



Navigating the PhD:



A Writing Workshop

Sponsored by The Graduate School and The Writing Center

These two interactive writing workshops, given at least once a semester, are designed to help you develop an individualized plan for graduate writing, especially comprehensive exams, dissertation proposals, and dissertations. Session 1 is designed for students in the early years, such as before exams and during coursework, of their PhD study. Session 2 is designed for students in the later years of their PhD study.





Session 1: Managing Time and Academic Relationships

This interactive online writing workshop is designed to help you develop an individualized plan for graduate writing, especially comprehensive exams, dissertation proposals, and dissertations. Session 1 is generally designed for students in the early years of their PhD study.

In this 3-hour workshop, participants can expect to reflect on and make plans for time management and working with others, especially during these unprecedented times in higher education. Participants will create academic timelines for their PhD work at MSU and discuss technologies and habits that can help them stay on task. Participants will also discuss strategies for managing stress that often pervades the life of PhD students and how that stress might be particularly amplified this year, due to widespread trauma and systemic violence.

Facilitators will help guide these discussions and share resources and strategies for overcoming writer's block and procrastination and adopting and maintaining productive practices to consider how to balance time management and prioritizing academic goals. Additionally, discussion about selecting and working with committees will provide a space for sharing about and learning how to communicate with faculty members about research and writing.

Your PhD Timeline

As PhD students, we have a lot to keep track of every day. It is easy to forget about program requirements, to spend more years than necessary taking courses, and to be surprised by deadlines. One way to help alleviate some of these surprises is to clearly map out our PhD years. Below is an example of one way to organize requirements on a timeline in a table.

Plan of Study

Here's a template you may use to map out your PhD timeline. You can add columns for additional years.

- **Degree progress** refers to what classes you'll take, your exams, proposal, and dissertation timelines.
- **Assistantships, internships, and fellowships** refers to what jobs, internships, funding, roles, and teaching or research you want to have during your study.
- The **research pipeline** refers to what projects you want to have moving. The pipeline usually consists of conference proposals, researching, presenting research at a conference, having an article draft, submitting drafts, and revising drafts for re-submission.
- Finally, **service** refers to unpaid work you do for professional development in your department, campus, and discipline.

Four-Year Plan

Semester	Fall Year 1	Spring Year 1	Fall Year 2	Spring Year 2	Fall Year 3	Spring Year 3	Fall Year 4	Spring Year 4
Degree Progress	Empty for filling in	Empty for filling in	Empty for filling in	Empty for filling in	Empty for filling in	Empty for filling in	Empty for filling in	Empty for filling in
Assistantships, Internships, & Fellowships	Empty for filling in	Empty for filling in	Empty for filling in	Empty for filling in	Empty for filling in	Empty for filling in	Empty for filling in	Empty for filling in
Research Pipeline	Empty for filling in	Empty for filling in	Empty for filling in	Empty for filling in	Empty for filling in	Empty for filling in	Empty for filling in	Empty for filling in
Service	Empty for filling in	Empty for filling in	Empty for filling in	Empty for filling in	Empty for filling in	Empty for filling in	Empty for filling in	Empty for filling in

We want you to create your own timeline based on your own department's handbook, policies, and guidance. You can choose the organizational method we've used as an example, or develop one of your own. In order to complete your timeline, you will probably need to find some specific information.

Take this time right now to find your graduate program's handbook online. Based on the information in your handbook, look for when you will need to complete the following and fill it into the chart below:

- Forming a committee
- Submitting any annual reports
- Applying for additional funding, like travel funding, research grants, or completion fellowships
- Finishing coursework
- Preparing for comps
- Submitting your dissertation proposal
- Collecting research
- Storing and cataloging data
- Drafting each dissertation chapter
- Meeting with the committee on each dissertation chapter
- Defending the dissertation

When faced with multiple tasks that are a part of academic work, it's important to prioritize and recognize that we often plan to accomplish more than we are actually able to do. In addition, large goals may require that you set frequent smaller deadlines on your path to the long-term completion deadline. Consider how you might do this as you expand and add detail to your timeline.

Managing Non-Academic/Academic Realities

Graduate school is a challenge for everyone. However, if you are a member of a non-dominant social group, things can be even more challenging. Facing systemic racism, sexism, classism, ableism, ageism, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, exclusionary practices, and a host of other obstacles inherent to participation in [white, settler-colonialist institutions](#) can affect your studies as well as your wellbeing.

We have begun to compile a list of preliminary resources for social and emotional support if you experience any of the above. Most importantly, these resources are meant to point you to safer spaces, spaces of strength and care for their members—places to encounter joy and build resistance:

- Black, Indigenous, and People of Color
 - [Multicultural Student Associations](#)
 - [Mosaic](#)
 - [Inclusion and Intercultural Initiatives](#)
 - [Lansing Association for Human Rights](#)
 - [Office for International Students and Scholars](#)
 - [Office of Cultural and Academic Transitions](#)
 - [Division of Student Affairs & Services Culture & Identity Offices](#)
 - [Office of Institutional Equity](#)
- Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Asexual+
 - MSU [Gender and Sexuality Center](#)
 - [SALUS Center](#)
 - [Lansing Association for Human Rights](#)
 - [Queering Medicine](#)
 - [Transgender Michigan](#)
 - [Affirmations](#)
 - [Women*s Student Services](#)
- Personal Health
 - [Olin Health Center](#)
 - [Graduate Student Life and Wellness](#)
 - [Health4U Program](#)
 - [Sparrow Hospital](#)
 - [McLaren Hospital](#)
 - [Ingham County Health Department](#)
 - [Medical Leave](#)
 - [Planned Parenthood- Lansing](#)
 - [Queering Medicine](#)
 - [Lansing Area AIDS Network](#)
- Mental Health
 - MSU [Counseling and Psychiatry Services](#)
 - MSU [Employee Assistance Program](#)
 - [National Alliance on Mental Illness- Lansing](#)

