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Preface
Conceiving and carrying out a project worthy of a dissertation can be likened to a long and arduous journey because it usually takes a number of years from the initial formulation to completion. Along the path, you will encounter many unknowns, and the journey will test your commitment and your stamina.

ACW’s Dissertation Coaches and Consultants help you prepare for the challenges of the Dissertation Journey, develop a roadmap to guide you, stay on track to reach the endpoint, overcome obstacles along the way, master the skills you need, and manage the frustrations that inevitably arise. Our experienced Dissertation Coaches advise you at all stages of your Dissertation Journey.

ACW’s Dissertation Coaches and Consultants help you refine your topic, conduct a review of literature and synthesize relevant studies, define a significant researchable problem statement, develop your research questions and hypotheses, choose a quantitative or qualitative methodology, manage your data, analyze and report your results, and write your conclusions and recommendations.
Introduction
Completing your doctorate is the highest degree you can attain in academia. It’s a lifetime achievement! The primary requirement for degrees such as the PhD, EdD, or DBA is a dissertation that demonstrates your ability to design, write up, and defend a unique and significant piece of independent research.

Historically, half of the people who begin the doctoral journey never complete it. Once doctoral students complete their coursework and pass their candidacy exams, they embark on a solitary odyssey to write a dissertation. Many doctoral candidates have never undertaken a project of such scope and have little idea of what to expect.

The Dissertation Journey often feels daunting, exhausting, never-ending, and insurmountable. If you do not adequately prepare for the terrain ahead, you may become discouraged and overwhelmed and decide to quit along the way. However, if you understand the requirements, adequately prepare yourself for the journey with the resources that you need, and mentally prepare for the hard work ahead, you will not only survive the Journey but actually triumph as you achieve the milestones along the way.

There are certain skills required for completing a dissertation. You will need to learn the art of research design, academic writing, critical reading, and synthesis. You will need to learn project management skills and new technologies. Equally important are the inner resources you will need to cultivate—prioritizing the dissertation, maintaining a positive perspective, and persisting in the face of hardships.

This ebook will introduce you to the challenges you are likely to encounter on your journey and suggest some strategies for traversing them. It will also introduce you to the idea of working with a coach who can act as a guide to prepare you, train you, and throw you a lifeline when you hit a rough spot along the way.
THE
Dissertation
JOURNEY

START

START-UP SWAMP

ISLAND OF ISOLATION

DATA JUNGLE

CREMLIN'S CAVE

DESSERT OF DESOLATION

LITERATURE FOG

MISERY MOUNTAINS

SIGNS OF SIGNIFICANCE

ORAL DEFENSE PEAK

REVISION

PASS

JOURNEY'S END
The Dissertation Journey

The dissertation process is like a journey, where you work to reach a series of milestones. The journey is long, with many twists, turns, and even detours and potential roadblocks. Frequently, dissertation travelers find themselves lost or stuck along the way.

The Dissertation Journey depicts some of the obstacles you can expect along the way, and this ebook offers some tips to surmount each of these obstacles.

The Start-Up Swamp is filled with lurking crocodiles. The first challenge is to select a topic suitable for your dissertation. Dissertators get stuck and frighten themselves by thinking about the consequences of such an important decision, and they get stalled in making a choice.

The Gremlin’s Cave represents the self-doubts that inevitably arise when you are contemplating or just setting out on a journey of this magnitude. The Dissertation Journey is as much a psychological one as an intellectual one. Managing your self-doubts is a major obstacle to overcome.

The Problem Pit sinks many dissertation writers. The challenge is to narrow and focus your topic of interest and frame it as a researchable problem that requires research to find a solution.

The Literature Fog refers to the confusion and disorientation that often results when dissertation writers undertake a comprehensive review of the existing literature. As you read more and more, it is easy to get sidetracked and lose sight of your focus. The challenge is to organize your sources and selectively synthesize the most relevant information.

The Island of Isolation represents the loneliness of dissertation proposal writing. No previous experience adequately prepares you for the task of conceptualizing and writing up this type of scholarly endeavor. The challenge is to recognize the kinds of support you need to gain the necessary skills and to manage the isolation.
The Desert of Desolation is the long period of time it may take you to collect your data and the challenge is overcoming the fatigue and perhaps exhaustion you may experience from the effort it took you to get your proposal approved.

The Data Jungle suggests the next challenge of organizing, analyzing, and making meaning of massive amounts of data you collect when you carry out your research.

