

APPENDIX B:

THE DISSERTATION: YOUR COMMITTEES, THE PROSPECTUS, COMPOSITION, AND DEFENSE

The dissertation is the culminating project of the Ph.D. program. It fulfills the final requirements of the program itself. Under normal conditions, it need take no longer than a year to write, revise, and defend a strong dissertation. Most delays have little to do with the composition process itself. This appendix outlines the many issues involved in writing a dissertation, from selecting one's committee, proposing a thesis, composing the work, and defending it.

Until the dissertation is completed and successfully **defended**, you are a Ph.D. **candidate**, or **ABD (All But Dissertation)**. Dissertations vary somewhat according to the topic and field, but **a typical dissertation is about 250 pages, not including bibliography, and may be as long as 400 pages**. Any project shorter than 225 pages is normally considered insubstantial.

The question of length, incidentally, is neither a matter of our program's rules, nor SMU's; this is the standard within the discipline of English as a whole. Since most new Assistant Professors use portions of the dissertation as the basis for their first articles and book manuscripts, a thin or insubstantial dissertation will make those achievements more difficult to reach. The longer a dissertation is, however, the more likely it is to take a great deal of time to complete. Depending upon your work habits, such a length may delay your overall progress.

At its core, a dissertation (sometimes called a **thesis**) is an *academic exercise* devoted to analyzing a fairly complex subject, such as an author's individual works, a single work, a set of works within a particular genre or movement, a critical question about the field in which one works (using specific texts, historical moments, ideas, movements, etc. as evidence), and so on.

PLEASE NOTE, however, that single-author dissertations are now *extremely rare* in English. The reason is simple. Although a well-crafted dissertation on a single author might demonstrate a command of a wide range of historical and critical materials, search committees normally seek candidates whose work indicates that they are willing and able to teach and research many other authors and works. As a consequence, a single-author dissertation decreases your chance of finding employment in today's market. The exceptions to this rule would be major canonical authors (e.g., Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, etc.), but these exceptions prove the rule. You should always develop a dissertation project that allows you to apply your analytical skills to the knowledge gained in your studies.

The dissertation should be an original contribution to the field. In practical terms this means that no one has written on the exact same subject in essentially the same way as you. It is YOUR opportunity to reshape the discipline and the fields that interest you in significant or substantial ways, whether small or large. It is the best representation of your intellect and all you have learned in your graduate studies. Scholars entering the job market use chapters from the dissertation, or portions thereof, as representative samples of their writing, often circulating one or two of them for publication in advance of a bid on the job market.

The dissertation is NOT one long paper divided into chapters; it is a series of extended papers connected by an argument, a THESIS that you, as author, use to anchor the texts you discuss. It normally consists of

- 1) an introduction and perhaps an additional, longer chapter that reviews the extant literature on the subject and your methodology (sometimes the introduction is part of the same chapter);
- 2) several chapters on your chosen texts or portions thereof;
- 3) a conclusion.

A dissertation is not a book, even if it is book-length. Dissertations should demonstrate to your dissertation committee the extent of your intellectual development and ability to conduct sophisticated research. It is quite unlikely to see publication as a book in the same form, as a book is meant to reach an audience that may be less sympathetic than your dissertation committee.

DEVELOPING A DISSERTATION PROJECT AND PROSPECTUS

You may find yourself inclined to begin developing a viable dissertation project early in your graduate program, perhaps by the conclusion of the second year. You may also wonder how someone develops a full dissertation. How will you know whether a topic is worthy of discussion for 250 pages or longer?

A FEW QUESTIONS THAT MIGHT HELP SPUR DEVELOPMENT OF YOUR PROJECT:

- 1) Which periods or genres interest you the most? Do you wish to specialize in these areas in your teaching and research career?
- 2) Who are the authors/what are the texts that most interest you?
- 3) Why are those texts specifically interesting or problematic? What do they have in common? Is it a shared view of the world? A unique set of techniques? Insight regarding a particular problem or set of problems? An explicit or implicit perspective?
- 4) Why are these authors/problems/issues important? What do we gain by studying them? How might understanding them change the way we look at the literature of a period, genre, group, movement, or other issues?
- 5) Who has worked on this issue/genre/author before? Is there already an extensive body of work in this area? If so, is it useful or up to date? If not, how would your perspective add to the body of work in a way that would be interesting or revelatory?
- 6) Similarly, can you bring a fresh critical approach to the texts or ideas you wish to analyze? What is novel about your approach? Does it extend the work others have done or take that work in new directions?
- 7) Are there forgotten works that are worthy of discussion? Why are they worthy of our attention? What do you have to say about them? How will these texts advance your project, rather than simply adding to it?