- Housing and Food Security
 - [On-Campus Housing](#)
 - [Off Campus Housing](#)
 - [Moving to MI Resources](#)
 - [MSU Food Bank](#)
 - [Greater Lansing Food Bank](#)
 - [Ingham Homeless Services](#)
- Graduate and General Student Resources
 - [Graduate Employees Union](#)
 - [Teaching Support](#)
 - [Anti-Discrimination Protections](#)
 - [East Lansing Community Information](#)
 - [Council of Graduate Students](#)
 - [The Graduate School](#)
 - Graduate Student [Life and Wellness](#)
 - [Spouse and Family Resources](#) and [Student Parent Resource Center](#)
 - [Student Legal Services](#)
 - [Graduate Funding Opportunities](#)
 - [English Language Center](#)
 - [Office of the University Ombudsperson](#)
 - [Resource Center for Persons with Disabilities](#)
- Sexual Harassment and Violence
 - [MSU Center for Survivors](#)
 - [MSU Safe Place](#)
 - MSU [Office of Institutional Equity](#)
 - MSU [Prevention, Outreach, and Education](#)
 - MSU [Title IX Office](#)
 - [Women*s Student Services](#)
 - [Capital Area Response Effort](#)

Normalizing Experiences and Examining Your Strengths

Grad school is difficult. It's full of a balancing act of obligations and responsibilities to yourself and others. Depending on your environment and your positionalities, grad school can be even more difficult because of systemic, institutional, and interpersonal oppression and harm.

It's very normal to struggle in your time in your program. You're surrounded by peers who learn and grow as you are as well as experts in your field, which makes it really hard to see your own strengths and talents as you're growing and learning to. A common result of this is "[imposter syndrome](#)," which is where "high-achieving, often minoritized individuals constantly doubt that they are deserving of their successes."

Even if you yourself don't believe it today, we at the Writing Center know you are deserving of your successes. You are talented, and you deserve to be in a graduate program. Many times, language surrounding our work and performance sometimes gets framed as a [deficit model](#).

Throughout this workshop, we will be [self-reflecting and using reflective practices](#). These practices enable us to understand ourselves through our emotions and experiences. Doing this allows us to improve our future behaviors, thinking, and emotions.

Therefore, in rejection of the deficit model, we are going to reframe our thinking about ourselves to reflect on our strengths. Reflect on the following:

- What skills, expertise, knowledge, and/or experiences do you bring to your program? To your field? To your assistantship/other work?
- What skills, expertise, knowledge, and/or experiences do you want to continue to cultivate during grad school? After grad school?

Strategies for Facing and Working Through Obstacles

Sometimes, though, we cannot just rely on what we are good at to make up for where we struggle. We need to learn new strategies to work through obstacles. Some common obstacles for graduate students are establishing systems of organization, managing and using technologies, facing limited resources of time and money, fighting procrastination, dealing with stress, and developing a supportive community.

We are going to discuss these obstacles as a group and share strategies for working through them. Below, we have provided some tips of our own, but before you look through them, we are going to discuss some of the strategies you have all developed. We encourage you to note any useful ideas as they are presented by your fellow workshop attendees.

Establishing Systems of Organization

Based on our conversations, take note of useful strategies and tools for organizing your research, your teaching, and your other responsibilities. Here are some tips:

- Set up a filing system to organize your materials—don't discard anything.
- Set up a calendar system with major deadlines visible and clearly spelled out. Although you will rarely meet the originally established deadlines in an exact fashion and must revise them (for various reasons), a master time plan may help you avoid the “no-end-in-sight” syndrome so common to the PhD student. Start researching topics early and everywhere: keep an investigator's journal where you jot down notes, ideas, thoughts, etc.
- Set up a log to chart your hourly/daily progress. This could be a running time sheet of hours spent in the office, library, field, etc. Such a log is important in its own right as a motivator and will play a part when you periodically review your progress, or have to rebudget your time in light of outside demands or new phases of your work.

Managing and Using Technologies

The following are several computer-based organizational tools. In your groups, choose one to examine. Play with the technology a bit. When we come back together as a full group, we will ask you to share your opinions about the tools. Here are some general suggestions:

- In addition to establishing “physical” or “material” organizational systems, establishing and maintaining a simple and organized computer file system is incredibly important with so many digital notes, handouts, presentations, readings, and written texts living in our computers. Clearly and specifically name and date your files and folders.
- Save each revision to a text with the day’s date added so you don’t lose your previous versions.
- Apply for fellowships—not only are these opportunities for money and research experience, but the application process itself usually asks you to write personal research statements. Reflecting on your work in these statements can be reassuring and productive for future work.
- Develop daily and weekly task lists in which you identify the tasks that *need* to get done, that *should* get done, and that you *want* to get done. Don’t limit these to work tasks, but include other daily activities such as chores, errands, lunches, and fun.
- Rethink your conceptions of time. Consider breaking your day up into small pieces of time and dedicate those pieces to the work activities you need to finish and the other time requirements of your day, leaving a few blocks open for yourself.

Analog Technology

- [Passion Planner](#): A premium planner that provides daily, weekly and yearly modules for planning and reflection
- [Plum Paper Planners](#): One of several sites that allows you to customize, adapt and create a planner that works best for you.
- [Black Girl, Lost Keys](#): A Black, neurodivergent woman who seeks to educate and empower others through knowledge and tools.

Citation Management

- [Endnote](#): Bibliographic software you can purchase, though free trials are available. You can use EndNote to search online bibliographic databases, organize references, images and PDFs in any language, and create bibliographies and figure lists.
- [Mendeley](#): A research tool helps you organize research and collaborate. It is a tool specifically made for academics to coordinate with one another and to keep track of their own research projects.
- [Zotero](#): A free bibliographic tool. It helps you keep track of what you’ve read and what you want to read. You can tag books and articles, attach notes and other documents, and link to websites.

Study and Research Programs

- [DropBox](#): Free and paid versions are available, with varying options. Dropbox allows you to sync your files online and across your computers automatically, to share files, to back up your files online, and to store files on its server.
- [Evernote](#): Evernote is a note-taking system. You can save links to websites and screen captures and write notes.
- [OneNote](#): A Microsoft Office software component that is included with some of the Office Suites. It allows you to capture text, images, as well as video and audio notes. Users can share 'notebooks' with other OneNote users, which allows simultaneous taking and editing of notes with people in other locations. You can view and edit notes from virtually any computer with an Internet connection or a Windows phone.