The Misery Mountain Range represents the challenges you still face at the end of the Journey. You must climb Mt. Significance by writing the conclusion of your study and indicating the meaning and importance of your results. And then you must mount a second higher peak, the Oral Defense Peak, by meeting the challenge of defending your research to your academic reviewers.

Revision Pass is the final challenge when you must address your reviewers’ concerns in the final revision of your dissertation.

The Shortcut is a way to reduce the hardships along the Dissertation Journey by enlisting a guide. Dissertation Coach can help you prepare, provide you with tools and resources, and shorten the time to Journey’s End.
Start-Up Swamp

When you start thinking about writing your dissertation, you may feel underprepared and clueless about how to begin a project of such daunting scope. Having been accustomed to an educational structure, do you suddenly feel on your own without any support? You may find yourself asking:

- How do I begin?
- How can I find the right topic?
- Where can I find guidance and support?

If you are feeling overwhelmed by the dissertation journey that lies ahead, you are mired in the Start-Up Swamp.
How Do I Get Out of the Swamp?

Make the topic commitment. The journey begins when you choose the topic for your dissertation. You may want to do some preliminary investigation of several topic areas. Eliminate those that aren’t practical. If you’re afraid of not selecting the “perfect” topic, give yourself a limited amount of time to ponder your alternatives, and then simply choose one. There is no perfect topic.

Prioritize the dissertation. Research the dissertation process and talk to others to get a realistic picture of what this journey is going to entail and make your dissertation work one of your top priorities. Set aside time every day to work on your research.

Develop a positive mindset about your dissertation. Regularly remind yourself why you want your doctorate and what it will mean to finish it. Nurture social relationships, get sufficient sleep, and exercise regularly to ensure you maintain your stamina and positive perspective when the journey gets rough.

Assemble your resources. Develop structures that will work for you. Figure out the costs and plan your finances. Develop a timeline and a daily writing time. Set up a good workspace. Identify a network of social support.

Then just put one foot in front of the other and wade through the swamp until you reach firmer ground.
A concept developed by Richard Carson in *Taming Your Gremlin*, the Gremlin is the inner voice that abhors change and demands the status quo. It is what keeps you from moving forward and achieving your goals. The dissertation may be the biggest thing you have ever undertaken, and you can be sure your Gremlin is going to have something to say about it.

Fear is the Gremlin’s primary tool. The Gremlin creates fear-based expectations such as: If you risk trying this, you are doomed to fail, be wrong, be rejected by your advisor, be embarrassed, look stupid… If you look closely, you are likely to find that on a deep emotional level you are basing your inaction on catastrophic fears that your Gremlin has created. What are you most afraid of? Is it fear of failure? Or maybe even fear of success? What are the negative messages your gremlin uses to sabotage your efforts? Your Gremlin is sly and subversive and quite easily can transport you to a time when your survival felt threatened in an emotional sense.
What Should I Do About the Gremlin?

It is important to notice the Gremlin in your dissertation process, recognize it, name it, even draw it so that you can disempower it. Once you personify it, you can tell it to leave you alone or take a vacation when you plan to work on your dissertation.

Don’t be surprised if your Gremlin reappears when you start a new leg of your journey. You can manage your Gremlin, but it never disappears entirely. Some common manifestations of your Gremlin that you may be on the look out for are procrastination and perfectionism.
Dissertation writing seems to bring out the procrastinator in us all. When you set aside time for writing, do you find yourself checking your email, tracking down an elusive reference, organizing your files, or reading more to motivate yourself to start writing?

Just by detecting your Gremlin and becoming conscious of the process whereby your Gremlin is scaring you, you will begin to escape its grip and gain some clarity from which you can choose to get in action on your dissertation.

If you’re not accomplishing your writing goals, here are some tips to help you move from procrastination to productivity:

Break down your big writing goals into tiny assignments. Don’t sit down to write your dissertation proposal or synthesize the literature on your topic. Instead, set small goals of writing a specific paragraph for your proposal or gathering 6 to 12 articles for one of the sections of your review of literature.

Schedule a time to complete your tiny assignment. Block out specific times on your calendar to work on that assignment and only that assignment. Begin writing immediately, even if you don’t feel motivated. Eventually when you start writing, you’ll experience some satisfaction, and it will motivate you to do more.

Reward yourself when you complete your tiny assignments. As soon as you complete a tiny assignment, take a break. Allow yourself that coffee break or social interaction on Facebook. Take a short walk. Do whatever feels right for you.
Perfectionism

One of the most common dissertation maladies is telling yourself that your dissertation had better be “perfect.” Do you set unrealistic goals? When you don’t meet your unrealistic goals, does your Gremlin tell you what a failure you are?

