

Making a Thesis or Dissertation Support Group Work for You



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The adage, “It takes a village to raise a child,” can also be applied to the thesis or dissertation writer. One of the ways you may wish to add to your “village” of faculty, colleagues, friends, and family who will help you to succeed is to become part of a thesis or dissertation support group. (Note: We will use the term “dissertation support group” throughout the remainder of this document for ease in communication. However, Master’s degree students who are writing thesis should translate this into “thesis or dissertation group,” as we hope you will find the questions and suggestions included in this paper to be useful.)

The Benefits of Being in a Dissertation Support Group

What can you expect to get from a dissertation group? Although doctoral students join dissertation groups for a variety of reasons, here are some of the most common:

- To receive and provide good company and support in what can be a time of great isolation. (You’re not alone.)
- To take courage from the fact that most doctoral Candidates face the same kinds of problems while producing the dissertation that you will. (You’re not weird or crazy.)
- To hold yourself and each other accountable for moving ahead. (The only way you’ll finish the dissertation is to break it into manageable pieces and keep working—especially when you feel discouraged or stuck.)
- To expand your network of resources that help you to achieve your academic and personal goals.
- To learn from others who have chosen to take the same journey (You get as much from their lessons learned as you do your own.)

In summary, to persevere and achieve your goal (You can do it.)

What You Shouldn’t Expect to Get from the Dissertation Support Group—Therapy

The dissertation support group may well prove to be an excellent source of personal support, which could be called therapeutic, but this is distinct from therapy. Completing a doctoral degree is an arduous process that brings a unique set of challenges. For some, if not many students, it can bring out emotional and psychological issues that, when seen in the right light, are great opportunities for personal growth. However, students who join dissertation support groups looking for therapy keep the group from focusing on academic goals. We encourage students who feel the need for therapeutic help to do so outside the framework of the Dissertation Support Group. Various sources of professional support are available to students, including the Office of Counseling and Psychological Services (see Resources section below).

How to Get Started

Dissertation groups come in many forms and sizes. Therefore you and the other group members have some decisions to make.

- What will your goals be?
- Who can join the group? Students from the same department (field, etc.) or across departments? Students at the same stage of the dissertation process or at various stages? Will it be same gender or mixed gender?
- How big will it be?
- Do members' dissertation topics have to be related or not?
- Will you have an official leader, rotate leadership, or be without a formal leader?
- How often will you meet, for how long, and where?
- What format will you follow at each meeting?
- What rules will you follow for your meetings?
- What meeting preparations will you expect of each other?
- How much of a commitment will you expect each member of the group to make?
- What will you do if someone decides to leave the group?

Words of Advice

What follows is advice that touches on most of these issues, drawn in part from the writing of Joan Bolker and David Sternberg (see References section below) and a focus group of Rackham Graduate School doctoral students who have been members in dissertation support groups and were willing to share their experiences and insights with us.

General advice

There's no definitive way to run a dissertation support group. If it works for you, it works. The following suggestions, however, are drawn from graduate students' experience in such groups.

Goals

The ultimate goals should be to push each other toward completion of the dissertation—to keep each other moving forward—and for every member of the group to finish a dissertation and earn a doctoral degree.

Membership:

How many members?

We suggest a maximum membership of four or five members. This size will give you diversity but keep the group manageable with respect to scheduling meetings, finding an appropriate meeting location, etc. It will also make it possible for every member of the group to have some time to talk at each meeting. For groups that choose to spend some of their time giving feedback on the writing itself, it ensures that not too much time elapses before it's your turn to again present your material.

Members from the same department or across departments?

Same department:

Possible pros: Common language and knowledge base, familiarity with each other and department culture and politics, closer proximity and therefore greater ease with scheduling meetings and making other meeting arrangements.

Across departments:

Possible pros: Less likely for members to compete with each other; broader set of viewpoints; greater “distance” from one’s own department (e.g., in discussing conflicts with committee members); interdisciplinary benefit; more likely to spend time discussing the writing process and focusing on clarity of expression rather than on content, which are at least equally important.

Same gender or mixed gender?

Having a mixed gender group can add to the group’s diversity. It also better parallels the environments most of you will work in and can be a good training ground in this regard. However, some women have found that a same gender group helps to create a group setting that best helps them to achieve their goals.

Related or dissimilar dissertation topics?

Try to be similar enough so you can understand each other’s work reasonably well but not so similar that there could be problems with respect to sharing ideas and approaches. It’s important for members to have a diversity of viewpoints.

Will you have an official leader, rotate leadership, or be without one?

