



THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
**mentor memo**  
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This Mentor Memo, part of a series, responds to graduate students' requests for advice about navigating graduate studies successfully.

The series also addresses topics in career preparation and professional development. For more information and to suggest topics, contact Graduate School Dean Jerry Baldasty at [baldasty@u.washington.edu](mailto:baldasty@u.washington.edu).

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Large projects, such as an MA thesis, dissertation, book, or just a long paper, can be daunting. For some of us, myself included, project management can be a challenge for any article written from scratch. This memo can help you break down your writing project into smaller, less intimidating parts. I will focus on the writing of a thesis or dissertation, but the same basic logic applies to even smaller writing tasks.

### Getting started:

#### Clarify purpose, argument, audience

**Purpose:** A thesis or dissertation should yield a high quality document that adds to the body of scholarly knowledge and is worthy, eventually, of publication in a peer-reviewed journal. Or your writing may address a public controversy or develop a creative insight that could change how people view a phenomenon of interest.

**Argument:** With your purpose clarified, think about your argument. Create a main argument that carries you through your thesis or dissertation. (There may be many other points along the way, but a core message will help you stay focused from beginning to end).

**Audience:** Keep a particular audience in mind. For academic work, identify a target journal. Think about who would want to read your work; this will motivate you to write and clarify your message.

#### Outlining, setting deadlines

One of the causes of vertigo with large writing projects is the sense that the work before you is too big or too much for you to handle given all your existing responsibilities and pressures. So break the project into manageable parts, and make the immediate task a two- or three-page mini-paper.

**How to start:** Outline your project carefully. Start with a one-page handwritten outline that is simply the main sections or chapter titles.

Then move to a more thorough outline, with detail under each of the points in the first version. At this point, each part of the outline is no more than a few pages.

Refine your outline to indicate how many pages and what kind of work each part will require. For instance, I might

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have a line in my outline that reads, “Introduce self-perception theory (two pages; brief literature review).” Your daunting, massive thesis or dissertation has now been reduced to a series of manageable, “do-able” tasks.

Set a schedule for completing each piece of the outline. Make sure that each chunk is small enough to be do-able in just a week or two, or even just a day or two.

## Procrastination

**First-time procrastination problems?** You may just be tired, so relax and don’t be hard on yourself.

**Persistent procrastination?** Break your task into even smaller pieces.

**One option:** Identify a one-hour block of time. Work on your next writing task for just 15 minutes, followed by a five-minute stretching/social break. Repeat two more times, and in one hour you will have done 45 minutes of work. If that works, then schedule your next writing period for 80 minutes, and so on, until you can set aside three hours at a time for writing. You may find that taking the break after 15 minutes is hard to do because you get a rhythm and can’t stop working. That’s a good thing.

**Another option:** Schedule writing appointments with fellow students or faculty—or, form a three-to-five person study group that meets every one or two weeks to help keep each other on track.

**Other options:** See your adviser, commit to a scholarly conference (to create an external deadline), or set up some other writing-related appointment.

If your large writing project becomes so emotionally upsetting that you find yourself unable to do any of the above successfully, consider making an appointment for student counseling (<http://depts.washington.edu/counsels>). It is easy for the different parts of our lives to get entangled, and the fear or stress you experience regarding your writing may have nothing to do with the quality of your ideas or your skill as a writer—but instead be symptomatic of other things upsetting you at home or at work.

**And remember—it’s OK to ask for help.**