When your Gremlin tells you that you aren’t or your dissertation isn’t ever good enough, the results are paralysis, endless revisions, and dissatisfaction with yourself and your process.

Look closely at the strategies your Gremlin is employing. You may find strategies like: You CAN’T do a dissertation, You SHOULD be able to do this, You DON’T deserve a PhD or some other assumption that disempowers you.

The truth of the matter is that no dissertation is ever done, is ever perfect. Finally, you and your committee will decide it is good enough, you will submit it, and you will move on with your life.

Here are some strategies to try if you are battling perfectionist tendencies.

**Set realistic goals.** When you are setting goals, work with a coach, a mentor, or a trusted peer. Write out your weekly goals and have someone else review them to help you think about setting goals that you can actually achieve.

**Connect rather than work in isolation.** Find writing partners or join a writing community. Create support and accountability so that you focus on actually writing rather than the negative dialogue going on in your head. Talk to other people rather than granting power to your formidable Gremlin.

**Seek feedback.** Don’t hold on to your written work until it is perfect. Force yourself to share your messy drafts with your coach or peer reviewers. Engage in constructive dialogue with others about your work and don’t focus on the negatives. Turn criticism into a positive. Make your writing as strong as it can be.
Problem Pit

To continue on your dissertation journey, you must narrow the focus of your topic and identify a research problem. Conquering the problem pit can be one of the greatest challenges on your journey.

It’s not enough to have a great idea for a dissertation topic. You must concisely lay out the specific topic and state it as a problem you will investigate.

The problem must be unique (no one else has solved this problem) and it must be significant (who cares if you solve this problem).

The problem statement clarifies, outlines, limits, and brings into focus a distinct image of the problem to be investigated in your dissertation.

The statement of your problem reflects your particular theoretical or conceptual framework. It identifies a gap in the knowledge base about your specific topic.

This step determines the direction of the rest of the journey. How do you translate your broad ideas into a project that is grounded in research, yet unique, and is manageable to carry out?
How Can I Escape from the Problem Pit?

At this point in the journey, no doubt you have found a general topic that excites you about your field of study. Now you need to narrow your topic.

Problematize it. Identify a general “problem” that grows from your idea. Why is this a problem? And for whom is it a problem? Why is there a need for your study?

Identify a gap in the literature. You’re almost out of the pit! A single idea can generate several problems. Select one that reflects a gap in knowledge. Concentrate on what is unknown or is missing from the literature.

Define it. Turn your problem into a statement of a specific problem that is researchable and manageable.

Provide citations. Demonstrate how your specific problem derives from the literature by providing research citations to support the existence of your problem and the need for your study.
Literature Fog

Once you identify your problem, you have to find out more about it. But the more you read, the more confused you seem to become! There are so many directions to pursue, so many more interesting articles to read. There’s no one to guide you when you begin to question yourself:

• How do I know when I have read enough?
• When should I stop collecting more?
• What do I do with the piles of information I have collected?

When you seem to have lost sight of your focus, and your topic changes with each new idea you find, you have lost your way in the Literature Fog.
How Can I Escape the Fog?

The best way to find your way out of the fog is to get organized and stay focused.

**Consult a reference librarian.** Spend time with a reference librarian to hone your search skills and learn about available databases. Narrow your searches to eliminate results that are too broad. Expand your searches if your results are too narrow.

**Maintain a log of your searches.** Include the date of your search, the search terms you use and the databases you search, as well as the pertinent results. Update your searches for new information every six months.

**Stop when you’re not turning up new sources.** When your searches start yielding the same results and when the names in the references of the articles you find are familiar, it’s time to shift from searching to making meaning of the articles you’ve gathered.

**Make your reading purposeful.** Read the abstracts and skim articles rather than reading word-for-word. Organize your articles to correspond to the sections of your review of literature.

**Analyze and synthesize the research.** For each section of your review, create a table that includes 6 to 12 research studies for that variable or topic. Record the author, year, title, study purpose, research questions, type of design, sample, and major findings that relate to your problem. Identify how the findings of each study are similar to other studies and how they differ. Use these tables to analyze and synthesize the studies as a group rather than reporting on each of the studies you read. In your text indicate the consistencies, inconsistencies, and limitations of current research.
Island of Isolation

The next task is to put together your proposal and get your committee to approve it. You’ve overcome some significant challenges. You may have conquered the Start-up Swamp, the Gremlin’s Cave, the Problem Pit, but now as you emerge from the Literature Fog, you may be realizing just how thankless and solitary this journey has become.