Time and Task Management

- [Airtable](#): A spreadsheet-database hybrid which allows for great functionality, sorting, and views compared to Excel or Google Sheets. Can be used for project management.
- [ATracker](#): A time tracker that allows the user to enter tasks, categories and activities in order to track daily, weekly and monthly time use. Provides pie chart graphs for visual clarity. Better to pay for the pro version.
- [Forest](#): App that encourages you to put your phone down and focus on tasks. Get rewarded by building a forest.
- [Habitica](#): An app that boasts a way to "gamify" your life. Build avatars, get rewards for tasks completed and organize your life.
- [Notion](#): Workspace builder that can manage projects and texts
- [Pomodoro](#): Technique that challenges you to complete timed productivity and builds in brief breaks.

Writing Style, Reading, and Diagnostics

- [750 Words](#): Writing practice app that works by engaging a social community and challenges you to write 750 words every day. Helps with goal setting and consistency.
- [Beeline Reader](#): Online tool to make screen reading easier on your eyes.
- [Hemingway Editor](#): Online tool to help analyze your prose and edit for clarity and concision.

Self-Care

- [Insight Timer](#): Meditation app complete with guided meditations of varying lengths and themes, talks by meditation teachers, a timer to meditate by and a social media component to encourage your practice.
- [Sanvello](#): App that helps the user track emotion and stress levels and find better coping mechanisms for emotional challenges. Aimed at stress reduction.

- [Stop, Breathe, & Think](#): Helps bring mindfulness to your daily life through guided meditations and reflective tools.

Activity

- Do you work with any other tools that you'd like to recommend to other workshop participants? Please share them with us.
- In groups, select to either:
 - find a resource, app, or tool that isn't on our list and present it to the full group: What does it do? What is it for? What are its strengths and limitations? Why would it be useful for you?
 - Or, look at a resource on the list that you're not familiar with and present it to the full group: What does it do? What is it for? What are its strengths and limitations? Why would it be useful for you?

Procrastination and Stress

Fighting Procrastination

Through self-reflection, we are going to think about how we procrastinate. Think about deadlines: Do they help your production or does the stress of them hinder your progress? Do you rely on others to set deadlines or do you set them for yourselves? How might you use deadlines to help you fight against procrastination?

Are there any patterns you can recognize? Below, list your procrastination “methods:” the things you do or use that keep you from being as productive as you could.

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Now, based on the above, what can you do to combat those patterns? Brainstorm below:

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Dealing with Stress

What causes the most stress in your life? Below list your personal stress factors:

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Now, based on the above, what can you do to cope with them? Here are some ideas as a starting place:

- [Michigan State offers free counseling](#) to students.
- Celebrate progress—even tackling a small task can help you feel good. Any accomplishments should be viewed as positive; let it represent progress.
- Find/schedule time to enjoy activities not related to your academic work. Especially consider interacting with people outside your program who share some of these interests.
- Exercise regularly and try relaxation techniques (meditation, yoga, etc.).
- Be sure to get enough sleep as the effects of sleep loss can harm you both in the short term and the long term.

Working with an Academic Community

Advisors, committee members, other faculty, and colleagues are a major influence on our levels of stress and our capacity for success, depending on how supportive they are. Therefore, we are going to spend the rest of our workshop talking about working with members of our academic committees, especially advisors and committees. Keep in mind that “non-academic” relationships are important to your academic success too; see the appendix for strategies and suggestions for interacting with people outside your academic community.

Developing a Supportive Community

When we think about the PhD journey, you will need support across a variety of realms. In this, you may wish to complete a [mentor map](#) to discuss who can support you in different areas. To define some of the terms on the linked mentor map,

- **Professional Development** refers to opportunities to enhance your research, connections, and skills. Internal professional development includes organizations and people at Michigan State and your department. External professional development includes local, regional, national, and international connections.
- **Accountability for what really matters** are the people who will remind you who you are, why you are doing what you’re doing, and remind you to maintain your values and morals.
- **Intellectual community readers** are people that can give supportive and generative feedback at different stages of the writing process.

In addition to the mentor mapping, here are some tips:

- Maintain your relationships with family and friends. They can be an invaluable source of support and help you maintain your perspective on life outside of academia.
- Consider how choices in topic might separate you from your partner or family and discuss these lifestyle changes with them. Talk about the expectations you have for your partner, children, and your family, and talk about the expectations they have of you.
- Think about whether there are ways to include your family/friends in your work.
- Join or develop working groups with other students—theory groups, research groups, study groups, and writing groups can be intellectually stimulating and supportive spaces.

Choosing an Advisor

For most PhD students, our advisors function as our academic mentors. Temporary advisors are, believe it or not, only meant to be temporary! Many grads begin working with a temporary advisor and invite that person to become their “permanent” advisor (which may not be “permanent” either and may be more

temporary). However, the point of having a temporary advisor is to help you get started in your program and you shouldn't feel guilty about choosing a permanent advisor later on. It may feel awkward to end this relationship, but most temporary advisors expect it to happen and you should feel free to choose an advisor that suits you best.

Before we make advisor choices, it is important to think about what we consider a good mentor to be. From the list below, add what you think is missing. From that, choose what you think is the top three most important qualities you have listed.

- Someone interested in and competent to advise on your topic;
- Someone with reasonable expectations for what you will accomplish;
- Someone reliable (ie. Will give comments within a reasonable time)
- Someone accessible for feedback and consistent with advice
- Someone with personal integrity;
- Someone interested in your success;
- Someone with the ability to responsibly chair the committee;
- Someone willing to be a mentor during and beyond graduate school;
- Someone respected by other faculty;
- Someone you generally get along with and enjoy being around.
- Fill in:
- Fill in:

A successful relationship with a mentor/advisor also places responsibility on the mentee/student. Now develop a list of the qualities and responsibilities of a good mentee. Again, choose the top three qualities to share with the full group.

