

# ***Finish & Flourish!***™

***Completing Your Dissertation, Thesis, Article Or Research Paper***

***By Sarah Federman, PhD***

“Remember there is a life waiting beyond your dissertation!”

– Bridget Moix, PhD Candidate

## **INTRODUCTION: THE CHALLENGE OF FINISHING**

Welcome.

This guide serves as a support manual for those wanting to start and/or finish their masters’ thesis, dissertation, academic article or research paper.

Have you started an academic program, but the final paper (be it a research paper, thesis or dissertation) keeps you from finishing?

Perhaps you

- have started, but doubt your direction?
- completed the research, but are confused about what to do now?
- cannot seem to make progress on the writing?
- received comments from your adviser and not sure how to move forward with them?
- lost interest in the project?
- simply feel a sense of writers block?

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Something called you to your academic program; I ask that you trust whatever called you needs this final paper to be complete for you to move forward in your life.

You also started this degree program (or article) presumably because you understood the value of the degree. If you are in a doctoral program, finishing means you will join the just 1.77% of Americans with a doctorate. This puts you as one of the 2% most educated people in America.

Those completing a masters' degree are developing vital skills and credentials that will enhance their effectiveness and open new doors...ones rarely open to people without your degree.

(A brief note, for simplicity sake I will often refer to "dissertations" throughout this guide. The same strategies also apply to theses, research papers and articles)

Finishing matters and you can finish.

You obviously know how to complete things on time or you would not have made it this far.

In spite of past successes, you may now be terrified that you will *not* be able to finish. You secretly fear the shame of abandoning the program; either how you will feel about yourself or how you fear others will see you.

If you could just finish, you imagine the relief you will feel and the opportunities (personally and professionally) that would be open to you. Finishing your degrees can open very exciting doors in all areas of your life. Your financial situation as well as your work satisfaction can greatly increase when you finish.

The fact that you are reading this is a good sign. It means you know you are stuck or at least could be advancing more quickly. Many people do not even realize they have become frozen in their progress.

People find themselves caught in different places. One colleague says he finds himself constantly starting over; rather than revising, he just keeps going back to the beginning. "I just love the rush of new ideas," he says.

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Regardless of where you find yourself stuck, you can finish!

Chances are whatever patterns are blocking your writing are also blocking your life.

Failure to commit to one idea, for example, might be showing up in other areas of your life.

Might as well use this writing exercise to work through them.

This guide will get you going again. I know that the people who finish seem to do so by magic or have special skills. Truth is, we have fierce focus and systems or rituals.

Because so many people ask me how I finished, I spent some time thinking about my process and interviewing other success people about their strategies. This guide is a combination of all of our strategies. Try them all, try them at different times and see what works.

Beyond finishing, however, the guide aims to support you in flourishing as you move forward. The process can be very rewarding and mind-blowing if you let it. I want you to finish and do so with a smile on your face.

### **Who am I?**

I worked as a writing advisor for the University of Pennsylvania and the American University of Paris. American University of Paris hired me to write their manual on writing a masters' thesis.

I have also worked as a freelance writer for two decades with Bedford St. Martins on their writing manuals for college students. I now work as a private coach helping individuals **finish** their papers.

I completed my undergraduate thesis under now-Harvard President Drew Faust, my masters' thesis in Paris and just completed my doctorate in a relatively short amount of time (4.5 years) and did so with a rather long manuscript (650 pages).

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Even though my name *Federman* means “man of the quill,” I did not start out a good writer or reader. In fact, my elementary school wanted to hold me back and placed me in remedial reading/writing classes. I failed state exams on spelling; I might still fail those exams.

But none of that matters now. I eventually learned how to read and write; spell check saved me from embarrassment. The coaching and support of many teachers with high standards, I improved my mastery over myself when it comes to writing.

Because I developed these skills (versus being born with them), I can actually explain what others and I do to finish and flourish.

### **What’s Next...**

I am writing this guide for you as well as myself. My writing has just begun. I have four books in the queue; two related to my doctoral research, one for conflict resolution students and the other for the general reader. These books, as well as academic articles and blogs, will require serious focus, especially if I plan to do other things in life.

Writing regularly and completing projects is something we’re all in together.

My goal is to always be writing and publishing. This means I am dedicated to developing life-long strategies *with* you. I want to look beyond simple one-off ideas.

### **What’s Different About This Guide?**

A number of books address the question of how to finish one’s dissertation. For the basics on structure, I liked *The Dissertation Journey* by Carol Roberts. For research help specifically, I love *Salsa Dancing into the Social Sciences* by Kristin Luker.