The questions at 6) and 7) above need to be emphasized. It's not enough, for example, to find an obscure work and argue that we need to revisit it simply because it is obscure. What do we gain as readers from revisiting that work? What does a particular field of study gain through your arguments or analyses?

Equally important, does your argument about these issues/texts/authors *make sense*? Put another way, your argument may be viable with one or several texts, but it may be inapplicable elsewhere. An illuminating argument about one or two works or authors frequently does not extend beyond them. For example, if I believe that all novels of Movement/Genre X provide evidence of Marxist sentiments based upon one novel by Jean Smith, and plan to write a dissertation upon that basis, I might soon find that my argument doesn't obtain; I have overgeneralized from my exemplary texts.

Your dissertation advisor should be able to recognize that you are engaging in a generalization by extrapolating from too narrow a set of texts. It is also possible to take on *too much* for the dissertation, to propose a work that is so ambitious or broad that you place an unnecessary burden on yourself to learn about multiple epochs, topics, and approaches. You should have clear reasons for including each of the primary materials that your dissertation would discuss. Your advisor should be able to alert you when the project's reach may be exceeding its grasp.

Even if your advisor does not warn you, it is ultimately **your responsibility** to test your hypotheses: read the texts that might support your thesis **well ahead of the due dates** for your **Ph.D. exams** and **dissertation prospectus** to see whether the project might be tenable. You should also **communicate** with your dissertation director what you plan to do **as early and often as possible, even if you have not mapped out all the details**. He or she might be able to save you a great deal of time and effort by critiquing early drafts of your proposals.

Finally—and perhaps the most difficult question to answer—is this the sort of project that you would be willing and able to revisit throughout the rest of your academic career? Your dissertation, again, is the first and best representation of your scholarly interests and intellectual abilities. It is apt to define your early career and act as the basis of many works to come. Would you enjoy thinking, writing about, and discussing these works for the next ten years or beyond?

In summary, an argument that would sustain a dissertation requires a wealth of evidence. A dissertation—from prospectus to completed project—demands extensive research from the earliest stages. That is one of the purposes of writing **Ph.D. exams**: to force you to conduct some of that research so you might begin drawing links between texts and ideas that were not immediately apparent. Your exam/dissertation director and committee should help guide you in that direction.

THE PROSPECTUS AND ORAL EXAMINATION

(otherwise known as the Prospectus Defense)

The dissertation prospectus is a detailed plan for the dissertation itself. It outlines what you plan to write upon, why your topic is significant and timely, and the implications of your project. It addresses the questions above as thoroughly and completely as possible and offers your committee a guide to your thought process. It should comprise, at the very least, three components: an essay outlining the project; a chapter outline; a working bibliography.

The essay reviews the origins of your project, establishes its historical or intellectual bases, elucidates its theoretical assumptions or components, and identifies the authors and works to be studied, along with rationales for their inclusion. On the last point, you might need to explain why certain works or authors are excluded as well;

this will depend upon your knowledge of the field and your committee's advice. You should also explain how you are organizing your project and why it is taking the form you propose.

Most important, the essay should clarify the project's overarching argument and its methodology. What unites the texts at hand? How will your approach enhance our understanding of the texts or issues? What are your goals within the project and beyond?

The chapter outline should summarize each chapter and its direction: authors you will discuss; critical approaches; arguments you will posit and some evidence supporting them; possible conclusions you may reach.

The working bibliography consists of the primary and secondary works you plan to use or incorporate. It is certain to shift as you write the project, but it should be the most complete bibliography you can offer.

Please keep in mind that your committee may ask more of you than these minimal components. Some committees wish to see the equivalent of a full chapter; others may ask that the bibliography be annotated or that the essay address the bibliography's composition; others may ask for a more detailed outline.

IT IS EXTREMELY IMPORTANT THAT YOU CONSULT YOUR COMMITTEE EARLY AND OFTEN REGARDING ITS WISHES.

This may save you significant amounts of additional work and difficulty as you prepare for the defense.

The defense itself is your opportunity to argue in favor of your project. Even if you vet your prospectus with your committee members early, some questions may arise about the viability of specific elements. The defense also provides an occasion for your committee collectively to engage your project and advise you on ways to proceed: archives you might need to visit; writing strategies; additional works you should consult; faculty here and outside of SMU you should contact. The members should ask you questions about the project's origin and direction. They will then ask you to step out of the defense room as they confer.