It is unlikely that one person can meet all of your needs. That's where your committee comes in. If you have the power to select your committee members, it will be important when you select them to think about who will "fill in the blanks" left by your advisor.

If you have already established a committee, below list your members and their best mentoring qualities. Are you getting what you need from them? If not, do you have the power to make changes? What changes would you make, if so?

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If you have not chosen a committee, what do you need from a committee? How do those needs relate to the people you are thinking about including? What are their approaches to mentoring and addressing your needs? If you don't yet have committee members in mind, list the qualities you will most need from your future committee members.

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Whether or not you have chosen your committee, can change your committee, or have chosen the best possible faculty members to support you and your work, you will still face challenges in working with these people. It is important for you to anticipate these challenges and how you would deal with them. Here are some tips:

- Consider working with your committee to establish realistic responsibilities for both you and the various members. For instance, you might want to have discussions about what are your communication preferences, how long to wait for responses, what is a manageable task for you, etc.
- Keep an open mind and encourage their suggestions and comments; feedback is important—let your committee know how they are doing.
- Early on, think about creating, along with your committee, a meeting schedule and stick to it.
- Sometimes, planning around times when everyone cannot meet is easier than trying to find the “one time” that everyone can.
- Consider clearly establishing at what point in the development of the drafts they will be given to the various committee members and agree on a response time. Solicit specific responses from individual members based on their strengths and your needs in order to assure timely and relevant responses from them.
- Take responsibility for communicating with members; do it regularly and build a positive relationship with them. Think about sending regular progress reports to them discussing coursework and research.
- This report should be a regular habit. For instance, submit a monthly report to the entire committee and be clear on what revisions you have accomplished and still need to do. It could also be a forum to resolve difficulties you may encounter.

Activity

The following challenges are fairly common problems or are serious issues. In your groups, **choose one** problem to discuss and try to come up with ways to deal with or work through it. Think about the resources available to you, both personal and external. We will ask you to present your solutions to the entire group.

- If you are not in agreement with a member?
- If you need additional support?
- If a member is not accessible enough?
- If feedback on your work is slow in coming?
- If members are not getting along?
- If your relationship with your advisor becomes problematic?
- If you begin to wonder whose work this really is?

- If a committee member moves/retires/dies?

Based on your conversation, if you could give one piece of advice to other PhD students choosing or working with committee members, what would it be? Here are some of our suggestions:

- Your committee is just **one** network of support. There are many other ways to have support throughout the PhD, including outside the department and university.
- Recognize that your advisor and your committee want to see you succeed (despite the feelings we might sometimes have to the contrary!). Keep these thoughts in mind when working out conflicts with your committee.
- If you disagree, keep lines of communication open. Both you and your advisor need to articulate your positions to eliminate misunderstandings. If you still can't agree (and the situation becomes insurmountable), perhaps you need to reconsider the membership of your committee. Remember, articulate your concerns early on in the process.
- If a member is inaccessible or unavailable, make sure that you are being very clear as to when you need them and how to reach them.
- If feedback is slow in coming (e.g., if it takes weeks or months to get work back), talk with the member and find out why the agreed upon time frame is not being adhered to. Make your advisor aware of the situation. If a resolution cannot be reached, you need to deal with it by channeling your energy and emotions back into your writing, finding outlets for stress, or finding an outside reader.
- If your relationship with your advisor becomes problematic—depending upon the nature of the situation—seek out the counsel of a responsible person. In most circumstances the graduate chair of your department is the best first step.
- If you begin to question whether the dissertation is your work or the committee's, be aware that it is a joint venture; you and your committee. However, you still should feel a strong sense of ownership in the work.



Session 2: Writing Processes & Strategies for Academic Writing

This interactive online writing workshop is designed to help you develop an individualized plan for graduate writing, especially comprehensive exams, dissertation proposals, and dissertations. Session 2 is designed for students in the latter years of their PhD study.

In this 3-hour workshop, the focus will be on developing and maintaining productive and effective writing processes and practices, especially during these unprecedented times in higher education and in society where we are collectively working through trauma and systemic violence.

Every PhD program at MSU requires comprehensive exams, dissertation proposals, and dissertations. In this workshop, participants will examine and share their current writing practices and be given practical writing and revision strategies. During the latter half of the workshop, participants will draft a plan for developing and completing their dissertations.

Reflecting on Your Writing Processes

What kind of writing do you do for your degree program?

What kind of writing do you do outside of school?

What kind of writing do you expect to do as part of your career after you obtain your PhD?

Examining your Writing Processes

The French word for rough draft is *brouillon*, which is derived from a verb meaning “to place in disorder, to scramble.” This messiness is an integral part of writing, but in English, we have no equivalent for *brouillon*. Rough draft, instead, suggests something that must be polished and smoothed, not something deliberately scrambled. Similarly, the word outline, which is frequently used when discussing writing, suggests an inert structure, a clear plan. The way we usually talk about writing in the US makes it seem like a very orderly and straightforward process instead of the messy, recursive, knowledge-making process that it usually is.

A Model of the Writing Process We're Familiar With:

1. Choose a topic
2. Narrow your topic
3. Write a thesis
4. Make an outline
5. Write a draft
6. Revise
7. Edit

A More Realistic Model of Writing Processes :

- Start with a problem or a question
- Examine the problem through research, freewriting, and discussion
- Take time away from the problem
- Delve into more
- Write a complete draft using exploratory writing and research
- Reformulate/revise writing by thinking through the problem again and considering audience more than before
- Polish and edit for unity, coherence, and structure

Writing is hard to talk about realistically in a step-by-step way because so many steps are repeated throughout the composing (this is what it means when people say writing is recursive) and every piece of writing is different, requiring different kinds of repetition. Writing processes are difficult to represent in alphabetic text, which often works in a linear way.

On a separate sheet of paper, write about, map, and/or draw your typical writing process for writing a paper for this workshop. What do you do? What kinds of activities not typically considered "writing" are part of your process?

Once you've completed your map, share it with your small group. Note how your approaches to writing are similar and different.

