

Kreitner's Dissertation Guide

If this were the middle ages and you wanted to become, say, a shoemaker, you couldn't just buy a set of tools, rent a storefront, and have somebody paint you a sign; you had to become a member of the shoemakers' guild. And to join the guild, you had to go through quite a rigorous process of training and examination. You would start by being apprenticed to a guild member, and by helping him and working up to a journeyman you would learn more and more complex skills in the shoemaker's trade, for some years until at last your master said you were ready to start on your own, and this is the word they used, masterpiece: a really extraordinary pair of shoes, which you would make from scratch, maybe with a bit of help and advice here and there from your master, but essentially all by yourself. When you were done, the shoes would be presented before a delegation of the guild. If they were good enough, you too were declared a master, a full member of the guild; if not, not.

The above is not a metaphor; it is the actual ancient tradition within which the doctoral dissertation was first conceived. By beginning a doctorate, you seek to join the guild of scholars—not, please notice, the guild of musicians or of teachers, but the guild of people who devote their lives to the pursuit of knowledge and wisdom. The nature of our craft means that we use a curriculum of coursework rather than a formal apprenticeship; but if you will think of your teacher as your master, your committee as the guild committee, and the dissertation as the masterpiece, you will have a better idea of the seriousness of what you face. When you pass your comps, we are saying that you are ready to start on a mature, extended piece of original scholarship on your own. It is a very big deal. And remember the shoes: no matter if you were the best apprentice and journeyman in the world, if your masterpiece shoes weren't perfect, you were no shoemaker.

The Dissertation Equivalent

So what is a dissertation? Music is an unusual field, and the answer varies a bit from one subdiscipline to another. In musicology and music education, you write a conventional dissertation, like those in the other humanities and social sciences. In composition, you write a substantial musical work. And in performance and conducting, you do what the university calls a “Dissertation Equivalent,” consisting of a series of recitals and, as the culminating event, the Doctoral Research Project.

The curriculum is complex, and in certain details it even varies from instrument to instrument. Your advisor and the departmental Graduate Handbook should be able to spell things out; or stop by my office. This guide is not intended to cover every possibility, nor is it in any way meant to replace (much less supersede) the Graduate School’s regulations, which can be found via their website. Mostly it is here to introduce you to the process and the concept of the doctoral dissertation.

But one important thing to say: whatever program you are in, you have a big piece of writing to do, bigger than you have probably ever undertaken.

Two **Frequently Asked Questions** right at the beginning:

Q: How many pages should it be?

A: If you are seriously asking this question, you may not fully understand the nature of the task at hand. If it’s any kind of research project at all, whatever idea you have of its length when you start out, will be laughably wrong. But okay: DMA dissertationoids tend to be in the 100-to-200-page range, and it is very hard to imagine something under, say, 75 pages that would fulfill the scope of the task. My own PhD dissertation was about 600 pages long, and Dr. Page’s was about 400, if that gives you any idea. Think a book.

.... and

Q: What should I sign up for?

A: This is a simple question in some programs, not so much in others.

- Musicology: MUHL 9000, for at least 9 credits total by the end.
- Music Education: MUSE 9000, for at least 9 credits total by the end.
- Composition: MUTC 9000, for at least 9 credits total by the end.
- Conducting and Performance: MUAP 8999 at 3 credits for every solo or chamber recital; for a lecture-recital, MUAP 9000 for at least 3 credits (covering the paper and recital both); for a final paper if you’re not doing the lec-rec option, MUAP 9000 for at least 1 credit. Again, they have to add up to at least 9.
- AND remember: for any 9000, once you have signed up once, you have to keep signing up every spring and fall till you are done.

Your Committee

Your doctoral committee should be made up of five people, including a chair. They must all be on the university's graduate faculty in some capacity, and the chair must have full graduate-faculty status—which normally means that he or she has a doctorate and/or is a very senior member of the departmental faculty. There are a few other restrictions and suggestions, e.g. that PhD committees should have one member from outside the department, and that DMA committees ideally should have at least one historian and at least one theorist.

