

# What is a Dissertation

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After nearly 30 years of work on my own, and on numerous other, dissertations, I think I can finally offer my own definition of a dissertation:

Let me break down each key word one at a time —

## **Lively**

This is the most important property of any dissertation. Good ideas cannot help but be lively. It is their nature. If we find them properly, or test them clearly, or present them compellingly, then they will shimmer with their own form of liveliness. If your accounts seem sludgy or pedestrian, then you have not nailed down your ideas yet. Help yourself out — read lively works. Better yet — read lively works outside your field. In my case, I have subscribed to the New Yorker for years. It comes to my apartment once a week. Each issue has at least one piece of fiction, and I read all the fiction because researchers cannot read too much lively short fiction. Short lively fiction is the Dim Sum of the research mind. At the same time, there are several articles on many topics. Many of the articles I do not read because I find the topic not all that interesting to me — usually politics, or cultural issues dealing with economic dynamics.

When there is an interesting article, I try to read it at one setting. Last night I finished a short biography on the father of Japanese anime. Your mileage may vary. Your sources of lively will be your own, but do not neglect them. When ideas are lively, they come to the surface and preen for us — like supple koi in cool crisp ponds in meditative gardens. Sit beside these garden ponds often. Watch and meditate the lively play of ideas in the world around you. Bring that spirit into your own work.

## **Substantial**

T.S. Eliot once said that the importance of a proper education is that it frees you from the tyranny of having been born at a particular place and time. Anything that helps free you from being forced to see the world in only one way has substance. If your dissertation does not alter the way we look at the world or ourselves, in even the smallest and most modest way, then it has no substance. It is fluff or propaganda or self-indulgence. A dissertation does not have to be long, or complexly or tightly argued, or rich with details and nuance — but that is the way to bet the hand. Be prepared to add things, or argue more stringently, or tie up loose ends. Your committee is not trying to punish you — they are trying to free you from the embarrassment of looking back on your dissertation ten years from now and wishing you had wrapped it up better.

## **Important**

First of all, a dissertation topic must be important to you. If it is not important to you, then discard it and move on to another topic. If it does not seem important to anyone else yet, then do not worry quite yet. Sometimes, it takes time to communicate the importance of a dissertation topic to others. Sometimes, it takes time to articulate that importance out loud. As long as it continues to feel important, keep working on it. The clarity of communication will come sooner or later.

There are times when something seems important to you, but when others help you look at it, you can see that it is not as important as you thought it might be. Life is sometimes like this. Move on, but do not move on until you feel in your heart that you were wrong in the first place. It is better to be too bold than to be too timid in this case. All you risk losing is a little bit of extra time.

## **Original**

Every dissertation is a one of a kind creation. There is no set of rules that will bring about a dissertation. At some point in time, you must put aside the guidelines and templates and make the work your own. Do not be afraid to do this. Revel in the fact that you have been blessed to live in a universe where you have free will, and that free will is an inextricable part of that universe. Your dissertation might have mothers and fathers and cousins and aunts and uncles and any number of relatives, but in the end it is its own thing. Anyone who tells you that a dissertation is a standardized piece of work that can be put together using a certain routine is telling you a lie. There are paths to follow, to be sure. But a dissertation is never finished until it leaves the paths and sets out toward its own unique final destination. That destination may be six inches from everyone else, but it is still on its own.

These are the four key terms that come together in a dissertation. How they come together, and how they balance out, is part of the creative and collaborative process that is at the heart of each and every dissertation.