

**I can't get my dissertation
proposal approved because**



**I don't
have
enough
time**

Time Management Tips for
Tired Dissertators

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When we are working on our dissertation proposal or manuscript, if there is one thing there never seems to be enough of, it's time! You aren't alone. It's a common complaint among hardworking dissertators.

When we are besieged by multiple responsibilities—health, job, and family, to name only a few—it sure seems like there isn't enough time to get everything done. However! You and I both know we all get the same number of hours per day, and we decide how we will use them.

If we want to get to the finish line, we need to find ways to manage our time more effectively. This guide will give you some ideas that worked for me.

Time management tips for tired dissertators

Whether you are working on your dissertation proposal or your dissertation manuscript, you need to manage your time effectively if you want to get it done.

In this guide, you will learn to

- Determine the activities that give you the most value
- Create a time spending plan
- Overcome the internal excuses holding you back

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Start with an honest self-assessment

Declaring I didn't have enough time was my favorite excuse when I was a dissertator. It's still the excuse I give most often for not getting things done. "I don't have enough time. I need to finish [xyz] first. Maybe later [tonight/this weekend/this summer/over the holiday break], I will catch up and finish." Sound familiar?

What are the first words that come out of your mouth when someone asks you why you haven't finished your dissertation? "I haven't had the time," or "I've just been so busy with work and what all"? If this is your typical response, it's probably automatic. You might say it just to get someone off your back. You might say it to avoid naming the real reason(s) you haven't finished. You may actually believe this is the reason you haven't finished. It's even possible it might be true. Maybe you really *don't* have enough time.

First, we need to find out if this really is the reason you aren't finishing your project. If it is, great. At least we know. Then we can start thinking about solutions so you can get your proposal or manuscript done.

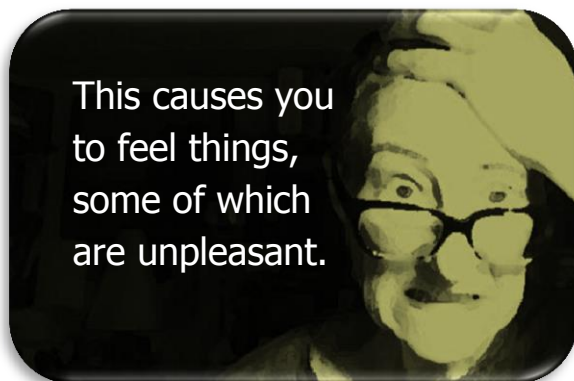
First, what are you experiencing that leads you to think that lack of time is the problem? If you are like most people in the developed world, you feel overwhelmed by life. You don't need me to remind you. You are pulled in a gazillion directions by work, family, friends, institutions, and obligations. You may be confronting health-related issues or financial challenges that eat into your schedule and make it nearly impossible to find time to write. It is easy to overlook mundane tasks like cleaning, doing laundry,

washing the dog, eating, exercising, and sleeping. No argument from me that all that stuff takes up a lot of time.

Let's face it, life takes up a lot of time. Living life pretty much takes up all the time there is.

Some people can handle time-related stress. Most of us freak. Depending on the day and how much I'm not getting done, I get impatient, and then I get frustrated, followed by a spurt of anger and finally by depression and self-pity. That's just me. My mother makes lists on scraps of paper. My friend enters her tasks into her smartphone calendar (and still shows up late).

We all have beliefs about time. What it is for, how much or how little there is, how we use it or fail to use it. And our use (or nonuse) of time brings up feelings.



You have some expectations of yourself that aren't being met. This causes you to feel things, some of which are unpleasant.

Some people somehow get a lot of stuff done. This makes you mad.

You have the same amount of time as everyone else. Reminding yourself of this fact does not help to relieve the frustration.

Maybe you really do have a problem with time. If so, there are about a billion books and TED talks that can give you some insight into your time mismanagement problem and help you get straightened out. Here are some statements about time, to get you thinking.

Self-assessment worksheet

Fill in the blank with whatever comes to mind.

Time is _____

If I had more time, my life would be _____

With more time, I could finally _____

Without time, I am _____

How other people manage time is _____

When I need more time, I _____

Managing time seems _____

Wasting time is _____

When I think of running out of time, I feel _____

Time is... (choose as many as you like)

A friend

Money

Elusive

A problem

In short supply

Unmanageable

Abundant

Expensive

A luxury

A rare gift

What did you figure out about your relationship with time?