- Why do you think these differences exist?
- Will you consider adapting your approach to include some of the processes mentioned by others? Which ones?

Writer's Block

Writer's block has challenged us all at one point or another. It can be really difficult to manage. Reflect on the following questions:

- What are the (imagined) “rules” you write with? How do those “rules” affect your writing process?
- What do you think are the causes of writer's block?
- What strategies have you used in the past to keep yourself writing?
- What is the minimum number of minutes you are willing to commit to working on a daily (or every other day) basis?
- How have or will you motivate yourself, or reward yourself, when you reach your daily or weekly writing goal?
- How have you reached your writing deadlines?

Tips for Overcoming Writer's Block

- Figure out the time and place that allows for the least disturbance for writing and allows you to be the most productive.
- You may want to give yourself time for a mental transition into writing from other tasks—think of it as warming up your brain before you begin.
- Park on a downhill slope: finish your work knowing where to begin next time; this may allow you to get back to work with less apprehension.
- Begin anywhere: Start writing at whatever point you want. If you want to begin in the middle, fine. Leave the introduction or first section until later.
- Talk about the paper: Talk to someone about your ideas. Talking will help you crystallize your thoughts into words or help you explain an idea in the simplest terms.
- Record the paper: Talk into an audio recorder (imagining a particular audience, if that helps). Then, transcribe the recorder material, and you'll at least have some ideas down on paper to work with and move around.
- Write through the confusion: Try freewriting about the thoughts, feelings, or ideas that are causing you confusion. By writing through your “block,” you may notice that writing is easier and ideas or questions become clearer as you write.
- Change the audience: Imagine you are writing to a friend, a parent, a person who disagrees with you, or someone who's new to the subject. This can help you make your ideas clearer or make you feel more comfortable and help you write more easily.

General Strategies for the Writing Process

In this section, we will provide common tips for various parts of the writing process.

Brainstorming and Organizing

There are various types of [graphic organizers](#) that you can use. Here are some ideas:

- Venn Diagrams are great for comparing and contrasting and for seeing details that can be synthesized. They could certainly be useful in figuring out how to organize something like a literature review. Venn Diagrams are easy to create on PowerPoint, though this program does not allow for much complexity. However, Venn Diagrams are not the best diagramming tools for multi-layered, complex situations.
- Clusters can be used as an initial brainstorming technique to not only generate ideas and connections but to also see what might be the most viable focus for a project. Clusters can be quite messy, and another organizational technique is generally used after a writer has worked through completing a cluster.
- [Mind Maps](#) are fairly detailed and complex maps that can display connections between ideas as well as sub-content. Mind Maps, as originally conceptualized, are more artistic than most other visual graphic organizers for brainstorming maps. They are generally used to help students remember concepts and visually present information (such as from readings).
- Schematics are generally used to display processes, such as the process of a factory production line, or the design of a circuit or machine. However, researchers and writers can use schematics to display processes observed (human interactions, movements, etc.) or how any “mechanisms” observed function.
- Situational Maps are maps that look to visually represent an entire research situation, considering human actors, non-human actors, and discursive (language-based) actors. Situational maps were developed by Adele Clarke and are discussed in detail in her book, *Situational Analysis: Grounded Theory after the Postmodern Turn*. Mapping software like Bubbl.us and VUE are great for creating complex situational maps.

Research and Drafting

- Keeping an investigator’s notebook: Don’t wait to start writing until you’ve finished your research/reading. Set aside a notebook in which you record your questions, ideas, notes, and concerns as they arise. Research, especially for the dissertation, is not just taking in ideas or facts; it involves engaging with information. Since you can’t expect to hold all of your ideas and thoughts in your head as you go, write them down.
- Begin with writing for yourself: Examine your ideas and begin writing a draft for you. This draft is a place for you to make your ideas tangible on the page. Write uncensored. Work through ideas as you go. This is a first step—just

getting your ideas on a page—and you do not have to show it to anyone, which alleviates any pressure or expectation of a polished writing project.

- Start by writing down your ideas; don't stop to correct or find the right word. Just get all your ideas down on paper in any order you can, and don't worry about editing. Some folks call this “blahing on the page.”
- Outline the chapter or section with major ideas, writing out each section as research comes in, and then read it over. Later you can move sections around as needed and eventually blend in changes.
- Talk to yourself via voice recording or with a friend/colleague to talk through particularly complicated writing problems in a different mode of expression

Revision

Revision is an inevitable part of the dissertation writing process. Revision is usually discussed as a specific stage of the writing process that takes place after initial drafting during which the writer rearranges text, expands ideas, and edits errors. Since writing is recursive, revision happens throughout the writing process until the document is considered “finished.”

Revision is recognizing what is and isn't working and making changes as your project grows. Take a moment and think about where you are at with your project. Consider what changes you might need to make to :

- **Methodological choices** are the decision you make as a research, given your question(s), method(s), goals, and positionalities
- **Conceptual frameworks** are the theories, ideas, and conversations that underpin the project
- **Diction and terminology** are the words and phrases used to position the project's key ideas
- **Writing processes and practices** are the methods and patterns you are using as you work on the project

Next, you'll want to shape your writing into a complete draft for others to read.

There are various ways to approach reworking a draft:

- Create an outline of your ideas as you read through your writing. You can sum up each paragraph in the margin, write down questions, or categorize ideas. This is sometimes called a reverse outline.
- As you read the draft, look it over to see how your argument and ideas fit together, and move sections around thematically. You can cut up pages on your printed draft if necessary, or highlight sections that are similar.
- Briefly sum up your ideas after each section (“What am I really trying to say in this argument/chapter/section?”) to articulate what you are trying to do in different sections. This can be like freewriting about each section to determine what you're trying to say, and it can help you gain clarity.
- Do what works for you. Don't try to force yourself into someone else's method. Consider what has worked for you in the past, and adopt methods

only if they fit your style. Remember, don't get overwhelmed by working through an initial draft, break it into chunks to make it manageable.

