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Getting started

The best way to prepare for writing a major project, whether it's a senior honors essay, master's thesis, or doctoral dissertation, is to take the right courses and develop good reading and writing habits as soon as you start college. Look for courses that include a lot of feedback on papers: most writing intensive courses will provide this, but you can also find out through the grapevine which professors provide the most helpful feedback on papers. Independent studies are also good opportunities to produce a lot of written work with focused feedback from your instructor. And when you do reading assignments for your courses, get in the habit of taking detailed notes, either on your computer or in the back of the book. Underlining or highlighting text is no substitute for good note taking, and if you get in the “highlighting habit” it will make it harder to adjust to life as a graduate student.

Most importantly, look for undergraduate classes with a research component. If you have any interest in postgraduate work, you’ll need to have a writing sample ready to submit along with your application, and this sample should demonstrate that you have learned how to do original research and translate that into a well-written essay or report. Failure to provide a solid writing sample is one of the surest ways of being bumped from the acceptance list in competitive MA and PhD programs. Although your writing sample should come out of a course you take, you should also be aware that it’s perfectly acceptable to revise that paper before including it with your admissions materials. Incorporate whatever comments your instructor made on your paper, and if possible schedule a meeting with your instructor for advice about how to improve it.

The Master's Thesis

Although many master’s programs are moving away from a full-blown (70+ pages) thesis, most still require a substantial research assignment as a graduation requirement. If they give you a choice, and you intend to pursue a PhD following your master’s degree, you should opt for the longer project, since that will be closer to what you'll go through at the next level. Regardless of the length of the assignment, you’ll be expected to master several skills on the way to completing it. You’ll need to choose a topic, read what other scholars have written about it, and discover a new angle on that topic.
Choosing a topic can be harder than it seems: it needs to be narrow enough for you to be able to say something original about it, but not so narrow that it’s either trivial or difficult to find material. The danger of choosing a very general topic is that all you’ll be able to accomplish in the semester or two you have to work on it will be to summarize what others have written; and this is typically not sufficient at the master’s level or higher. Last but not least, it needs to be a topic you’re truly interested in. To do outstanding research, you need to eat, drink, and sleep it, and this can only happen if you pick a topic that sustains your interest.

Once you’ve chosen a topic, you need to read what other scholars have written about it (this is often known as a “literature review”). You should focus on books and articles published in the last five to ten years; these will lead you back to earlier, “classic” works, which you’ll also need to learn about. You should also be proactive in seeking advice from faculty members at this point—including faculty from other colleges, if there is no expert in the field at your college. Electronic databases can provide you with most of what you need for a literature review, but there’s no substitute for talking to someone who has published in the field.

Finally, you need to discover something original to say about your topic that contributes to the literature you’ve reviewed. Think of it as joining a conversation halfway through: once you’ve figured out what the other people are talking about, you need to find something to say that will move the conversation forward. This can be a matter of finding new primary sources that put a new spin on a set of old questions, or it could be a new interpretation of old evidence by examining it in a new context.

By this point you are already well into the process of researching your project. With the guidance of your adviser, you will continue digging through primary sources until you have the confidence to declare what your original argument is and how you propose to make a case for it. You will often be asked to do so in a formal piece of writing known as a prospectus or proposal, which will be read by your adviser and often by an additional faculty member. This should include your literature review, a thesis statement, a blueprint of the work you will undertake in the thesis, and a full bibliography of primary and secondary sources. With your prospectus in hand, you are ready for more intensive research, in which you collect information that will help you deliver on the promise of your prospectus.

Next comes the writing process. Everyone has their own methods for organizing information and translating it into written work that will be understood by other intelligent people. When you’re just getting started, it’s helpful to ask several different experienced researchers and writers how they do it. Then pick a method that seems to work best for you.

