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# Introduction

*Breathe deeply.* Look inward. Look outward. Find your center and your purpose. Do this regularly in the coming months as you write (and re-write) your dissertation.

And consult this small book, which follows from a previous "textual mentor," *Before the Dissertation* (University of Michigan Press, 2014). Like the earlier book, it is written primarily to be a companion for doctoral dissertation writers who are doing qualitative or mixed methods work in fields related to language education. These are the methods and areas of inquiry I know best. From my experience and reading, I find that qualitative projects can be messier and less template-like than quantitative studies, and so potentially the source of more anxiety for dissertation writers, hence the usefulness of a book like this one. Nevertheless, the issues facing all doctoral writers are similar, including those who are writing dissertations with a quantitative approach or dissertations by publication. This book could also be used by writers of masters' theses in these fields and other social sciences, as many of the same issues pertain to both masters and doctoral level writers. (Note that in Europe and elsewhere, the terms *doctoral thesis* and *master's dissertation* are used. In this book, I follow the North American convention of referring to the single-document doctoral project as a dissertation.) For all writers, this book is meant to be consulted once actual writing has begun, in other words, when students are no longer struggling to find a topic, designing their project, or collecting data. Instead, they are analyzing, drafting, revising, polishing, and probably fretting, deleting, reconstructing, and all the while losing sleep.

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For the most part, the book addresses challenges that graduate students face who are writing a single major document based on one main project rather than those who are compiling several previously published articles, as is accepted in some doctoral programs. Most of my anecdotes are from such students and sources, and because of my particular background and interests, I draw mainly on qualitative projects of the sort my students have done or that I have read about. However, I must note here that the single-authored monograph style of dissertation, which first appeared in medieval Europe, is likely losing relevance in today's multi-media digital age. Anthony Paré does not mince words when he asserts that "... changes in the past couple of decades have rendered the single-authored, paper-based, book-length dissertation obsolete" (Paré, 2017, p. 408; Paré, 2019). It may be slowly disappearing, but I do not think it is obsolete yet, whether paper-based or digital, and whether qualitative or quantitative in approach. And of course single-authored monograph-style book publication might follow, post-dissertation.

Doctoral projects and requirements do take multiple forms, of course, including the portfolio approach favored by Paré. The "dissertation (thesis) by publication" and/or the requirement that doctoral students publish in order to graduate is becoming more common in many parts of the world (Lei & Hu, 2015; Li, 2019; Paltridge, 2002), but as Paltridge noted some years ago, is rarely covered thoroughly in the how-to books. This book too, does not do justice to the topic of writing a dissertation (thesis)-by-publication or by means of multi-media productions, but then this is not a how-to-write book. Yes, advice of various kinds appears throughout the book, in some chapters more than in others, but the focus is on helping doctoral students and their supervisors-advisers understand some of the issues that arise during and surrounding writing at the dissertation stage, including the importance of writers' well-being. Regardless of form or of method and approach, the writing of a doctoral dissertation is

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an enormous high-stakes endeavor that affects many aspects of writers' lives.

Therefore, whether or not doctoral students need to write single-authored monographs or compilations of articles in qualitative, mixed, or quantitative traditions, many matters covered in this book will pertain to all those who are preparing for a final assessment in order to be awarded a doctorate. I refer conventionally to this assessment as involving writing. Regardless of form, the high-stakes doctoral project poses similar challenges to students who are in the midst of writing and challenges as well to their supervisors. Likewise, as a companion to both first (L1) and second or additional (L2) language writers of English, the book bears the message that the challenges that both L1 and L2 writers of English face are similar in that they go beyond language proficiency (Habibie, 2019; Hyland, 2015). In all cases, the topics covered in *During the Dissertation* are ones that arise during writing but that are not usually covered in how-to-write books.