Set realistic timelines

My alma mater required doctoral candidates to devise a timeline at the beginning of every 12-week dissertation “course.” I made an Excel spreadsheet listing all the elements of the dissertation approval process, taken straight from the dissertation handbook—things like “submit concept paper to committee,” “revise concept paper and resubmit,” and “receive chair approval on concept paper.”

		Duration (DAYS)	Start date	End date
CONCEPT PAPER	DIS9323B DIS III START 8/6/2012	84	8/6/2012	10/29/2012
	Revise chapter 1 introduction/submit (14)	28	8/6/2012	9/3/2012
	Revise chapter 3 methodology/submit (14)	14	9/3/2012	9/17/2012
	Revise chapter 2 literature review/submit (14)	25	9/17/2012	10/12/2012
	Submit to Committee (7 days)	7	10/12/2012	10/19/2012
	Submit to GS (10 days)	10	10/19/2012	10/29/2012
DISS PROPOSAL	DIS9323B DIS IV START 11/12/2012	84	11/12/2012	2/4/2013
	Prepare DP/submit (14)	56	11/12/2012	1/7/2013
	Submit to Committee (7)	7	1/7/2013	1/14/2013
IRB APPLICATION	Submit IRB application (21)	21	1/14/2013	2/4/2013
COLLECT DATA	DIS9323B DIS V START 2/24/2013	84	2/24/2013	5/19/2013
	Collect and analyze data	42	2/24/2013	4/7/2013
	Summarize sample demographics	14	4/7/2013	4/21/2013
	Begin DM	28	4/21/2013	5/19/2013
DISS MANUSCRIPT	DIS9323B DIS VI START 5/29/2013	84	5/29/2013	8/21/2013
	Submit chapters 1-3 (14)	35	5/29/2013	7/3/2013
	Submit chapters 4 and 5 (14)	28	7/3/2013	7/31/2013
	Prepare title page, signature page, acknowledgements, table of contents, ab	7	7/31/2013	8/7/2013
	Submit DM to Chair (14)	14	8/7/2013	8/21/2013
	DIS9323B DIS VI START 9/4/2013	84	9/4/2013	11/27/2013
Chair submits DM to committee for review	28	9/4/2013	10/2/2013	
Chair submits DM to GS	10	10/2/2013	10/12/2013	
Chair submits DM to Provost (7 days)	7	10/12/2013	10/19/2013	
Schedule oral defense	2	10/19/2013	10/21/2013	
Complete oral defense	10	10/21/2013	10/31/2013	
Make final revisions if any to the DM	2	10/31/2013	11/2/2013	
Submit final DM to Chair	1	11/2/2013	11/3/2013	
Submit final DM to Registrar for publication	1	11/3/2013	11/4/2013	
Petition for award of degree	0	11/4/2013	11/4/2013	
Graduate	0	11/4/2013	11/4/2013	

My pie-in-the-sky timeline

In the next column, I put a number to represent the duration in days I thought each activity might take. The committee had 21 days to return feedback on a milestone paper, so that was easy. Then I estimated how long it might take me to revise and resubmit. The next two columns contained the start date and end date of each activity. Each course was roughly 84 days, so I could use that figure to estimate start and end dates. I quickly discovered I didn't have a lot of time to finish my program before I ran up against the seven-year deadline. Yikes!

As it turned out, my first timeline was off by a year and two months. Call it magical thinking. Call it pie in the sky. Really, it was just my inexperience. Nobody knows how long it will take: There



are so many moving parts in the dissertation process. The only part you can "control," if that is the right word, is how long it takes you to write, submit, revise, and resubmit. Getting approvals from your Chair, committee, the IRB, and the

graduate school and any other entities that serve as gatekeepers in the process are beyond your control, sometimes even beyond your awareness, especially in online graduate school.

I updated the spreadsheet every 12 weeks, at the start of each course, and submitted a summary of it to my Chair. I often imagined her looking at it and laughing: *Dream on.*

Still, the exercise of creating the timeline was helpful for me. I was able to see all the actions needed to accomplish my goal.

Plan how you spend your time

It might seem counterintuitive to take time out of your already brutal schedule to plan how you will spend what paltry amounts of time you have left. Sorry. You may have heard that “failing to plan is planning to fail” (you can attribute this quote to Ben Franklin or to Alan Lakein, but I don’t know who really said it, does it matter?)

People have devised many tools to help us manage our time. My personal favorite is the time spending plan (see example).

I feel silly offering you this simplistic tool for two reasons: First, you most likely have already tried it years ago and discarded it as useless, and second, I don’t think time management is really the problem keeping you from finishing your writing project. But I’ll show you what it is and how I have used it, just so I can say I offered you something that *could* work (if you want it to work). If nothing else, documenting how you spend your time for a week will open your eyes.