Your committee will ultimately decide whether the project is viable. If the committee's decision is positive, then you will advance to candidacy and proceed to write your dissertation under its advice and direction.

CONSTITUTING YOUR COMMITTEE

Before you can take exams and write a dissertation, you need an exam/dissertation director, as well as a complete committee.

PLEASE NOTE: Although our program allows you to have different committees for your exams and the dissertation, **YOU SHOULD NOT CHANGE THE MEMBERSHIP OF YOUR COMMITTEES UNLESS ABSOLUTELY NECESSARY.**

When you ask members of the faculty to serve on your exam or dissertation committee, you are asking them to make a commitment to your intellectual development, to advise you for the remainder of your program *and beyond*. These are the faculty who should work hard to ensure that you have mastered your fields, that you have the best chance of employment through their advice and letters of recommendation, and that you will go on to a successful career. In turn, you indicate that you trust their judgment and will listen to it as you develop your dissertation project and write it. It is a solemn commitment, one that ALL should take seriously.

In short, do not ask anyone to be on your committee whom you would not be willing to consult *for the rest of your graduate career*, at the very least, and perhaps many years beyond. When you remove someone from your committee, that is usually a sign that the professional relationship between student and faculty member has been unproductive; many faculty interpret such a dismissal as a comment upon the quality of their work. The same is usually true if or when a faculty member resigns from the committee, unless she or he says otherwise.

In sum: Choose your committee wisely. What follows is some advice for assembling this group.

THE DIRECTOR

The director (sometimes called the Major Professor) you choose needs to be someone with whom you have a strong *professional* relationship: you have taken at least one class with this professor; s/he clearly has great respect for you as an intellectual (and vice versa); you can *disagree* amicably; you trust his or her judgment. Your director should also be sufficiently knowledgeable and discriminating to respond critically to your work and challenge it whenever needed. You gain very little from a director who believes in your project but never questions it extensively, even if your working relationship is a comfortable one.

Although your director needs to be a knowledgeable, critical reader, she or he should not be so critical that your work will be returned for endless revisions. In the end, the dissertation is your project, one for which you need to take agency and ownership. In other words, it is both *normal* and *desirable* that your director and other committee members negotiate with you about your project. Without that process, you may very well finish your dissertation, but that does not necessarily translate into a productive career.

Think of the dissertation director as one of the most important mentors you will have. His or her letter of recommendation carries the most weight when you apply for jobs. She or he should be willing and able to offer advice on prospective jobs, read your application materials, and prepare you for job interviews, publication opportunities, and other aspects of the profession. In one capacity or another, your dissertation director is likely to play a central role in your early career.

THE SECOND AND THIRD MEMBERS

The second and third members of your committee serve several purposes. First, each holds expertise in at least one of the secondary or tertiary areas in which you are examined for your Qualifying Examinations. They may also have expertise in the primary area. They are charged with determining whether you have sufficient knowledge and understanding of the fields in which you will be tested to advance to candidacy at the appropriate time.

Second, each member is a critical reader of your work as a whole. He or she may evaluate the quality of your writing, the extent and accuracy of your research, the viability of your theses, and other criteria.

Third, the other members may be among those who write letters of recommendation for your initial job searches. They cannot do so unless they have thoroughly vetted your work. Their specific expertise may be especially important if you are applying for positions where your ability to teach and research in one area is the *sine qua non*.

COMPOSING THE DISSERTATION

The dissertation may be based upon papers you have completed in your graduate courses. In fact, it should build upon that body of work rather than be a fresh start. A major goal of graduate coursework is to allow you time and

opportunity to develop a viable dissertation based upon the new ideas and information you have acquired. The dissertation should focus that work into a project that simultaneously demonstrates to your committee what you have learned from its members and other faculty, and establishes you as a distinctive voice in your own right. It is a defining statement.

Although your committee comprises your first readers, the scholarly community at large will be listening to that statement. At SMU, dissertations are published electronically and made available through University Microfilms International. As a result, your dissertation will be accessible to the public once it is completed.

This offers both advantages and disadvantages for you. The advantage is that others in the scholarly community will be able to read and use your work in short order. The main disadvantage is that your future publications based upon the dissertation will require extensive revision. The extent of those revisions will depend upon you to some extent, but be aware that editors of learned journals and university press acquisitions editors alike are reluctant to publish work that is too similar to material published earlier. This may include dissertations, despite the rather narrow circle in which they circulate. For better or worse, however, extensive revision of one's dissertation has become the norm in our profession. It is now rare for anyone to publish a minimally revised dissertation as his or her first book.