Additionally, here are some general tips for reworking your draft:

- Look for materials that stand out as interesting.
- Look for questions that pop up as you read.
- Read and mark themes by color, number, letter, etc.
- Read through and put a check by something that seems (very) right, or (very) wrong.
- Cut out, but save, the paragraphs that have interesting ideas but don't belong in that chapter. Put them in a specific file or section "to be used later" and hold on to them.
- Identify what you need or where you are struggling and ask someone else to work with you on these concerns. The Writing Center can be helpful here, as can friends, family, and colleagues. Visit writing.msu.edu to make an appointment at the Writing Center.

Continuing Revision for the Reader's Draft

After you've gone through the draft that you write for yourself, you'll want to start working toward a draft for other readers. Here are some tips to keep in mind as you're working on this draft.

- Don't be afraid to remove or scrap work. This means that if it doesn't make sense or work, throw it out or revise completely. Remember, there is always more than one way to say something. You can always save the revision as a new draft so you can go back to the removed pieces if you want to revive them.
- Keep it brief and use short paragraphs; break down elaborate or complex ideas or thoughts into manageable chunks. Aim for simplicity the first time around.
- Don't try to adopt a completely new "dissertation writing" (or other project) voice. [Be yourself.](#)
- Establishing and going back to key words can help keep your argument consistent.
- Give yourself some time to rework sections as needed. Take some time off in order to look at your writing with fresh eyes.
- Try chopping off first sentences or opening paragraphs. Sometimes your opening words are just your warm-up—what you really mean to say may take several pages to emerge.
- Back everything up, at least twice in different locations. Be sure to save your work on both a hard drive and a portable storage device (flash drive, CD-R, external hard drive, etc.). Consider keeping copies of drafts and disks in a safety deposit box or at a friend or relative's house. The idea is to keep these copies in a separate building in case of a fire or other disaster. You may also

want to keep your work on your AFS space through MSU or another online location such as with Drop Box or in your email account.

- Keep copies of old drafts so that if you lose your most recent copy, you will have a fairly recent version to revise.

Revision resources

- Your advisor and committee members: be clear with them about which point they wish to see your drafts and revisions, and what they expect from your revisions.
- [The Writing Center](#): outside readers for help with all revising tasks.
- [Graduate Writing Groups](#): start your own group or join an existing group of peer editors.
- A fellow doctoral candidate: trade work with other students in order to give each other feedback as you proceed.

Comprehensive and Qualifying Exams

All PhD students are required to take comprehensive exams (also known as qualifying exams) and to write a dissertation. These processes and documents are different for every degree program. Use the information below and your graduate handbook to help you develop a plan for approaching and/or completing your comprehensive exams.

1. Find out how many components your comprehensive exam has. Do you take more than one exam? Will the exam(s) take place in a specific location? How much time do you have to complete the writing? Will the exam be long- or short-essay questions? Will you be responsible for writing your own exam questions? Is there an oral component to the exam?
2. When do students usually take their comprehensive exams? Many programs have students taking their exams in the second or third year of study. Make sure you know what is normal and that you are on track.

Tips for Exams

First, like many things in graduate school, comprehensive or qualifying exams differ from department to department. This list of strategies is a broad overview and does not replace talking to your advisor.

- Many departments maintain a file of previous comp questions. Talk to a department administrative assistant to find out more about this.
- Talk to other graduate students in your department who are studying for/recently completed comps. They are one of your best resources for planning
- Get a reading list ready early. Talk to your advisor or fellow graduate students to get a suggested list of the most significant texts in your field. Think about forming a reading group up to a year before your comprehensive exams.
- Generally, departments give you more than one test with one required to be written; sometimes they are both written, sometimes one is written and one is oral. Check with your advisor to find out the format of your exams.
- Comprehensive exams are meant to show the breadth of your general subject matter knowledge and the depth of your speciality.
- Exams are about synthesizing your coursework and research interests as well as showing your department what you know about your potential dissertation work. Make sure your committee understands your work and guides you as you prepare for comps.
- Some departments require a proposal before exams—check with your advisor for specific details.
- In the unlikely event that you don't pass your exam, most departments allow retakes, although some departments are more stringent on this. Again, check with your advisor for your department's policies.

Overview of the Dissertation

The Process

1. Find out the processes and structures for dissertations in your discipline. Do you need to write and defend a prospectus/proposal? How are dissertations in your discipline structured? How many chapters do they have? Consider reviewing completed dissertation proposals by checking them out from the library and seeing their content and structure.
2. When do students usually begin their dissertations? How long will you have to complete your dissertation? How might this affect the research methodologies you would like to employ?
3. Use this information to develop a timeline and plan to approach your topic selection, proposal/prospectus writing, and dissertation writing with confidence. Refer to the tips in the appendix for more direction.

Purposes of the Dissertation

- Don't let the idea of the perfect dissertation paralyze you; it doesn't exist.
- The dissertation is not your magnum opus; it is the ticket to your professional career.
- The dissertation is an apprenticeship project; what is "significant" or "original" depends largely on your field.
- Keep in mind that you are building on existing research. The dissertation is rarely a place where completely "new" ideas are presented.
- The dissertation is designed to show that:
 - You can persevere;
 - You are familiar with what others in the field are writing;
 - You can make a contribution to the field through your research;
 - You can document and make your research available to others;
 - You can suggest future areas for research.

Situating Your Dissertation

Before we begin overviewing the different phases, reflect on the following:

- What characteristics do you feel an ideal dissertation possesses?
- What do you feel has been or will be your greatest area of confidence as you work on the dissertation project?
- What has been or might be your greatest challenge?
- Finally, what purpose(s) do you feel your dissertation might serve for you?

Dissertation Proposal

What is the proposal?

The proposal may also be called a “prospectus” in your department. There are many ways that a proposal can look. This is field specific. Consult your advisor, committee, and others who have done this in your department for more information. Some ways to consider what a proposal is include:

- A template for the larger project of the dissertation;
- An evaluation;
- A research plan;
- A trial run or head start;
- A sales pitch;
- A contract with your committee saying what you will do and what requirements occur before you get your degree;
- A document that demonstrates you can conceive of a dissertation;
- A document that identifies the ideas you want to call your own; and
- A tentative blueprint that is always subject to change as you go.