When I feel time slipping away from me—that is to say, when life is feeling unmanageable and I think it might be attributable to poor time management rather than other reasons I’d rather not explore at the moment—I pull out the time spending plan. This chart also doubles as a time spending record, on which I can record the excruciatingly important details of my very important life.

I offered this chart to my students in my Professional Development classes at the career college where I used to teach. The students groaned when they saw it, but most of them filled it out when I showed them all the pretty colored markers they could use. (My career college students loved colored markers, stickers, and glitter—go figure.) I let them spend half the class period happily scribbling in boxes to illustrate their out-of-control busy lives. Some

claimed to manage on three hours of sleep a night during the work week (and it showed in their schoolwork). No doubt they had kids.

The exercise showed them how they spent their time, and that was useful for raising consciousness. However, convincing them to make changes to their schedules was a much harder task.

So many elements of our schedules fall outside our control. You know what I mean. Children's school schedules, significant others' work schedules, the distance between work and school and home ... there are so many things in life that, in the short term anyway, are exempt from our valiant efforts to manage and control them. It's frustrating and at times terrifying, especially when we realize that all this time spent frenetically moving from point A to point B is time lost forever—the dregs of a life we are barely party to, let alone in control of.

A week of recording how you spent your time will open your eyes to where your hours and days have gone. However, by itself, the time spending plan is useless. You need to make changes to your schedule if you are going to finish your dissertation.

	Week						
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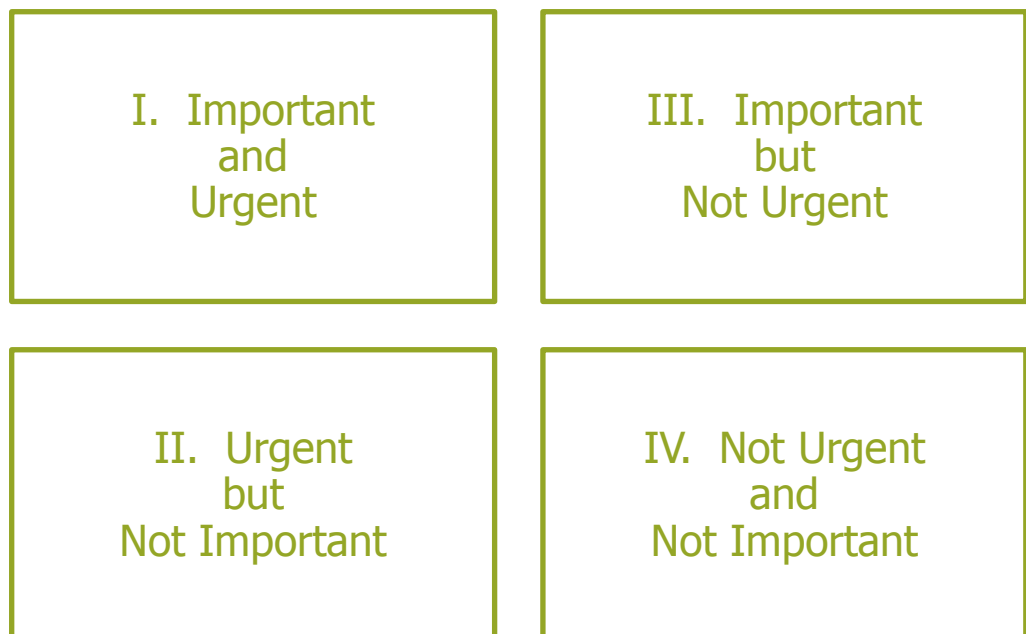
Time spending plan

Are you a chronic procrastinator?

We all procrastinate sometimes. A chronic procrastinator is someone who repeatedly puts things off to another day, even when (or especially when) those things are important, required, or lots of fun.

Forget for a moment about the weirdness associated with avoiding doing things that are important, required, or fun. Let's talk about procrastination. Apparently, there are some negative health risks associated with procrastinating. Google it if you don't believe me.

I'm not going to haul out Stephen Covey's seven habits (which I highly recommend, even if you are not into self-help books). There is one concept I found helpful, and I used to share it with students in my College & Career Success classes: the concept of dividing tasks into four quadrants (see figure). I'm sure you can anticipate where I'm going with this.



Time quadrants

The quadrant I want to spend my time in is the *Important but Not Urgent* quadrant. That is the quadrant containing my book projects and all the other interesting creative projects I have barely started and partly finished. But where do I spend most of my time? In the *Important and Urgent* or *Urgent but Not Important* quadrants.