To move my writing along, I enjoyed the little book, *How to Write a Lot* by Paul Silvia.

To connect with the deeper purpose of my work, I enjoy picking up *The Journey from the Center to the Page* by Jeff Davis. For humor and relief, Anne Lamott’s *Bird by Bird* is a must.

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This guide complements these other good works by getting you focused on finishing as well as providing strategies for how. Even if you just pick up one or two tips that work for you, the guide has done its job.

The main difference between this guide and many others is that this focuses on the internal focus and rituals writing requires.

This guide also has a very different tone than some dissertation guides. A number of resources treat academic writing endeavors like a disease or a bed of hot coals one must walk across quickly. They have titles like “Surviving Your Dissertation” or “How to Finish Your Dissertation In Two Semesters.”

With these guides, you may finish a bit faster; that’s great. I want you to finish **and** flourish in the process. I want your life to be better, not just your paper completed.

My undergraduate and masters theses and dissertation crafted me as much as I crafted them. To miss this opportunity is to really miss the point of the program. Even if antiquated in some ways, academic programs have an arch to them, and if you just fire-walk through them, you might graduate early but still having no idea who you are.

You can add flourish to the process without extra work. Right now you probably expend energy avoiding the process or feeling guilty about moving forward. We will refocus that energy and release the guilt and maybe find out who you are or another dimension of you.

As a result your work will be fresher, brighter, have more resonance and be more fun to do.

### **Beyond the Guide**

This guide provides a powerful overview of the strategies that work for people; ideally I would have struggling writers in a semester long class or at least a short intensive where we advanced your writing together.

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In the meantime, I also serve as a writing coach for people serious about completion and who understand the importance of on-going support. In one-on-one sessions we can tailor a program to exactly your situation.

Furthermore, what works in one phase of the process may not work in the other; during coaching sessions we can adjust the strategies. If this is something that interests you, you can contact me at [Federman.sarah@gmail.com](mailto:Federman.sarah@gmail.com). I will post on my website any upcoming webinars or seminars. [www.sarahfederman.com](http://www.sarahfederman.com).

This guide:

Addresses how to develop a completion mindset, set up a support team, and handle the challenge of daily writing.

- Make Finishing a Must
- Establish an Encouraging Context
- A Completion Mindset
- Flourish as Well as Finish
- Daily Writing Challenge
- Support
- Rewards
- Physical/Mental Health
- Emergency Mindset

An upcoming guide looks at the specifics of planning, researching, writing, revising and defending your work.

### **Make Finishing A Must!**

You may now be skimming for the quick “strategies” and bullet point lists of what to do. I have learned from coaching, however, when people skip the *mindset* adjustments the strategies do less. Plus what works for some does not work for others. Everyone needs, however, focus and determination to finish.

This guide talks about how you get that focus if you do not have it.

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“Forget everything but your dissertation”

-Tetsushi Ogata, PhD

Mindset work means cleaning up the mental climate in which you will be working. This means taking charge of how you think about the project and the costs and benefits of finishing.

Most of society is running around reading tweets and you will go deep. You will actually think and develop full coherent thoughts. These skills may be the most rare in the decades ahead. If you embrace this writing process you may be one of the few ready to take the lead when others can only collect information. You will know what to do with it!

**Establish an Encouraging Context**

One of my specialties is narrative, meaning I examine the *stories* around any given topic and then decide if those stories serve me. If not, I write my own.

For example, the cultural story about dissertations is that they are miserable, difficult experiences. When people hear you are working on a dissertation they may say, well-intentioned,

“Oh, wow, that sounds rough...How are you?”

If you respond saying, “Oh, thanks, yes it’s really terrible,” you perpetuate this story. Now, it may feel nice to have someone’s sympathy, but ultimately it does not serve you.

Firstly, you are accepting that this process must be one of suffering. That programs your mind to look for pain and focus on self-pity. The impact is that you lose your power and connection with yourself.

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For example, think about the impact of this response instead,

Oh, yes, some people struggle; I really see this as a privilege. So few people have the opportunity to continue their education and then to complete it with a research project of *their* choosing. I feel really fortunate. Of course there are challenges, but ones I enjoy.

Bam! That will really change the story and if you have studied the power of appreciation you know that saying something like that paves the way for a better experience.