Generally, your proposal includes the following steps:

1. **Topic Selection:** selecting your general topic and questions you plan to address. Consult your advisor and committee as you select this.
2. **Pre-proposal outline:** the general outline for your proposal. Consider your advisor look at this outline early in the process
3. **Proposal drafting and revision:** you take the outline and draft and revise your proposal in preparation for the final version you share at your defense.
4. **Proposal defense:** in this, expect open-ended and specific questions—consider asking other students to do a trial run with you. Think of your committee as colleagues trying to help you refine your ideas. Ultimately, your proposal won’t answer every question. In final form, it becomes whatever your committee agrees it should be and guides you into your dissertation.

Topic Selection

- How have you selected or thought about selecting and narrowing your topic?
- What process did you go through or do you imagine yourself going through in order to come up with your final topic?
- How does your topic reflect your passions, your interests, the way you do research, and/or your previous academic work?
- How does your topic demonstrate the need for further research?
- Does sufficient background information exist to facilitate your research?
- Is your topic narrow enough so you can claim a degree of expertise?
- Is your topic amenable to research methods?
- Is your topic one you can write in a reasonable amount of time?
- How does your topic match with your capabilities and interests?
- How is your topic attractive for funding?
- How does your topic allow for professional development?

- Has your topic been addressed already? If so, in what detail?
- How does your topic allow you to demonstrate expertise in a larger field?
- How does your topic provide a springboard for future research?

Tips for Topic Selection

- Look at other dissertations in your field in order to get an idea of the overall scope and style. (The MSU Library is a good place to find dissertations from your own department.)
- Identify your areas of interest. What are you passionate about? Write about topics and look at your own academic career to see what you have done. Choose the best possibilities, analyze them briefly, and present them to your committee to get their feedback and develop them further. Strive for a balance between passion and practicality.
- Identify how you think and research—do you look at one topic in depth or several ideas you can examine in a comparative manner?
- Look at job openings to see what is “hot” in your field and what potential future employers are looking for. Talk to your advisor and professors to learn what they are working on. Contact experts and professionals in the field to see what they’re doing and what’s new.
- Remember that an idea or topic that is general and undefined is fine to start. Broad is all right because it is a research topic not research questions.
- Try using cognitive/mind/concept maps to organize your ideas.
- Reading. Do extensive reading and research on your topic to narrow it down and get specific.
- Generate titles as soon as possible. They will contain words that will frame your work and identify key words and concepts.
- You will also want to investigate your school’s requirements concerning human research subjects early in the process. You might need to gain Institutional Review Board approval.

Structuring the Proposal

Please note that these are just examples. Your program may have specific guidelines. Please speak with your advisor to find out about structures that are appropriate for your field.

Structure A

1. Problem
2. Hypothesis
3. Importance of research
4. Literature review
5. Possible methodologies
6. Limitations and key assumptions
7. Potential outcomes and importance
8. Descriptions of proposed chapters

Structure B

1. Introduction
2. Statement of purpose
3. Explicit research question
4. Limitations and assumptions
5. Terms to be used
6. Literature review
7. Potential methodology

Writing the Dissertation

Before you begin writing the dissertation, consult example dissertations in your department as well as your field. You will want to consider:

- **Audience:** Who are the audiences for your dissertation? For those audiences within your discipline, what research, methods, and/or teaching & learning is that audience expecting to see? For those audiences outside your discipline, what research, methods, and/or teaching & learning is that audience expecting to see?
- **Conventions:** Is there a typical format or structure for dissertations in your field? Are dissertations usually textual or multimodal projects? How long are they usually? What types of methods, language, and theories would be expected?

The Structure

- Be clear on the structure required for your dissertation by your department and advisor.
- Ask your advisor to recommend recent dissertations that you can model yours after, and/or go to the library and look at dissertations in your area of research.
- Make sure that you spend time with your advisor early in the process, going over a specific structure for the dissertation and your chapters/sections.
- Go to your graduate school office and get a copy of the formatting requirements of the university.
- Realize that the format or structure of your dissertation may change as you research and write, so be flexible with your initial plan.

Please note that these are just examples. Your program may have specific guidelines. Please speak with your advisor to find out about structures¹ that are appropriate for your field. Some possibilities:

Structure A

1. Front Matter
2. Chapter 1: Introduction
3. Chapter 2: Literature Review
4. Chapter 3: Methodology
5. Chapter 4: Results
6. Chapter 5: Discussion
7. Back Matter

Structure B

1. Front Matter
2. Chapter 1: Introduction
3. Chapter 2: Literature Review
4. Chapter 3: Experiment 1

¹ Adapted from Robert L. Peters' *Getting What You Came For*

- a. Methods
- b. Results
- c. Discussion
5. Chapter 4: Experiment 2
 - a. Methods
 - b. Results
 - c. Discussion
6. Chapter 5: Experiment 3
 - a. Methods
 - b. Results
 - c. Discussion
7. Chapter 6: General Conclusions
8. Back Matter

Structure C

1. Front Matter
2. Chapter 1: Introduction (including literature review and methodology)
3. Chapter 2: Theme 1
4. Chapter 3: Theme 2
5. Chapter 4: Theme 3
6. Chapter 5: Theme 4
7. Chapter 6: Conclusions
8. Back Matter

Job Searches during the Dissertation

The job search usually begins while you are writing or defending your dissertation. This is an already stressful time, so good time management and personal organization is critical. Here are some tips:

- Keep your curriculum vitae (C.V.) up-to-date throughout the entire PhD process. Consider maintaining a web-based portfolio that includes a vita, cover letter, photos, samples of writing, and other items pertinent to your work.
- Use opportunities to present at conferences to polish your public speaking skills, refine your work for clear presentation and network with others in the field. This also builds your C.V.
- Seek help from your committee while reviewing postings in your field well ahead of time. Remember, your defense will likely become your job talk and you should consider larger audiences and purposes.
 - It might be to your advantage to create multiple versions of your defense, which is addressed in the next section, where you consider the different positions that you are applying for; consider the context of the institution you are applying to as part of the overall design of the presentation (goals of the college, history of the organization, etc.)