Even if your dissertation were not published electronically, it would still be necessary to revise it. Dissertations and books are not the same, even if the best of the former may be superior to many of the latter. A dissertation is an academic exercise, often with extensive footnotes and other appeals to authority. A book attempts to reach a wider and more diverse audience than a dissertation ever would, tends to eschew footnote-worthy material, and must be written to a different set of rhetorical standards. In shorthand, a dissertation establishes your authority; a book assumes your authority.

For this reason, you need not succumb to the same pressures that a book author has. Make no mistake; you should strive for excellence in writing your dissertation. Your committee will expect no less from you. Your goal, however, is completion, not perfection of your project. Your dissertation director should be able to help steer you away from rhetorical, logical, or intellectual dead ends and guide you toward the texts, ideas, and approaches that will help you complete the project.

STRATEGIES

As you begin writing your dissertation, recognize first of all that once you have passed your qualifying Ph.D. examinations, you have reached a new echelon. You have no more formal coursework or papers to complete. You might still be teaching, but other than the obligations to your students and your dissertation committee, you have almost no regularly scheduled activities to attend. The university and departmental deadlines for completion of the dissertation (five years and one year, respectively) should be heeded if you wish to remain in good standing (and you should), but they are comparatively distant.

In short, the ABD student exists in a world apart. For some people, this can be isolating, though it needn't be. A regular schedule for submission of your work to your committee (see below) can reduce this sense of isolation. Regular communication with your mentors and guides about writing issues you face makes the enterprise seem like more of a communal effort, even if you are ultimately the one who must ultimately do the work.

The dissertation writer also faces the same challenge that all writers do: the terror of the blank screen or page. How *does* one write a project of this length? How do you maintain momentum and interest? Several common bits of writing advice apply to dissertations as well.

First, give yourself permission to write poorly. Dissertation chapters are completed via small, steady steps and multiple revisions; completely polished first drafts are extremely rare. Your first drafts may leave much to be desired, but it is always better to write a complete, very rough draft rather than nothing at all.

Second, keep a written journal nearby as you read books, finish a day's writing, complete sections of chapters, and turn in drafts. Track what you do each day and the issues that arise as you write.

Third, put yourself on a work schedule that jibes with your other commitments. Assign yourself regular daily minimum goals that you can realistically meet. For example, you might

****Commit to working every morning five days a week. Write at least one page per workday. If you find yourself inspired to do more, go for it! But hold yourself to that one page per day goal. Conduct your research and write annotations or complete other work in the balance of the day. Give yourself two days off per week to rest and recover.***

**Commit to writing for a set number of hours each day, five days a week. Do not move from your computer. Stay away from social networking sites. Don't answer the phone except in case of emergencies. Conduct your research, annotations, and other work in the balance of the day. Give yourself two days off per week to rest and recover. (N.B.: This strategy tends to be less successful for those working on dissertations, as it is often necessary to take time away from writing itself to check one's research, which can eat up writing time or offer too many distractions.)*

**Attempt psychological warfare: Purchase a large three-ring binder, a ream of printer paper, and tabbed dividers. Fill the binder with as much of the ream as you project your dissertation will be when completed. Insert the dividers where you believe chapters will begin and end. As you complete a certain amount of work—a page, a day's writing, a section of a chapter, an entire chapter, etc.—print it out on blank sheets and replace those sheets in the binder. Along with a writing journal, this technique allows you to see in concrete form how your writing is progressing from one mark to the next.*

WORKING WITH YOUR DIRECTOR AND COMMITTEE

You will need to negotiate with your dissertation director how and when she or he will receive and review parts of the dissertation and pass them on to your committee.

AT A MINIMUM, YOU NEED TO ADDRESS THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:

- *Does your director want to see drafts of chapters or only the completed dissertation?*
- *Does the rest of the committee wish this as well?*
- *Would your committee members rather allow you and the director to work out issues with individual chapters until the first draft of the dissertation is complete?*
- *How much time does your director need to review chapters?*

- *Does the committee expect to vet a draft well before it will agree to a defense date, or will it accept a final draft only in advance of the defense?*
- *How much time do individual committee members need to review the final dissertation?*

[N.B.: AS A COURTESY, you should allow your committee a full month to read and evaluate the dissertation. Remember, you are asking the committee to read the equivalent of a new book in addition to other obligations.]

- *Would your committee members mind exchanging e-mails or meeting with you while your work is in progress, or should those conversations remain between your director and other members of the committee? Might they be willing to meet with you individually in advance of the defense?*

(This sometimes helps you to anticipate and allay common concerns.)

