I Don’t Know How to Write My Dissertation

No one really *knows* how to ride a bike until they start riding it. No one really *knows* how to swim until they’re in the water. No one really *knows* how to drive until they’re behind the wheel. And no one really *knows* how to write a dissertation because every dissertation is unique. You’re going to have to get on the bike, get in the water, or get behind the wheel: get your fingers on the keyboard and start writing!

1. You’ve written a lot in your life. You’ve written undergraduate essays. You may have even taught undergrads how to write essays. What is the normative length of a dissertation chapter in your field? How many five-page papers is that? Write five pages today. That’s writing your dissertation.

2. You’ve written lots of paragraphs. Chapters are made up of paragraphs. Write a paragraph today. That’s writing your dissertation.

3. Writing is reading and talking and walking and sometimes washing dishes. Thinking about writing is part of writing.

4. Reading, talking, walking, washing dishes, and thinking can help you write, and these activities can also work against you and keep you from writing. Be careful on those walks; watch where you’re going. (Hint: It should be back to your desk.)

5. Lots of people feel stress and anxiety when approaching a writing task. Lots of people feel stress and anxiety when they’re going on a first date, going to a job interview, waiting for test results, or traveling someplace new. If you don’t know what to expect (and you’re a human being) you’ll probably feel anxious. You aren’t sure what you want to say, how you want to say it, or if it will come out right when you do finally get around to saying it.
   a. Good news: it’s not a first date, and you get to take a long look at it before anyone else does. If it’s a royal stinker, you get to rewrite it.
   b. Good-news-is-relative-news: every writer generates a royal stinker now and then.
   c. More good news: the Graduate Writing Center will not judge your royal stinker. We’re here to help, not to judge. We’re all writers. We all have a closet full of crumpled paper skeletons.

6. When you’re stuck, return to your research. Let it structure your writing; let it anchor your ideas. You were trained to do research, and the research you did inspired you. When you’re lost or overwhelmed, revisit your field notes, lab notes, archives, catalogs, or data. Don’t lose sight of your idea.

7. Developing an outline or creating a structure counts as writing. Scaffolding your writing is important. You wouldn’t go on a trip without planning; don’t think writing works differently. Just as thinking is writing, writing can help your thinking.

8. Reality check: You aren’t going to write a dissertation today. You aren’t going to write a dissertation this week. One day, you *will have written* your dissertation over a long period of time that you will hopefully look back on fondly (or mercifully forget).