The Dissertation Defense

In a “typical” defense, you will present a brief overview of the dissertation that can last from a few minutes to an hour. Then, your committee asks you questions for an hour or two. Finally, you participate in a final summation where you are advised what may need to be done or addressed next. That said, you will want to consult your department for what a “typical” defense is in your department.

Purposes of the Defense

- The defense is an opportunity for your committee members to help you better understand the research that you have done and to point out the limitations of your work. Their purpose is to help you finish your degree requirements.
- The defense is a test of whether you can present your work in a “professional manner” and of how skillfully you can think on your feet to defend it under pressure.
- The defense is an opportunity for you to show your committee how well you have conducted research and prepared your dissertation.

Preparing for the Defense

- The secret to having a successful defense is preparation. If you have selected your committee wisely, communicated well with them throughout the project, and prepared thoroughly for the defense itself, you will be in an excellent position to succeed.
- Meet with your advisor ahead of time and discuss the strategy you should use at the defense. Identify any possible problems that may occur and discuss the ways they should be dealt with. Try and make the defense more of a team effort.
- Try to attend one or more defenses prior to your own.
- It may be helpful to prepare an outline.

During the Defense

- You know more about your dissertation than anyone, and everyone present wants you to succeed.
- Your performance reflects not only on you but also on the professional competence of your advisor in ways both subtle and direct.
- You may want to bring a copy of your dissertation with you to the defense.
- Consider video and/or audio recording your defense.
- Can you fail? Very few people fail if they have worked closely with their committee during the writing of the dissertation. “Provisional pass,” however, is not uncommon, where eventual acceptance of the dissertation is dependent upon either major or minor revisions.

Academic Journal Articles

Either during your PhD or after your defense, it's a good time to work on creating articles out of your research. If you create an article from your dissertation, keep in mind that this is far more than a cut-and-past exercise. You may need to make significant revisions to prepare the document for another audience and condense part of your arguments given that dissertations are far longer than academic articles. Depending on your field, you may want to consider the issue of "co-authorship" with your advisor.

Journals in Your Field

First, you will want to generate a list of journals in your field. To do this, consult your advisor, committee, and professional organizations in your discipline. After you have a list of common journals in your field, you'll want to research them to examine which journals are the best suited for your research. To do that, you may want to create a template that records the following about each journal.

Example Template

- Journal Title (and any previous names, if applicable):
 - Published since
 - Published by
 - Edited by
 - Guidelines for acceptance
 - Acceptance rate
 - How to submit
 - Citational practices
 - Publishes how many times per year
 - Average number of articles per volume
 - Availability of articles (e.g., print, online, open-access)
 - Sections in the journal (e.g., research, book reviews, reflections, dissertation overviews)
- Example Articles: In this, you'll want to research and find articles in the journal that are related to your research. If you choose to publish in this journal, it's important to cite those articles to show you've looked into their work.
 - Example Article 1
 - Overall argument
 - Organizational sections used
 - Type of methodology and methods
 - Scholarship cited that's of interest to you
 - Other conventions you notice
 - Example Article 2
 - Overall argument
 - Organizational sections used
 - Type of methodology and methods
 - Scholarship cited that's of interest to you

- Other conventions you notice
- Example Article 3
 - Overall argument
 - Organizational sections used
 - Type of methodology and methods
 - Scholarship cited that's of interest to you
 - Other conventions you notice

Evaluating Your Research Article as a Reviewer

This workshop has focused primarily on the writing process, strategies for combating procrastination, and navigating some of the material obstacles of being a doctoral student. However, as we all know, whether or not you plan on remaining in academia as a researcher or working in industry or the public sector, for now at least, professionalizing your writing is a huge component of your enculturation here.

We offer documents aimed at helping you understand how to do some of the following at a professional level: review your own writing and the writing of others, how to break up larger projects into smaller, publishable pieces and how to evaluate and track publication venues in your discipline. We gratefully share these adapted materials in partnership with the community engagement and outreach office here at MSU.

What follows is an activity to help you in a twofold approach: first, to evaluate your own writing and second to evaluate writing as a reviewer would, helping you gain skills as both a writer and reviewer.

Part 1: Overarching Review

Follow this template for reviewing your own draft:

- Title of the Article:
- What is the [journal's title] looking for in a research article submission?
 - What are the parameters for research articles?
 - What sections should research articles contain? See example below:
 - outline the overall concept of the study;
 - provide a thorough literature review that is timely and relevant to the study;
 - give a clear statement about what gap in the literature the current study is addressing;
 - outline the methods used
 - Indicate that Institutional Review Board (IRB) human subjects approval was secured, if applicable (or explain why it was not required);
 - provide robust sections that report the findings of the study and discuss their implications;

- include a section with the limitations of the study and areas for future research; and
- provide conclusions that address
- the gap in the literature that the study addressed;
- best practices or lessons learned that the reader can apply to their context; and/or
- how the conclusions inform decision makers.
- What is your decision (Accept, accept with major revisions, accept with minor revisions, reject)?
- What are the particularly positive aspects of the submission?
- What are general recommendations for improving the manuscript?

Part 2: Specific Recommendations

Follow this template for reviewing your own draft:

- **Context of the study:** Nature of the context; nature of the exigency for the project? Community/Audience/Issue being addressed by the article?
- **Literature review:** Has the author identified literature highlights and gaps? How have the gaps led to the current study? What gap is the study seeking to fill? How do the findings extend, revise, or forge new ground in the literature?
- **Research methods:** What is the connection of the author to the project and assessment of the project? Was IRB approval secured? If not, why not? Who or what is being assessed (the sample)? How were data collected and analyzed? What are the limitations of the study? How were participants involved in study (research ethics)?
- **Findings and implications:** Has the study extended, revised, or filled a gap in the literature? How do the findings inform theory? Practice?
- **Conclusions:** Does the author provide lessons learned or best practices that readers can apply to their contexts? Does the author cogently tell how this study contributes to the literature?
- **Stylistic concerns:** Readability, flow, copy-editing, organization, citational formatting, use of acronyms, etc.