Formal group facilitation is not often available. By rotating leadership, the group makes sure someone has responsibility for keeping things on track but shares that responsibility. It also can be useful for everyone to practice being a discussion leader.

We recommend that there be a facilitator who starts the meeting on time, keeps the meeting on track, and holds members to agreed-upon time limits (more to follow on that subject). Only groups that have demonstrated that they can operate effectively without the help of a facilitator should consider operating without one. It is of utmost importance that all the members feel that the meeting time is well spent, and having a facilitator will go a long way to making that happen.

Every group should also have a convener who creates and maintains an E-mail message group and communicates with the group (this might or might not include meeting reminders). This responsibility can be rotated (e.g., every six months) to avoid placing an undue burden on any one member.

Will your group focus just on the process of getting through the dissertation or also on the content of the dissertation?

Focus on Process

Every group should dedicate some of their time to giving and getting encouragement and support for the process of getting through the dissertation. One of the biggest challenges of writing a dissertation is finding yourself facing a large task with few, if any, deadlines. Some people are naturally organized and disciplined regardless of how onerous a task they find before them. Then there's the rest of us. For many doctoral students, the writing stretches endlessly before them. The reassuring days of coursework, classes, and paper due dates are a thing of the past. **In effective dissertation support groups, members commit to weekly or bi-weekly goals for writing or doing other dissertation work that translate into measurable and steady progress.** Rates of progress among members will vary, of course, but even slow progress leads to success.

Tips on giving process feedback: What follows are sample process-related questions you may wish group members to report on at each meeting:

- What went well with your dissertation since the last meeting? What did you accomplish? (Give kudos.)
- What didn't go so well?
- What will you do differently in the coming week (or two weeks)?
- What are your specific goals to accomplish during that time?
- What obstacles might keep you from meeting those goals?
- In what ways will you address those obstacles?
- What problems, if any, have you've encountered that are affecting your progress on the dissertation (e.g., with a part of the dissertation itself, a relationship problem that has arisen in conjunction to your dissertation work, and/or a problem with your committee)?
- How will you reward yourself for meeting your goals?
- Are there (simple) ways the group can give you support?

Writing Feedback

Some groups also set aside a block of time at each meeting (or at some of their meetings) for one or two members to receive feedback on their writing. This requires that the written material be distributed in advance (e.g., at the prior meeting) and be read by the other members. Some groups have also designated one or two "discussants" from among the members, who are agree to prepare to make a more in-depth response, but this is entirely optional.

Tips on giving writing feedback: In general, people are moving toward more of a coaching model for giving feedback. Coaching often hinges on asking the writer the right questions before offering your opinions and suggestions. Good coaching also always start with the positive, with respect to questions and comments.

Here's a sample of coaching questions you can ask of a person presenting some of their dissertation writing:

- What do you like about this piece of writing?
- In terms of the content, what do you think works well? What doesn't?

- In terms of the quality of the writing, what works well? What doesn't?
Clarifying questions
- What did you intend to do [in this part]?
- How does [this section] link to [another section]?
- What do you mean by [this statement]?

What general format will you follow at each meeting?

Our focus group recommended the following structure.

- Time to socialize: Allow some time at each meeting to socialize but keep it brief. In general, we recommend that you save social time for the end of the meeting after your work together is done. This makes it possible for members of the group who have the time and inclination to socialize for a longer period of time (e.g., by going to a coffee shop together) without cutting into the working part of the meeting for others.
- Time for each group member at meetings: It's very important to give each of you (at every meeting) time to "check in." For groups that focus only on the dissertation writing process (see above), this may be 10-15 minutes apiece. For groups that focus on both process and writing feedback, the check-in time needs to be shorter (e.g., 5-7 minutes apiece) followed by 45 minutes to an hour or more for writing feedback.

What rules will you follow for your meetings?

During your first few meetings, you should collectively develop and agree on group guidelines. We recommend that you consider adopting the following expectations:

1. Everyone attends every meeting except under extreme circumstances. Joining a support group is not just about making a commitment to oneself; it's also about making a commitment to the group. **For the group to work, everyone needs to commit to making a serious go of it.** When a member drops out (for reasons other than completing his or her dissertation), it can have a negative effect on everyone in the group. Students who are unable or unwilling to make this commitment are better off not joining.
2. Stick to agreed upon time limits. Once you decide how much time you'll spend on socializing, member check-in time, and writing feedback (if your group does this), you need to stick to those time limits (see notes above about the role of the facilitator). All members need to know that their other time commitments are being respected.
3. If you agree to take turns providing food and/or beverages, keep it simple and hold each other to it. Or make it even simpler and have meetings without food and members can bring their own beverages if desired. (An occasional splurge, of course, can be good for the soul.)
4. Use discretion when telling others about your good fortune. This issue came up in our focus group so we've decided to mention it here. Celebrating each other's successes will be a natural and important part of your group. But if you happen to be one of those rare people who continuously has good fortune (e.g., yet another full fellowship fell into your lap in the same week you published

an article in the top journal in your field), you might want to be low key about your latest good news to avoid undermining the self confidence of others.