Important and Urgent is responding to a call from my 88-year-old mother to come over immediately and find out what happened to the link to her Castle Camelot computer game. *Not Important but Urgent* is tuning into my favorite primetime television show after I've been editing and writing all day and my eyes are bulging out of my eye sockets.

Where should we be spending our time? Quadrant III. If we don't do the important work while it's not urgent, we end up doing a half-baked job later when it is both important *and* urgent.

If you postpone sending your weekly updates to your Chair until the night they are due, when you could have done them earlier in the week, then you understand what I'm talking about. It's like putting gas in your car: You can do it now, while you have time, or you can wait until you run out and spend your time walking blocks to find a gas station. Or waiting for your partner to rescue you. You get my drift.

Procrastination taken to an extreme is mental illness. Procrastination can kill you. People die because they put off doing important things, like visiting the doctor or cleaning up their house or fixing their brakes. Are you that far gone? If so, you need professional help. Finishing your proposal might have to wait while you figure out how to get your life back on track. The Ph.D. won't do you a whole lot of good if you are dead. Just saying.

I'm going to assume that you aren't totally insane with procrastination. Maybe you are suffering from a case of resistance.

Are you resistant to making time to write?

If you think time management is your problem, odds are you are a binge writer. That means you save up your writing effort for a special occasion, like the winter holidays or summer break. If that sounds like you, I highly recommend a book called *How to Write a Lot* by Paul Silvia (2007). Silvia's premise was this: You aren't writing because you don't make time to write. It sounds a little like telling a cookie addict to just stop eating cookies, but you can't argue with the fact that you get lots of other things done. Even the laundry gets done occasionally. So why not your writing?

One of my many excuses was I didn't have time, but if you really pressed me, I would admit, there were some underlying reasons why I was avoiding writing. I made a list of some underlying reasons why people might claim that they don't have enough time to write, when the truth is, they really do have time, they just don't want to write.

There were some underlying reasons why I was avoiding writing.

The table shows a "translation device" to help you figure out what are you *really* saying when you say "I don't have enough time." Some of these thoughts might be painful to read. But you need to figure out if the problem hindering you from finishing your dissertation really is a lack of time, or if you are using lack of time as an excuse for avoiding something else you'd rather not admit.

If any of these resonate with you, sorry. But it's good to know now, don't you think? The good news is this: Some of these assumptions are just things your brain is throwing in your path in its misguided attempt to protect you from harm. Once you know

that, you can have a conversation with your brain. It may take time (and people may think you are borderline nuts), but you can negotiate a peace settlement with your brain to allow you to take action toward finishing your dissertation. Put your commitment in writing and get someone you trust to witness it, so you can be held accountable for showing up for your work.

Translating misperceptions about time		
What I say	What I mean	What I don't want to admit
I don't have time.	I have other things I'd rather do.	Finishing my dissertation is not a top priority.
I don't have time.	I'm waiting for [a holiday break/ a vacation/the right time].	I'm scared I can't [get it approved, write it, finish it, defend it, etc.].
I don't have time.	There's too much to do. I can't do it all.	I'm scared what I write won't be perfect. If I can't do a perfect job, I'd rather not do it at all.
I don't have time.	Poor me.	I need sympathy so I can feel okay about not showing up for my dissertation.
I don't have time.	This is too hard.	I am not willing to put in the time and mental effort needed to finish.
I don't have time.	I need to do more research.	I don't want to admit I don't know what I'm doing.

While I was earning my doctorate, I was fortunate that my teaching job gave me Fridays off. I could devote Fridays to grading papers and prepping for the upcoming week and spend the rest of the weekend working on my dissertation.

Even 30 minutes a day can get you to your goal. If you can't do 30 minutes, do 15. One paragraph at a time.

I have complained constantly to anyone who will listen that I don't get enough time to work on my writing projects. The editing jobs keep flowing in, and I feel obligated to get busy on them. When I get some occasional downtime, I spend it sleeping, grocery shopping, fetching stuff for my mother, and doing laundry. My first book was neglected for weeks at a time, and I was demoralized at my lack of progress. Poor me. Nobody cares if I finish writing this guide: I don't have a seven-year deadline like I did with the dissertation.

For my first book, I sometimes got up 30 minutes earlier than normal, made my coffee, and spent 30 minutes writing. Then I put it aside, ate breakfast, and moved into the editing work. Page by page, the book got done. I also did some binge-writing when I had chunks of time. For this guide, I blazed through in one day. Whatever works. The main thing is to write.