The one constant is that you need to be prepared to submit several drafts for revision. Without this, your final product might seem fine to you but will, almost inevitably, be full of problems. Remember that successful revision is a two-way street. You need to find an advisor who is able and willing to offer constructive
criticism, but you also need to be able and willing to listen to that criticism without taking it personally. A big part of the challenge (and it is very challenging!) is being willing to accept that your original plan for organizing your material—even if it's something your adviser signed off on—is probably not the best plan, and it's only after one or more drafts that you and your adviser really start figuring out what your argument is and what the best way is to present it.

By the time you and your main adviser are satisfied with your research project, you're almost at the end of your master's degree—but not quite. In most cases, and in contrast to most undergraduate assignments, your project will need to be approved by a second reader. This is a second test to see if you've really succeeded in communicating your ideas: since your adviser has been working with you all along on the project, he or she might have missed some obvious points. And even the best advisers will always bring a different set of interests and concerns to a project from those of their colleagues. In the “real world,” academic or otherwise, you always need to please many people with whatever you write, not just a single faculty member. Think of this as a practice run for the rest of your life.

The Doctoral Dissertation

The doctoral dissertation is a master's thesis on steroids: it's bigger (sometimes in excess of 400 pages), it's more densely packed, and it's often only accomplished with large and repeated doses of artificial stimulants. It also takes much longer to complete: once your Ph.D. coursework is over, you need to allow at least three years (usually quite a bit longer) from start to finish.

Even more than with your master's project, the key to writing a successful doctoral dissertation is finding an idea you're passionate about researching, and then finding the right adviser to help you do this. Your topic is something you'll be living with for as much as ten years; and you'll be working closely with your adviser for nearly as long. Your Ph.D. supervisor will also be your main reference for future employment and your primary mentor for developing your research for several years after completing your Ph.D. Keep this in mind when you apply to Ph.D. programs: start with ones that include faculty members whose work you admire. While other factors, including location and funding, are certainly very important, don't lose sight of the importance of finding an adviser who can help you succeed. Many programs won't accept even the best students if there isn't an obvious person on their faculty to advise the student's proposed research.

The other essential step for writing a doctoral dissertation is, of course, getting into a doctoral program. As stated above, the best way to do this is to prove that you're capable of writing a solid research paper, either at the undergraduate or master's level. Another plus is to get to know several of your professors well enough for them to be able to write detailed letters regarding your potential. Finally, you will need to write a statement of purpose that makes it very clear what your research agenda is. Don't just say, “I want to teach college.” Say, “I want to research topic X with Professor Y, and this is how I intend to do it.”
Once you're in a PhD program, the actual process of writing a doctoral dissertation is very similar to what I described above for the masters project—just longer and more involved. Your proposal might be read by a larger committee (as many as five faculty members), and it might take up to a year to find your topic and successfully submit your proposal. The problem you pick to write about will be broader than is the case for a master’s project, but often still relatively narrow. And along the way, it might be necessary to apply for funding to perform your research. A top-notch dissertation proposal should put you in a very competitive position to receive such funding.

Researching a doctoral dissertation is a longer and more involved process than an undergraduate or master’s project; so is writing it. If you think of chapters in a dissertation as five or six term papers stitched together, it doesn’t sound quite so daunting—but remember as well that your adviser needs to sign off on each of these chapters, and that this often doesn’t happen until several drafts have gone back and forth. Instead of one additional reader, as many as four additional committee members will also need to approve the final draft—which often requires additional revision. And if you use your Ph.D. to get a job as a professor, the revising doesn’t even stop there. To keep that job, you’ll need to publish what you’ve researched for your dissertation, either as a book or as articles. And this means receiving new feedback from editors and outside referees, and more revision. On the plus side, these are all skills that you will have learned by this point, thanks to the process of writing a dissertation!

So to conclude: earning a master’s degree or a Ph.D. is a big deal, and it takes a lot of work. What I’ve discussed is only half the story: there are also oral exams, written exams, and coursework. But it’s one of the most important things you’ll do at that level, and it’s the least like what you do in most of your undergraduate courses. So it’s a good idea to learn how the process works before you make the decision that graduate school is the right choice for you.