To reiterate, as was the case with *Before the Dissertation*, this book is not designed to teach anyone how to write a doctoral dissertation. Other books exist that try to do this. Books of the start-to-finish type tend to focus on the design and production of text according to typical dissertation or research article templates with chapters or sections devoted to introduction, theoretical framework, literature review, methods, findings/analysis, and discussion-conclusion (the well-known acronym IMRAD—Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion—covers most of these). Such how-to books help readers with collection and analysis of data, organizational issues, and linguistic conventions, and presume some uniformity and linearity of writing steps and strategies (see for example Joyner, Rouse, & Glatthorn, 2018; Paltridge & Starfield, 2007, 2019; Swales & Feak, 2012; White, 2011; see also many websites easily located by search engines). Templates offered by such guides may work better for graduate students who are writing quantitative studies rather than the more labor-

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intensive and less straightforward qualitative or mixed method studies, which by their nature tend to be messier. However, most fully qualitative studies roughly follow similar templates.

Even when the final product follows a predictable template, this says little about how dissertation writers arrived there or what they lived through in the process. Hence, an underlying assumption in *During the Dissertation* is that so much diversity exists in how individuals approach and survive challenging writing tasks like a doctoral dissertation that it is impossible to prescribe, or even suggest, a "best approach." This is the case whether the final doctoral project is a qualitative one or a more predictable quantitative one, or whether it is a monograph or a set of related papers. Moreover, for most doctoral students, writing of many kinds will happen at different stages of the dissertation project, not just post data-collection when the serious drafting begins. Strategies for and timing of these different kinds of writing differ across students, and also across supervisors and advisers who are tasked with helping students complete the dissertation. If dissertation writers do not know by the time they start writing which strategies and issues pertain to them, this book can help them craft some approaches that suit their personalities, preferred practices, and individual goals and visions, and help them figure out how dissertation writing might fit into the real-life intrusions of work and family. Additionally, because actual dissertation writing tends to be a solitary time for L1 and L2 graduate students, a textual mentor like *During the Dissertation* can fill a void in writers' lives at a time of solitude, uncertainty, and anxiety. Keep it under your pillow.

In spite of other kinds of writing and planning that graduate students may have already done, the actual drafting of dissertation chapters or sets of related publishable papers represents a shift of direction and possibly a shift in strategies. In other words, once they have crafted a topic, done some reading, designed the research, collected and analyzed data, and started planning the

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preliminary writing of the actual draft, dissertation writers begin the real work of writing, revising, and polishing. Unless they are already published book authors, their dissertation writing experience will likely be the first, and perhaps only, time for them to produce such a lengthy and complex work. Many decisions and challenges need to be addressed before actual writing begins, of course, and some of these are covered in the earlier book, *Before the Dissertation*. But at the earliest writing stage, once the preliminary work of design and data collection is done, the challenge for many writers who have not faced such a huge writing project before is to shift attitudes, strategies, and visions of who they are and what they will be doing for the next many months. They need to turn into people who are living the life of writers, not just researchers.

However, if dissertation writers dare to look at other finished dissertations as models (which they are often encouraged to do by well-meaning supervisors), they could become overwhelmed and intimidated to see what lies ahead for them to get to the end point. They may be unable to construct a vision of the whole project and feel they will never be able to produce such a polished and lengthy document, which always looks "perfect," and impossibly long, in its finished form. At this early stage of writing, how can they see themselves as accomplished researchers and writers, whether they are working in their L1 or L2/L3, and so gain the confidence they need in order to move ahead in the actual work of writing and revising? The comparisons are insidious. As useful as it is to look at some finished dissertations, comparisons can potentially be very counterproductive if they lead to self-sabotaging feelings and behaviors. Feeling overly intimidated can result in paralysis and depression at this critical moment of early writing. One message in this book is that it is normal for the dissertation writing experience to be emotional and psychological as well as intellectual. Overly negative feelings therefore need to be understood and managed. The other side

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of a response to looking at finished dissertations as impossibly perfect is for the dissertation writer to say "I can do this, and I can do it even better." In all cases, it takes courage and tenacity to commit to dissertation writing and to see the process through to the end without being trapped by a belief that perfection is the unreachable goal. Such a belief, instead, needs to be liberating.