You may have difficulty staying on task, and there’s no one to turn to. You are in danger of becoming totally self-absorbed and stranded on the Island of Isolation.
What Can I Do?

There are many students like you who feel alone and disconnected from the rest of the world and, especially, from the dissertation.

It may be time to call forth your support network. Meet with your advisor on a regular basis and mobilize your writing peers.

**Join or organize a writing group.**

A group is a powerful source of motivation, and identifying with individuals who are similarly engaged in writing their proposal or dissertation tends to keep everyone on course. Joining a writing group will help you avoid feeling isolated, lonely, and overwhelmed and will help you maintain the focus you need to sustain yourself.

**Hire a Dissertation Coach to guide you on the Dissertation Journey.** If you want to stay on track and sustain a productive pace, consider taking the Shortcut. A Dissertation Coach can help you overcome each of the challenges along the way and can provide the guidance and accountability that you need to complete a successful proposal and prepare for the remainder of the journey.
Desert of Desolation

Just as you experience great exultation when your proposal is finally approved, you may again find yourself in another lonely stretch of the journey.

As you immerse yourself fully in the data collection process, you start to find yourself running low on your reserves. Fatigue takes over. Maybe you are having a hard time finding subjects. You may be running out of money, you may be running out of time, and those around you are giving up on your ever finishing. There is no relief in sight! You have arrived at a Desert of Desolation.
Don’t Give Up. Your Perspective Alters Things!

This is the time to replenish yourself by reviewing your personal commitment and your perspective. Your perspective is the mental attitude you have about your situation. If you are a victim of negative thinking, the journey becomes more difficult and your chances of success decrease.

Maintain perspective. Get in touch with the reasons you began this journey. Post a picture of your cap and gown next to your computer. Imagine yourself with a PhD after your name. How will that feel? Shift your thinking to focus on the positives at the end of the journey rather than the hardships along the way.

Keep trekking. Create a schedule for data collection and try to maintain a regular pace of work. Work in small blocks of time. Take breaks when you need them. And reward yourself every time you accomplish the next chunk of your research. Each step gets you closer to the end of your journey.

Perspective and persistence will see you through the desert. These are truly your greatest resources.
After months of data collection, you may lose your sense of direction. Perhaps you don’t know which way to turn to move forward on your journey.

Maybe you didn’t find any significant results? Or your advisor wants more and more analyses? Perhaps you are overwhelmed with a humongous pile of qualitative data? You feel ready to abandon the whole thing? It sounds like you’re lost in the Data Jungle!
Don’t give up. Here are some suggestions to cut through the jungle.

**Take control of your data.** Organize your data in spreadsheets, folders, binders, or whatever system works best for you.

**Learn how to use the software.** Use tutorials to learn how to use the data analysis software and perform the specific analyses you proposed.

**Immerse yourself in the data.** Begin with the raw data. Allow ample time to read your interview transcripts or go through your statistical printouts to look at your distributions and outliers. Use your highlighter. Take notes. What stands out?

**Step back.** What themes emerge from your qualitative data? What tests show significance for your quantitative data? What do the data tell you? Begin to think about how your data answer the research questions of your study.

**Debrief with an expert.** Whether it’s your advisor, a statistician, or a qualitative research expert, find someone to consult with and to strategize about how to set up your quantitative analysis or your qualitative data coding. Meet regularly to review your findings and begin to think about their implications.

**What Now?**
Mt. Significance

You have searched the research literature, designed and executed your research plan, and written up your findings. You’re done!

Not so fast, you must address two important questions: What is the answer to your research question? What is the significance of your results? You are at the top of Mt. Significance.

You must write the final chapter. The good news is that, finally, you get to be creative! So far, what you have written has relied on the work of previous scholars. Finally you have a Voice.
As a scholar, you are immersed in your subject, and your reflections will be highly valued by your readers. This is the opportunity to integrate your findings into your conclusion to your dissertation.

**What’s your contribution?** Your research filled an important “knowledge gap” in the field. Maybe you enhanced the understanding of the problem, or perhaps you pursued a new approach to it. Your results might suggest an application of your research to improve and/or alter current practices in your field. Your results may even call into question long-held assumptions on your topic.

**Answer the So What question.** Think of this chapter as the answer to the question “So what?” Restate the answer to your research question and follow it with an explanation of why the answer is important. This is the payoff for all your work. The last chapter of the dissertation clearly illustrates why the journey was worthwhile.
Oral Defense Peak

The Oral Defense Peak is aptly named, because the defense is one of the highest points on your journey. Your fate is in your committee’s hands.