Academic work is a privilege; millions of people wish they had the opportunity you have right now. Instead, many slave away in factories or doing mentally stagnant work, or they spend their days thinking other people's thoughts. You have an opportunity to think for yourself over a period of weeks or months. So few people have or take this opportunity.

### **Banishing the burden mindset**

Thoughts like, "I just need to get through this" or "I wish I didn't have to write the thesis" only lead to more pain. Even talking to your friends this way only amplifies pain. Rather than commiserate, schedule time to work together at the library.

I notice those who complain find themselves found more miserable than those who just do the work. Ultimately, it's your choice.

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**Completion Mindset**

“Garp did not write faster than anyone else or *more*; he simply worked with the idea of completion in mind.”

- John Irving, *The World According to Garp*

To finish and propel forward, you need a completion mindset. This quote from John Irving struck me when I read the book over twenty-years ago. I think of it often.

Many writers *think* they are focused on completion because they think about their work all the time. A completion mindset is different; most people sit and think about how they **cannot** finish. They do not believe they can.

You can.

Garp was not such a bright bean and he moved along just fine. This has nothing to do with intelligence; completion is a mindset.

Think of all the terrible books, TV shows and movies you have encountered. These people are not smarter than you; they just complete their projects.

“The fundamental cause of the trouble is that in the modern world the stupid are cocksure while the intelligent are full of doubt.”

— Bertrand Russell

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noticed several major distinctions between those who finish fast and those who take years.

Those who finish fast;

- 1) believe they can do it and
- 2) have reasons why they *must* finish.

Those moving more slowly see completion as something they *ought* to do. They do not make it an imperative.

A motivating force for me was finishing by the end of my scholarship. I missed my personal deadline by 3 months and had to pay \$500. Ugh. What will delay cost you?

Others want to finish before the New Year or before they have a child, get married, move, or turn 30 or 40 etc.

The following aims to help you make finishing an imperative.

### **The Cost of Not Finishing**

In order to help you make finishing an imperative, versus just a nice idea, please consider the following...

The head of our doctoral program told me the impact of not finishing on some of his colleagues. He said those who do not finish their dissertations often live their lives feeling embarrassed and deeply shameful about their incompleteness. It is a burden throughout their lives. I met one such man; he could not move forward in his life in any area ten years later because he still carried the shame.

- How will you feel about yourself in 1 year, 5 years, 10 years if you do not complete this?
- What opportunities may you miss?
- How will your children, spouse and family be impacted?
- What trips might you not be able to take?

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- What people might you not meet?
- How might this shame impact *all* of your future interactions?

This may sound harsh, but if you are stuck you may need this douse of cold water. Amplifying the pain of being stuck can get you unstuck. I start my coaching sessions with this discussion. If the person cannot convince me why they must finish, no strategy tip I offer may make much difference.

### **The Benefits of Finishing**

The benefits are more fun and may seem easier, regardless many people who are stuck cannot really see the benefits clearly. If they did, they would finish faster.

You can ask, I wonder....

- how good I would feel having graduated?
- what opportunities might be open to me?
- what financial rewards might be possible?
- how inspired would my partner, friends, children, colleagues be?
- how free might I feel?
- what other things could I do with my time?
- what other projects might I be available to work on?
- who might I meet that I would not meet because I was still in the library?
- how might my work contribute?

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**Flourish as well as Finish**

The above exercise helps connect you to why you must finish. Finishing will make your life better.

This guide promised to help you flourish as well as finish. If you are going to do finish, why not have a mind-blowing, earth shaking, soul shifting, and intellectually enriching experience?

Why not meet fabulous people? Read astonishing books and have tons of “Eureka!” moments?

As with life, you can slog through or sing and dance your way through.

If you are not up for soul shifting, I want to help you at least enjoy the experience.

In *The Journey From the Center to the Page*, writer Jeff Davis asks writers to ask themselves this question everyday before they write,

*What am I writing this for?*

My colleague’s first answer was understandably, “to finish this darn program.”

When I prodded he found a deeper reason. He is refugee, he did his research interviewing other refugees. He said,

I am writing to share the stories of the refugees. I did this work because I wanted to support these people. If I do not finish I will let them down.

He added that he loves his adviser and does not want to let *him* down. He would write it for him.

Just keep asking the question; the point is to keep asking it and keep deepening the answers.

What are you writing this for? What called you to this topic?

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Asking the question helps connected me with something beyond myself.

**Daily Writing Challenge**

“I sit at the computer everyday from 9am-12 just in case  
a good idea comes along”

- Eudora Welty  
(Author)

To reach your goal you may need support, rewards, health and some top writing strategies. I did. You also may want to bust some myths about writing.