I should note from the start that in this book I pay perhaps undue attention to the difficult aspects of and negative responses to doctoral dissertation writing. This strategy makes sense in some ways, because I hope to reach writers who are struggling or dreading or balking or angsting at the dissertation writing stage, and to convince them not to give up, now that they have gotten this far. Dissertation writers who are sailing through their writing probably have little need for this book, beyond curiosity as to what others are going through. It is also likely that dissertation writers will suffer more at the moment of writing than they will recall suffering later. ("I don't know how I'm going to finish/survive this" vs. "It wasn't so bad after all.") I also hope to reach faculty who are advising students on their dissertation writing as a way to alert these advisers and supervisors as to what their students are going through and to remind them what they themselves might have experienced. A little empathy can go a long way.

Nevertheless, let me stress early on that, for many people, the pleasures of doctoral dissertation writing, once a proposal has been accepted, the research has been carried out, and the data have been collected and analyzed, cannot be matched by other experiences in a doctoral program. The writing stage is a time to be totally immersed in one's ideas, goals, challenges, intellectual interests, and writing rituals. It is a deliciously selfish time in this sense, because all attention focuses on YOU, the dissertation writer. A supervisor, classmates with whom students have a supportive relationship such as in a study group, and other faculty are all working together to help dissertation writers get through

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the writing stage successfully. I should note that students who are reciprocally helping other dissertation writers with their writing also benefit themselves—the comments writers make to others could be comments they are making to themselves.

What, then, are some of the specific issues that arise as dissertation writers immerse themselves in the massively complex job of constructing a book-length piece of research writing or a compilation of related writings for publication, probably for the first time in their lives?

## Issues Covered in the Book

In parts of this section, as well as in other places in this book, I address dissertation writers directly rather than referring to them in third person. You, the reader who is currently writing, in addition to general dissertation writers, are my main audience.

To start with, knowing about your own writing styles and strategies when facing a huge and complex project is central from early stages (see Chapter 1), in conjunction with developing a vision of the whole project and its parts (see Chapter 2). Also early on, it is critical to establish a healthy working relationship with supervisors and other faculty and to understand at the writing stage what you and a supervisor expect (see Chapter 3). Some of the studies of doctoral supervising that I refer to in later chapters confirm what dissertation writers know—that not all students have the perfect supervisor-advisee relationship. "Perfect" is taken here to mean a relationship that is low on conflict, high on emotional, intellectual, and procedural engagement and support, and characterized by respect and compatible styles and goals. Neither nagging nor neglect by a supervisor fits into this picture. But perfection in the advising relationship is so rare that dissertation writers need to commit to moving ahead even without it, and if possible, without feeling victimized ("I couldn't finish because my supervisor didn't help me enough.…").

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It is also helpful to understand ahead of time, as well as at the moments of occurrence, what possible obstacles to writing might confront you. For example, having never done anything like this before, most of us are likely not to know how "perfect" the dissertation needs to be in order to guarantee a successful defense and later, a diploma with our names on it (see Chapter 4). Striving for perfection on such a high-stakes project, as is commonly known, can be very counterproductive by making you feel you need to do more (and more and more and more) and that what you have done so far is never good enough. But as I suggested in the previous paragraph, we may not be able to define what perfection is in dissertation writing. (I think it does not exist.) The compulsion to perfect a dissertation can lead to blocks and burnout, of course, and possible failure to complete the project. Likewise, compulsively following a list of things that other people or guidebooks say you should do can drive your own natural inclinations in counter-productive directions. Yes, it helps to read advice and suggestions from guidebooks and other published and in-person sources (including from this book) about how to get the dissertation written and to make it acceptable, but following prescriptions blindly makes little sense. There are too many "shoulds" out there and not enough focus by writers on their need to continually attend to what works and does not work for them. Pursuing a path suggested by others may turn out not to be productive.

In other words, individual factors greatly influence how you and supervising faculty decide when a dissertation, whatever form it takes, is good enough, if not perfect, and what paths to take to reach this goal. These decisions cannot be made solely from guidebooks or prescriptive advice. Dissertation writers will want to know how good is "good enough," of course, and so you need to keep in touch with supervisors and other critical readers. Otherwise, how do any of us know when to force ourselves to walk away from a document that is not up to our standards or to some imaginary set of standards we think others hold over us

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or whether we should start over or instead accept the inevitable imperfections? If you stay committed until the end, deadlines imposed by universities will naturally force you to complete the project, even if you feel it is not the model of perfection you had hoped for (ah, the power of deadlines!) (see Chapter 10). Getting through to the end in a timely manner is more likely to require an ongoing awareness of what standards and strategies work for you individually, as well as the tenacity to persist during periods of doubt and confusion. All writers of high-stakes projects need to cultivate this awareness in themselves, and revisit their awareness at different stages of writing.