5. Stay with the group until you complete your dissertation. As you near completion, you may find you need the group less. Remember, however, that you'll then be in a position to give back some of the encouraging words you've received along the way.

What meeting preparations will you expect of each other?

For groups that include writing feedback sessions, the member whose work will be discussed at the next meeting should give the other members of the group ample time to read it in advance. We also recommend that you be considerate with respect to how many pages of material you ask the other members to read (e.g., no more than a chapter, or less depending on its length). You all have many other time commitments. Also let them know (on an attached note or via e-mail) what type of feedback you're most interested in receiving at this point.

How often will you meet and for how long?

Based on the advice of our focus group, the ideal is a weekly meeting of 60 minutes up to, but not exceeding, 90 minutes. Meeting weekly helps members to keep up their writing momentum or, if they meet a stumbling block, to get back on track quickly. Groups that convene every two weeks (which we suggest should be the maximum amount of time between meetings) generally meet for at least two hours.

Where will you meet?

One option is to take turns meeting at each other's homes. Another option is to reserve meeting space in the departments or in the Rackham Graduate School. Note, however, that making reservations, etc., if they're required, is another task for the group to take on. One member of our focus group recommended against meeting at a restaurant, which can be costly and tends to increase the amount of time the group spends socializing.

What will you do if someone decides to leave the group?

Agree in advance that if this situation arises, you'll discuss it as a group and reach consensus on the matter, since your decision would be influenced by various factors (such as the size of your group, whether someone has asked to join, etc.). We recommend against inviting someone to join the group, or even attend a meeting, unless it's been discussed with the group in advance.

At the First Few Meetings

At the first meeting or two, get to know each other (if need be) and discuss and clarify the group's goals and the various logistics (many of them mentioned above). This is important groundwork for the time you will spend together. Here are some sample questions you may wish to have each member of the group speak to in these initial meetings.

- What's your dissertation topic and how do you feel about it at this point in time?
- Where are you in the dissertation process?
- What's your timeframe for finishing?
- What have been and/or are likely to be your biggest obstacles in completing the dissertation?
- What do you need to get from this group to help you clear those challenges?
- What else do you hope to get from group?
- What style of giving feedback is most helpful to you?

You may also wish to give each member, sometime during the first few meetings, a longer block of time in which to describe his or her research in greater detail. This exercise may help to ground the group and increase the likelihood that you'll be able to refer information and resources to each other.

Resources

Formal dissertation support groups are run by the Office of Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS), located on the third floor of the Michigan Union. CAPS also provides short-term counseling to enrolled students. Visit <http://www.umich.edu/~caps/> or call 764-8312 for more information.

Dr. Mary McKinney, a licensed Clinical Psychologist, offers a Dissertation Skills Workshop at the UM Psychological Clinic, 2463 East Hall (call 764-3471 for information). Two members of our focus group had been involved in dissertation support groups that were outgrowths of Dr. McKinney's workshop. We expect, therefore, that some of Dr. McKinney's guidance has made its way into this document through their comments! Also watch for Rackham workshops featuring Dr. McKinney.

You may wish to become a recipient of the on-line All But Dissertation (ABD) Survival Guide Newsletter. Visit <http://www.ecoach.com/> for more information.

If your group is having problems Jayne London (jplondon@umich.edu or 647-6341) in the Rackham Graduate School, and Jennifer Walters, University Ombud (waltersj@umich.edu or 763-3545) are all available for consultation and advice.

Bibliography

Sternberg, David. *How to Complete and Survive a Doctoral Dissertation*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981.

Bolker, Joan. *Writing Your Dissertation in Fifteen Minutes a Day: A Guide to Starting, Revising, and Finishing Your Doctoral Thesis*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1998.

Additional Suggested Reading

The Clockwork Muse: A Practical Guide to Writing Theses, Dissertations and Books by Eviatar Zerubavel (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999)

Style: Toward Clarity and Grace by Joseph M. Williams (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995)

Surviving Your Dissertation: A Comprehensive Guide to Structure and Process by Kjell Erik Rudestam and Rae R. Newton (Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 1992)

Writing for Social Scientists: How to Start and Finish Your Thesis, Book, or Article by Howard S. Becker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986)

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