First, let's address some myths about writing.

<b>Writing Myth</b>	<b>What Writers Say</b>
I need to feel inspired to write	Nope! Good and fun writing can come even when you do not <i>feel</i> like writing.
I can only work in certain conditions	True you might work better in certain places than others. Do not, however, use this as an excuse <i>not</i> to work. Even an hour or two of writing in an non-ideal place will move you forward.
I need to know what I want to say before I sit down.	Keep showing up at your computer and your mind will do the rest. Sometimes you may just have to be patient.

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Writing must happen in isolation	Teaming up with colleagues can be wonderful.

**The Real Challenge**

The real challenge that no one really talks about is that writing is a bit like being on a multi-month meditation retreat. You often have to face your inner demons. In the quiet of writing you may feel old life disappointments coming up. Failed relationships, missed opportunities or the feeling of missing out on life when you flip through Facebook. Everyone else seems to be having fun while you are in the library.

I faced many demons. Some I'd wrestle down successfully others came back again and again. By the end though, I seemed to be at peace with them. Those voices, memories, and unfilled dreams seemed like little goons trying to stop me from finishing. When I made peace with them they stopped interrupting my work.

I would say it took me at least 4 years to make peace with that silence and sometimes it still haunts me...especially on weekends when I'm writing and I believe everyone else is having fun.

In future guides, classes, and in coaching I will talk more about this. For now, I just wanted to pass a nod to this phenomenon in case it is happening to you.

The following provides some tips just to keep you moving forward.

**Vital Writing Rituals**

- Close every writing session by planning the next day. If not, you may spend 30 minutes the next morning planning what to do that day.
- Set time as well as actual goals (finish Part I, etc.)
- Writing at least two hours a day will move you forward. I like 8am-10am. Later you will work up to 4-5 hours.

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- Set up a twenty-five minute timer on your phone. Get up and move—take a 3-minute break every time it goes off.
- Turn off your Internet access while you work. Keep a pad next to you and write down what you *think* is so vital to do. This alone can save you months.
- Text writing buddies your goals for the day and then tell them if you reached the goal.
- Perfection is the enemy of the DONE! My friend giggles every time I tell her this.
- Another colleague prefers intensive bursts! If this works for you, may want to clear your calendar schedule a little retreat.

You can use a combination of these strategies and mix them up at different times during the process. What works one week might not work the next and vice versa. Keep mixing it up to make sure you get the results you want.

### **Support**

Support of all kinds may be vital for you as it was for me. I had and created teams.

#### ***Academic Support***

Decide early on who will be your support team. I recommend 2-3 people beyond your advisor. Your advisor may not have as much time as you hope or may not be able to give you the help you seek. Rather than complaining about an unavailable person, be smart and spend the energy getting the support you need.

Lean on the Writing Center, other professors, friends who believe in you (rather than compete with you), family, even library staff!

#### ***Personal Support***

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Getting family and friends on board will make a difference in the speed and quality of your success.

Some of you might have partners, jobs, both or any other number of things happening in your life that bid for your time. You may think this is why you are not advancing. I have as many people tell me they cannot advance because they do *not* have a partner or a job to take away the financial burden of student-hood. So I am not sure which is actually better, being single and unemployed or married and/or employed. They all have difference benefits and challenges.

*But I have kids!*

My married friend Susan with kids advises, “maximize the time you do have.” She also suggested thinking about what you can do with your kids and what you need to do alone. She reflected that the process was good for her kids to see her working and writing papers too. One brought her drafts into his high school class to show her hard work.

She reminded me that our divorced friend had other advantages. When the kids were with the other parent she could write. We all finished quickly.

I suggest that you consider whatever situation you have as the *perfect* situation. Work with it.

*Help others help you!*

Tell people how they can support you. Otherwise they will “mess up” and you may spend way too much time complaining about them (in your head or out loud).

During heavy writing periods, you can say things like, “It would be great to have you check on me every week to make sure I’m on track of my schedule.” Or, “can you meet me for an am run to get me going.”

One friend and I would run and even talk about our research. One run she taught me a theory I used in my dissertation!!

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From experience, you may want to let people know you might not be as social during this period. Significant others and kids may not love this part; if you can schedule time for them and help them support you, you will improve the process for everyone.

Some people did not take kindly to my writing intensives. This process may reveal for you, as it did for me, who was willing to provide the support I actually needed and who bailed.

