

## **Pedagogue Bonus: Tips for the Dissertation (w/Antonio Byrd)**

Pedagogue podcast

*Transcript*

Welcome to Pedagogue Bonus, a short episode that explores a single topic or question. I'm your host, Shane Wood.

In this bonus episode, we're going to talk about the dissertation and potential strategies and tips for those in the writing process.

When I was brainstorming the direction for this episode, I thought of two different approaches and perspectives. The first was I could have a conversation with the graduate students writing the dissertation and we could hear them talk through their process. The second was I could have a recent graduate student reflect on their process and what helped them. I actually decided to incorporate both of those voices because I think both are extremely valuable and necessary to this conversation. I reached out to two good friends and colleagues, Charlesia McKinney and Casey Keel, both graduate students writing their dissertations at the University of Kansas, to give me some insights and tips to share.

Here's what Charlesia had to say: (1) Find ways to build in affirmation post-course work. (2) Talk with others. I missed the discussions we used to have in coursework and lately I've been seeking ways to recreate that experience in then dissertation process. A few friends and I are creating a discussion group to create a space to talk through ideas and get feedback. (3) Create and continually update a dissertation reading list. I'm easily overwhelmed when I sit down to write my dissertation that's far too big. Instead, continue to break down the dissertation into small steps.

Here's what Casey had to say: (1) Figure out how to effectively create weekly smart goals. Here's the questions I asked myself in developing these goals. What do I want to reasonably accomplish this week? How are my weekly task helped me develop my chapter draft. (2) Getting a draft out on paper is more important than the quality of the draft. (3) If I have a big writing task ahead of me, I'm going to work on that project in the place I enjoy like a comfy chair in the library or a nice coffee shop or if I complete my weekly smart goal, I'm willing to take the afternoon and do something I want to do. (4) Plan. Writing and dissertation is huge, so breaking it up into manageable tasks that I can finish and then reward myself in little ways throughout the process makes it much more enjoyable and less overwhelming.

Thank you again so much Charlesia and Casey for providing those tips. Personally, I think it's good to hear from different people in similar positions and then sort of take what advice works best for you. A lot of this is knowing yourself, knowing what is going to be most helpful and productive. You can also probably identify threads in individual pieces of advice.

With that being said, I'd like to introduce Antonio Byrd, an Assistant Professor of English at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. He teaches courses in digital rhetoric, composition theory and professional and technical writing. He researches how African American adults access and

learn new emerging digital literacies such as computer programming to promote social inclusion within their own communities.

Thank you so much for joining us, Antonio.

*SW: I would love to hear about your dissertation writing process. What advice did you receive while you were writing the dissertation and what advice you would give to someone else?*

AB: Yeah, yeah, so I can definitely actually just start with talking about the advice that I received. It was basically that I have to create a system of discipline that fits my own life and where I am. Interesting enough that advice came from another graduate student. She had asked me how I got through the prelims, what was my process for completing prelims, and I was a little reluctant because it was a process that was very intense. It was a full day every single day over the summer that I was doing prelims and I knew that wasn't something that was going to fit for other people who had families or anything like that. But after I shared with her the process, she said, so basically you had your own system of discipline that you have to stick to. I said, yeah, that's exactly what the big takeaway is, I guess. So the advice came both from a graduate student and myself. It was like a collaborative effort I think. So that's my first step for giving advice on that is create a system that best fits your life and where it really works.

When I first started to jump into the dissertation, I was teaching intermediate writing at UW Madison and that was a digital focused course, met with those students about twice a week or so. That was at the very early part of the dissertation writing. So I was not only teaching, but I was also visiting the computer code bootcamp where I would try to conduct some interviews and some observation as well. So there was definitely a moment where I had to balance the actual lesson planning with my students while also going away to do research and also working in the writing center where I also tutored too. So it was at the very beginning, I would say for that first year there was a lot of trying to fit things together. I wouldn't say necessarily balance, but try to fit everything together so that way everyone's getting the attention that they need that I'm really responsible for.

So yeah, I would often leave my apartment because I knew that that was a place with a bed and a refrigerator and there was food and I had the internet so I could jump on YouTube and Netflix. So what I really wanted to do is like, okay, I need to be in a public space because then I can't go on Netflix or YouTube. Other people are working. So what I would do is most often going to a coffee shop that was in walking distance to my apartment. In fact, the coffee shop where I did a lot of my writing was a place called Michelangelo's. It was in downtown Madison. They knew me by name eventually because I was always there usually sometime at night around 7:00 and they would instantly say, "You want the coffee? You want a brownie? How's it going?" As far as like what I actually did for my process, there were different steps that I took for completing the dissertation.

One of them was that I was doing a lot of data analysis while actually collecting data at the same time. I did my dissertation at a computer code bootcamp, training low income people of color and women in hopes that they could take computer programming and use it for social mobility. So while I was visiting classes and doing interviews there, I was making memos to myself. One

of the big key ways of doing ethnographic studies is always to write memos and reflections and everything. So I think that could be something that could apply to other types of dissertation research. Whether that's you're looking at something that's based in literature or you're looking at different types of studies, there could be a moment where you can stop and do your own data analysis as the ideas are coming through. So in this way you could start writing a chapter while in the midst of doing data collection. If you have an idea, jump onto it and then start writing. Don't take any time to wait until everything is done and then start writing.

So one of the other things that I really found very useful was checking in with all of my committee members on my dissertation committee. I primarily spoke to my advisor, Kate Vieira at UW Madison and shared some of the big core ideas for chapters, but for different directions I could take my analysis, where I could take my argument, I tried to utilize the expertise of everyone on my dissertation committee from the computer scientist to the rhetorician to the compositionist. I knew they didn't have a whole lot of time because they are responsible for other people's committees and they have to teach and do research. So I would just ask them just for 30 minutes, let's have a conversation, let me take some notes and then I will disappear for the rest of the semester because I know that you're really busy.

That was really helpful. They were really generous with their time and giving some possible resources. Then I think the last bit of advice really goes into the actual writing process and what I did to do that. What I did was that I treated each chapter of my dissertation as if I was writing a seminar paper for one class. The way that I wrote my chapters, they were basically journal articles that I would later on submit to for publication.

So my three data chapters were written as articles and in that process, each semester was just an article a day, at the very least to draft something that I could then give to my advisor. In that way I'm kind of compartmentalizing the dissertation. It didn't become this overwhelming thing, but it was just like one seminar paper, which is what I was familiar with in graduate school in my graduate coursework as well.

Then I was Assistant Director for the Writing Center when I wrote the main bulk of my dissertation. So what was really helpful was when I wasn't spending 20, 25 hours in the office supervising about 50 TA's in the Writing Center, I would use maybe an hour or two hours to focus on one chunk of the chapter. I'm going to do the introduction or write through the introduction for these next two hours. Then another day when I had some time, I would like say, okay, what did I do in the introduction, maybe I can shift over to the literature review section of the chapter?

So that was really helpful for making sure I stayed on top of my writing. Then finally, whenever I got stuck, and this is the last piece strategy that I used, I would turn to dissertations that were already published and in the library database, especially the dissertations that my advisor was responsible for chairing over. So I would look into their chapters and say, "Okay, so what did this person do to get through this? What kind of moves were they making? Then I would jump in and steal some of their moves and try to rhetorically use that to jumpstart my writing.