You’re not sure what to expect. You hope the questions will not be too difficult. Your heart beats faster at the thought of facing your committee.
How do you prove that it is time for your committee to regard you as a peer (albeit, a junior one) rather than as a graduate student?

**Strategies for getting ready.** The key to your success at your orals is preparation. Remember these three strategies for preparation:

- Know your audience by trying to find out what questions to expect.
- Write a script for the presentation.
- Meet with your chair prior to the defense to find out what is expected.

Practice! Practice! Practice! Speak about your project in front of colleagues to improve your presentation skills.

**Tips for the day of the Defense.** On your big day, remember these 10 tips for a successful defense:

1. Arrive early and arrange the setting.
2. Be mindful of your physical appearance.
3. Make eye contact with your audience.
4. Don’t rush your answers.
5. Answer the question. Don’t ramble.
6. Correct your mistakes immediately.
7. Ask for clarification if you don’t understand the question.
8. Don’t fabricate something if you don’t know the answer.
9. Stand up for yourself in a positive way.
10. Record the defense for later reference if revisions are required.
Revision Pass

You’re on the bridge over Revision Pass, and from here you can see the Journey’s End. Along the way, you’ve drafted countless versions of your dissertation. You’ve checked and double-checked your formatting, your citations, and even your spelling. What more could anyone possibly want?

You thought your oral defense was the final step on the path. You gave it your all, but the members of the committee still are not satisfied. Just some minor changes, they said. Perhaps they want you to expand on your discussion of your findings. One member would like you to add another citation to your literature review. Another caught a misspelled word in a chart in the findings section and an error in one of your citations.
The final revision is the next to last step in your dissertation journey. You must respond to your committee’s concerns and polish your manuscript so that it represents you in the best possible light.

**One more time.** You may be tired, but just do it! Revise and resubmit your dissertation. Make the changes and get the coveted signatures. You’re done.

**The University has the final word.**
Still, not quite yet. Your manuscript must be reviewed by whomever your university designates to check dissertations. This person knows all the rules of formatting set forth by your graduate school. One last time, you are asked to dot every “i” and cross every “t.”

Hurray, your journey as a dissertator is over. Proceed to Journey’s End and celebrate!
Shortcut

Many dissertation writers decide to bypass the hardships on the Dissertation Journey by taking a Shortcut and hiring a Dissertation Coach. A Dissertation Coach is both a content and methodological expert as well as a supporter and guide to help dissertation writers navigate the obstacles along the Journey.
A Dissertation Coach can assist you in managing the dissertation process:

- Set realistic goals and prioritize your weekly tasks to keep your dissertation on track.
- Break down the dissertation into small, manageable assignments.
- Manage the gremlins or negative thoughts that may sabotage you.
- Focus on dissertation deadlines and weekly accountability.
- Learn about your own writing process and become a better writer.
- Remind you of why you began the Dissertation Journey and help motivate you to persist.

At each milestone in the Journey a Dissertation Coach can guide you to:

- Refine your topic.
- Conduct a review of literature and synthesize relevant studies.
- Define a significant researchable problem statement.
- Develop your research questions and hypotheses.
- Choose a qualitative or quantitative methodology.
- Manage your data.
- Analyze and report your results.
- Write your conclusions and recommendations.
If you choose to propose a qualitative research study, our Qualitative Dissertation Coaches provide you with support and advice on:

- Writing a methodologically-sound proposal,
- Framing the research questions,
- Searching for relevant literature,
- Choosing the most appropriate qualitative framework,
- Selecting the type of sample to use,
- Developing interview and focus-group guides,
- Building an argument that demonstrates why the study is significant,
- Creating strategies for recruiting hard-to-find subjects,
- Developing systems for storing and managing data,
- Learning about and choosing various analysis techniques, and
- Developing tables, charts, and scales to best present your results.

Or, if you decide to propose a quantitative research study, our patient and non-judgmental Statistics Coaches, who know how to get people excited and comfortable with statistics, help you to understand, implement, and interpret your statistical models. They guide you in:

- Designing your quantitative study,
- Formulating your hypotheses,
- Determining the sample size,
- Understanding when to use parametric and nonparametric analyses,
- Deciding which statistical analysis to use,
- Reporting your results,
- Preparing tables of your results,
- Interpreting your results, and
- Defending your study.
LEARN MORE ABOUT WORKING WITH A DISSERTATION COACH

Click here for a free ACW consultation.