Is your schedule strained by household and family obligations?

Family happens, for most people. Even for us loners, life is a panorama of relationships. We come from families; in fact, sometimes it is hard to leave them behind. Then we fall in love, make commitments, acquire children, adopt pets, and care for

elders. With family comes an obligation to pay attention, to spend time, to be present.

Family come first, no matter what anyone says. What good is a Ph.D. if you miss seeing your kids grow up? What good is a Ph.D. if you spend all your time writing and no time visiting your mother or playing with your cat? Cats (and parents and kids) won't be around forever. Old parents and old cats wear out and die.

A Ph.D. degree won't curl up next to you and keep you warm at night or bring you chicken soup when you are sick.



It takes planning and dedication to maintain family relationships and write a dissertation. It's not one or the other, though. You can have both. Try using the time spending plan. Make appointments to write, just like you do for any other commitments.

Many graduate students work at least part time, if their institutions allow (Kuther, 2015). Even if you work from home, work takes time away from your writing. It's difficult to make time to write after you've put in your work day and you are so tired you can barely see straight, let alone write a coherent sentence.

You are the only person who can decide what is a valuable use of your time. A jillion authors of self-help time management books offer their tips and insights into how to manage your time more effectively, but always from their points of view. For example, Laura Vanderkam wrote *168 Hours: You Have More Time Than You Think*, touted as a "fun, inspiring, and practical guide that will help men and women of any age, lifestyle, or career get the most

out of the time and their lives.” Before you buy books like this, read the reviews. You may find out you are not doing so bad.

Notwithstanding the palaver on the previous pages, I doubt whether time is really the problem hindering you from finishing your dissertation. Why do I say that? Well, somehow you managed to get all your coursework done, somehow you managed to pass your Comp exams. You probably have a job, a family, a dog, a yard, a pile of laundry. Sooner or later, you get stuff done. Am I right? You usually show up for your life, maybe not on the dot, but you get stuff done—if you want to.

And that is the key: if you want to. I leave you with one question: How much do you want this degree?

Doctoral degrees don't come to us by magic or wishful dreaming. We have to do the work to win through to the finish line. That means managing our time effectively.

Recap

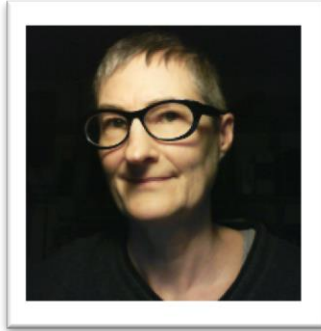
- We all get the same amount of time—every minute, every hour, every day.
- How we use that time is largely up to us.
- Sometimes we just need more awareness of how we are spending our time, but sometimes we use lack of time as an excuse for avoiding doing something hard, like writing.

Suggestions

- Set realistic timelines. Make a chart.
- Do a time spending record: Where do you spend your time?
- Make a time spending plan: How do you *want* to spend your time? Make writing dates with yourself (and keep them).
- Identify areas of resistance. Get honest with yourself. Find out what is really going on.

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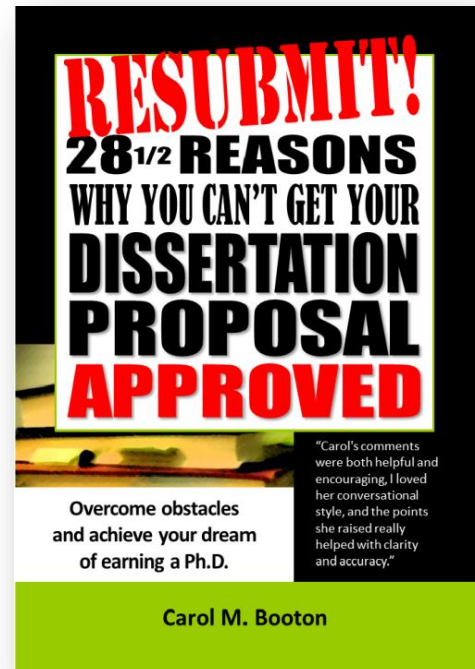
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If you liked this guide, let me know.

Resources

Find more tips on time management and delve into the many other obstacles that could hinder you from earning your Ph.D. in my book *Resubmit! 28 1/2 Reasons Why You Can't Get Your Dissertation Proposal Approved*, published by Crossline Press, available through Amazon in print and Kindle versions.

If you purchase a book, tell me what you think about it by leaving a review on the book's Amazon page. Did you find it useful? Did I miss anything? Thanks. Happy writing!



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