Addressed minimally in *Before the Dissertation* was the topic of health. In *During the Dissertation* I pay a bit more attention to it because of how important it is to stay healthy in the midst of dissertation writing. Writers who sit at a computer for days and nights (and weeks and months) on end face particular health challenges beyond those of the common cold (see Chapter 5). If you are immersed in a long-term high-stakes project, and are pressed for time as well, you can experience eye strain, joint and muscle problems, fatigue and burnout, poor nutrition, lack of exercise, and all the consequences of these discomforts and poor habits. You risk turning into flabby hunchbacks, junk food and caffeine addicts, pre-diabetics, insomniacs in constant pain, and nervous wrecks who depend on sleeping aids and painkillers to get through long days and possibly short nights. Brain power, in addition to health, suffers. Even if health is basically good, the loneliness and isolation at the writing stage can take a toll on your mental and emotional well-being (see Chapter 7). Dissertation writing is always a challenge, of course, but does not have to be so onerous as to ruin your health.

Nevertheless, even under the best of circumstances, we all have what I call "low- and high-IQ days" (see Chapter 6) and so need to adjust the many different kinds of writing activities to fit such days. Writing does not have to stop on low-IQ days; it just

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changes to more mechanical tasks. However, on low-IQ days, you may feel more isolated and empty than usual, and wonder if, in the absence of brain power, the mechanical tasks have taken over your lives. I recall asking myself during dissertation writing and even now as I work on other projects: "How long do I have to wait before my brain returns?" It helps, of course, if you can find ways to stay connected to a handful of supportive people to help temper the feeling that you are a solitary imposter who cannot possibly finish this enormous project. A basic source of such support is the school-workplace, where you are likely to have regular contact with other students, colleagues, and co-workers. Even if others cannot make time for in-depth consulting, they can surely assure you that your high-IQ days will indeed return. They can also help you get back on track when you feel isolated and out of touch (see Chapter 7) or overly distracted and beset by interruptions (see Chapter 8).

A major issue for all dissertation writers, those of you with or without a supportive supervisor, is that you all face the generally oppressive task of revising what you have sweat blood and tears to get into a first draft (see Chapter 9). Indeed, all academic writers, and many others who write as well, face the challenging and sometimes tedious task of revising and polishing their work throughout a career. In this small book, I won't review much of the vast literature on correction, feedback, and response to writing, which discusses various ways that writing gets revised and improved (regrettably focusing mainly on corrections to grammar and lexicon, particularly if the advice is given to L2 writers). This literature presumes that someone else, such as a dissertation supervisor, is reading, commenting on, and possibly editing your writing, whether superficially or in great detail.

But supervisors often do not respond in great detail, and instead offer only general comments or even no comments, and may actually refuse to edit and proofread your work. With minimal help from knowledgeable outside readers, how can you move

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through your revisions without becoming so discouraged that you are ready to give up? To revise successfully, all writers need to cut and paste and toss and keep and shuffle and reorganize and add and expand and then toss some more and finally nit-pick at the punctuation, spelling, spacing, and formatting, having never done this before on a work so large and significant. I hope to convince reluctant revisers that these activities are normal, even as they are sources of anxiety for some of you. I know of only one writer who told me over lunch once, and confirmed it later, that he "loves revising." Really Matt? Maybe you need to write a book on this topic!