### **Rewards**

Friends, family and colleagues can provide essential breaks. They can be your reward!

Runs, tea, movies, shopping, dancing, weekend trips, etc. can all be wonderful breaks.

Setting up rewards proved really vital for me. I am as fierce about my rewards as I am about my writing. Today, my reward was a Café au Lait with soymilk at a café called *Le Pain Quotidian*. I avoid coffee (caffeine) as much as possible; for me it is a treat. Last night, I rollerbladed with friends from the White House to the Georgetown waterfront!

Sometimes, I schedule massages, workouts, dance nights, and dinner with friends. After major mileposts, I planned bigger rewards. The day after I finished my comprehensive exam, I jumped on a plane to Alaska to see the Northern Lights.

Those are my joys; what are yours?

### **Physical/Mental Health**

A quick warning here about using food as a reward:

You may want to reward yourself with sugar or pizza; please do so sparingly.

I think of intensive writing like distance swimming or running, meaning I take care of myself.

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You want to be drinking at least half your body weight in ounces a day of water. Coffee and soda dehydrate and do not count.

I could write volumes more on this; because of space, will simply encourage you to eat a whole foods diet, drink plenty of filtered water, and MOVE! You may have heard that “sitting is the new smoking.” We now know the major impact of sitting on the spine, circulatory, nervous and other systems. Sitting for so many hours contributes far more conditions than we ever knew.

I aim (and often fail- but am working on it) to move every 25 minutes. I used Pete Egoscue’s method to help realign my spine. You can read about him online.

My friend Susan would do her reading on a stationary bike.

A brief word about alcohol; alcohol kills brain cells that are hard to replace, increases the acidity in the blood and serves as a depressant. As a writer, you need brain cells, alkaline blood and mood up-lifters—not depressants.

Exercise provides the best way to improve your mood fast. Even taking the stairs to your office or writing space will help. Scheduling active, rather than just food breaks, with friends will improve your well-being and ensure you graduate without an extra ten pounds, skin breakouts, or other conditions.

Even with good health, friends, and a great topic you might find yourself stuck at certain periods. Perhaps a life change or illness threw you off your schedule. The following provides some emergency tactics you can use during these moments.

### **Emergency Tactics!**

Even good, disciplined, and passionate writers get stuck. This section provides some brief emergency interventions when you just cannot seem to move forward.

Emergency Procedure #1: *Write the Acknowledgments*

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A man I knew said he had put off his dissertation for over a year. Then he decided he had to finish, but knew he could not proceed with his present attitude. He completely resented the project. His solution?

I decided to write the acknowledgements section. I began to think about all the people who had helped me and all the people I met because of this project. Once I wrote that page, I felt entirely different about the dissertation. I realized how many people had supported me and I *wanted* to write.

### *Emergency Procedure #2: Set a Minimum*

On days when you really feel you can do nothing, think of the bare minimum you can do. Something as small as printing out your draft or outline and walk around the room with them in hand.

Just the act of physically acknowledging the task has an impact on the brain.

### *Emergency Procedure #3: Set a Punishment*

Renowned coach and family therapist Cloé Madanes used this approach with a client struggling to finish her dissertation. The woman had to finish her dissertation soon and needed to write at least 10 pages to complete the document by her due date.

During their sessions, Cloé discovered the woman had a sister-in-law she despised. So Cloé told her, everyday you do not meet your goal, you must do something nice for your sister-in-law. She either wrote her a nice card, or sent her a gift, some money or did something nice for her every day she failed to meet her goal

The woman did this begrudgingly; she finished her dissertation and transformed her relationship with her sister-in-law.

### *Emergency Procedure #4: Explain it to Someone New*

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One colleague says she keeps herself interested in her topic by explaining it to new people. By selling them on her topic, she sells herself—again and again.

*Emergency Procedure #5: Write by Hand*

Another colleague recently told me she broke through her writers' block by getting OFF the computer. She pulled out a pad and started writing by hand. This helped her reconnect with her thoughts.

**Conclusion**

This guide addressed the climate of your writing including your mindset, support networks and the writing itself. The following addresses the individual components of process.

As I said, this guide just scratches the surface, you may want to work with a coach, me or someone else or join a writing class to make sure you finish. A few sessions can propel you into a new space.

You can ask me more about coaching at [Federman.sarah@gmail.com](mailto:Federman.sarah@gmail.com) or write me on my website [www.sarahfederman.com](http://www.sarahfederman.com)