Relationships with committee members in all of these scenarios may change over time and as the project advances. As a rule, you should always keep your director and/or other members apprised of your progress. If you anticipate problems with a particular component, **early consultation and advice may help you to avoid extensive revisions later.**

THE DISSERTATION DEFENSE

The **dissertation defense** is the final stage of your graduate experience. As the name implies, it is an opportunity to present and *defend* your work—its *raison d'être*, its arguments, your research methods and outcomes, your contributions to the field, etc.—to the scholarly community at large, but primarily to your committee and department. Dissertation defenses are announced to the Office of Research and Graduate Studies and the Dedman Dean's Office. This means that faculty from this and possibly other departments may attend if they wish. Faculty not on your committee may comment upon the work and ask questions during the defense, but they may not cast formal votes upon your case; only your committee may do so.

The defense serves as your first opportunity to present yourself as a mature scholar and to allow the scholarly community to appreciate the significance of your work. It is therefore traditional to treat the event somewhat more formally and with a clear structure. In consultation with your director, you should plan an initial presentation on the dissertation and its evolution. This may consist of a **written précis** of the finished dissertation and its significance that you read aloud to those present. This helps to frame the discussion that follows.

The remainder of the defense normally consists primarily of your committee members asking you questions about the finished document. Again, though, others in attendance may comment. These questions may challenge some assumptions, argue with specific points, or suggest further ways to expand your knowledge and insight as you prepare to publish and teach your material. Some may offer criticism and praise in varying degrees; still others might ask you to address pedagogical issues in much the same way a job interview committee might. In the main, you should consider the defense an opportunity to engage in an intensive conversation about your most accomplished work to date, the first of many to come.

By the time you reach the defense, you will have chosen how to define yourself for the first part of your career in the academy. The conclusion of a successful defense certifies that you are no longer a student; you are a scholar of your chosen fields, a peer of your professors.

AFTER THE DISSERTATION: WHAT NEXT?

As stated above, the dissertation—whether in progress or completed—serves as the basis of your job search. It is in part upon the dissertation's promise that any institution that interviews you for a position will make its decision. Your future colleagues are likely to expect you to turn at least some of the dissertation into published articles and/or a book. Equally important, hiring institutions also believe the dissertation should lead to something else, whether as a first book (in heavily revised form) or another book entirely. If your cover letter for an advertised position or interview with a hiring committee does not demonstrate that you have *additional* research plans, then that might be a cause for concern.

The perennial question in the academy is “What next?”

AFTER YOU HAVE PROPOSED OR COMPLETED ANY MAJOR PROJECT, YOU WILL FACE A NUMBER OF QUESTIONS:

- *Where will this project take your scholarship or teaching?*
- *How will that new direction contribute to current discussions in the field?*
- *What will be the issue of that new direction? A new article? A book chapter? A book? A new pedagogical approach?*
- *When will this happen? In six months? One year? Three? Five? Ten?*

Some of these questions are likely to be asked in various forms during job interviews. They also return multiple times in your career, whether at the beginning of a tenure-track appointment, during a third-year review, in the course of the review for Promotion and Tenure, and well beyond. Even as your research plans change and evolve—and they will—colleagues, deans, and provosts are certain to ask about those plans.

The academy in general and our discipline in particular appreciate coherent narratives with definable arcs. These questions ask you to define that arc as carefully as you can.

After you have completed the dissertation, however, you might not want to begin revising it immediately into book form. This is normal; most authors are a bit weary of their dissertations and need a little time—perhaps a few months—away from it. You may also decide that your first book should be another project that has little to do with the dissertation. This is becoming commonplace. Many institutions, in fact, explicitly state that tenure will depend solely upon work easily distinguishable from the dissertation.

Either option requires a great deal of work. A new project means starting over, which you may be well poised to do. A revised dissertation may take less time, but it still involves reconceiving the dissertation so it appeals to a broader audience.

SEVERAL EXCELLENT RESOURCES SHOULD HELP IMMENSELY IN GETTING YOUR
DISSERTATION PUBLISHED:

Germano, William. *From Dissertation to Book*. 1st ed. University Of Chicago Press, 2005. Print.

---. *Getting It Published, 2nd Edition: A Guide for Scholars and Anyone Else Serious About Serious Books*. 2nd ed. University Of Chicago Press, 2008. Print.

Luey, Beth. *Handbook for Academic Authors*. 5th ed. Cambridge University Press, 2009. Print.

Luey, Beth, and Sanford G. Thatcher. *Revising Your Dissertation: Advice from Leading Editors, Updated Edition*. 2nd ed. University of California Press, 2007. Print.