And, finally, it will be time to stop (Chapter 10). The difficulty for all academic writers, but especially for dissertation writers, is that we must end a writing project before we feel it is truly finished (as I feel about this book). Even with time extensions in a doctoral program, those extensions will run out and it will be time (as one of my dissertation advisers told me) to either fish or cut bait. We can conclude the project somehow, or we can walk away from it unfinished, after sometimes years of hard work, a regrettable ending but one chosen by about half of all dissertation writers (Golde, 2000, 2005). (See Sternberg's [1981] advice from long ago on reasons for and against writing a doctoral dissertation.) We can understand the temptation to walk away: It can be quite terrifying to imagine ourselves being judged on a high-stakes project before we have perfected the document, but as I discuss in Chapter 4, most of us will never get to the perfection stage. We will inevitably be evaluated on a product that feels unfinished, unperfected, and in need of more revision. We have to stop. It helps to remember that even if you have to finish (meaning submit and defend) before the work feels finished, a new life begins once you can display on your CVs and business cards a new title of "Doctor." And you must not forget that the work can continue, in articles, books, and further research on the dissertation topic and on related and new topics. The search for perfection doesn't need to stop.

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## Audience for the Book

The primary audience for *During the Dissertation* is L1 (English as a first language) and EAL (English as an Additional Language, also called L2) graduate students who are in the process of writing theses and dissertations in language education fields, although the basic issues apply to dissertation writers in other fields as well. The book is also aimed at interested supervisors and faculty who wish to understand what their advisees are experiencing as these students try to make sense of readings and mounds of data and then selectively put what they can into a book-length piece of writing or compilation of articles. However, many of the struggles that individual students go through are invisible to supervisors, who might see students and their drafts infrequently and who might not feel interested in or responsible for helping students with particular writing problems or with personal struggles. Faculty advisers who read *During the Dissertation* will thus be alerted to what students are going through, and be able to reflect on their own earlier dissertation writing experiences. Such understanding and reflection will help faculty provide first-hand intellectual and emotional support that students might not be able to find in the existing books on "how to write a dissertation." Moreover, supervisors themselves could be experiencing professional and personal stresses that dissertation writers need to be aware of. This book can help all readers do the kind of perspective-taking that will help them better understand the dissertation writing experience from both writers' and supervisors' viewpoints.

Because this book is targeted at both L1 and EAL/L2 graduate students who are writing dissertations in English, it will appeal to domestic graduate students in English dominant countries and to the growing number of international students in graduate programs in these countries (e.g., United States, Canada, United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand). For L1 users of English, the

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topics in *During the Dissertation* will likely be both familiar and challenging. For L2 users of English, the chapters deal with issues that they possibly have never confronted in previous academic work and that they may never have discussed openly with supervisors or classmates. Topics that draw on personal struggles and anxieties in academia remain off-bounds in some cultures, as do confessions that a writer needs help and consolation. Such responses should not be seen as signs of weakness in students, but as normal, if hidden, experiences.

Although *During the Dissertation* could easily be used in classes and seminars on dissertation writing, given that each chapter provides rich areas for discussion and for reflective journal writing, the book does not contain extensive discussion questions or activities in the style of some textbooks. A few topics for discussion, journal writing, and reflection stem from the content of the chapters themselves and appear at the end of each chapter. In other words, the book can be used flexibly by individual students as well as by students in seminars and study groups and by their supervisors and faculty, and many chapters can be read individually as needed (hence some repetition across chapters). Even in the midst of intense writing, the goal is for dissertation writers to make time to talk about issues and activities, write about them, and share ideas and concerns so that they are externalized and turned into language that can feed into further writing and reflecting.

Of course, each graduate student who reads this book will likely be at different stages of the dissertation writing process, and be facing different sorts of personal and intellectual challenges. Every reader will thus benefit from some chapters more than others. I urge all readers therefore to study the Table of Contents, and then to pick and choose what to read, when to read, and even how to read (such as with care and attention, or with a goal of a quick overview). I also urge those dissertation writers who are not already doing so to keep a reflective journal as

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they read this and any other resources, and also as they write. In some cases, excerpts from this kind of journal writing might also end up in the dissertation itself or in post-dissertation writing, so it is not wasted time to do this kind of reflective writing. My own journal-like excerpts and commentaries that might parallel writers' own journal reflections appear throughout the book. Many additions can be made to the commentaries in *During the Dissertation* from each reader's experiences, including issues I have not included or dealt with in enough detail or looked at from enough perspectives. So let's get started.