Apart from such considerations, the choice of a committee is largely up to you, in consultation with your teacher or advisor, and with the approval of the Assistant Director for Graduate Curriculum and Advising. There are forms to fill out, of course. But the point for the moment is that you should choose your committee carefully, for they will probably be with you, for good or ill, to the end. They are there to help you, yes; but please understand that their principal allegiance is to the integrity of the discipline, and that their prime directive is to say no if the dissertation is not ready. Remember the shoes.

Style Sheets

There is an overall University of Memphis style for form and presentation of the dissertation, most notably for the signature page, title page, table of contents, and so forth; you can find the details via the Graduate School website. But for conventions of grammar and especially documentation, different departments use different style sheets. In the School of Music we use two: dissertations in music education use the American Psychological Association (APA) handbook, and all others use the University of Chicago system, as shown in the latest editions of the *Chicago Manual of Style*, Turabian, and *Kreitner's Guide to Scholarly Documentation*.

By the time you read these words, you will probably have already received this advice from me or JKP orally, but here it is again, now in writing. Master the forms completely and early. Get so they are there in your wrists and guide your typing automatically. Know what's italic, what's in quotation marks, what's in roman numerals and what's arabic, what punctuation goes where. Don't do a perfunctory job on the footnotes while you're writing, thinking you'll remember to come back and correct the form later. There will, I promise, be less time at the end than now, and you don't want to have to dig out all those sources again.

Most of all, what you don't want is for your committee to have to correct hundreds of niggling little errors in your footnotes. This fills us with nameless rage when we have to do it; it seems to show that you don't care about the little stuff, and it diminishes your authority on the big stuff. And do you want us to be filled with rage when we read your dissertation? I didn't think so.

Lecture-Recitals vs. Documents

Those of you in the performance and conducting programs have the choice of combining the final recital and the document into one lecture-recital. People get confused about this, but it's really quite simple even if not self-evident. The lecture-recital consists of two parts: a big paper (called, informally, the dissertationoid), which you defend and present to the graduate school, and a public presentation in which you read a summary or extract of the dissertationoid and perform some of the music that you are writing about. But the point is, there is a big formal paper in either case: my heart always sinks when I overhear a doctoral student saying she is doing a lec-rec, so the paper doesn't actually have to amount to much.....

Your Topic

Choosing a topic is hard, and I don't know much blanket advice that will cover every possibility. Try to find something that you can sustain interest in over a long time. You might as well play to your strengths: if you know French but not German, Fauré might be a better subject than Wagner. If you are doing a lecture-recital, choose something to do with your instrument—or, more accurately, something within the traditional scope of what a player of your instrument might do. A flutist, for instance, might certainly write about piccolo or even pennywhistle music, or a horn player about the role of the alto horn in nineteenth-century band music.

It is natural, if you're a performer, to think first of the virtuoso literature for your instrument; that, after all, is what you have been playing in your doctoral program all along. But you might also consider resisting that impulse, partly because your faithful Kreitner is likely to find the v.l. for your i. boring as hell, but also because lecture-recitals on virtuoso literature are strewn with peril: it is hard to speak at length in public under pressure, then turn around and play killer music. Plus, the research phase is apt to take much longer than you think, forcing you to keep the killer music warm for an uncomfortably long time.

It is also likely that whatever topic you think of first, you will discover someone else has done it. Don't let this discourage you: that person, poor sap, did the tedious spadework and foundation-building for you to write something more interesting. But do let your committee members help in steering you toward an aspect of your subject that is feasible but still interesting.

The Proposal

If you have taken the bibliography course here, you have already done a mock-proposal and no doubt, ahem, will remember every bit of the good advice you received then. Proposals differ with different sorts of projects, but the basic idea is to persuade your committee that the topic is worth doing and that you are ready to undertake it. Normally this involves some sort of review of the literature and formulation of the research problem; an explanation of your method and the materials you are going to use; a proposed table of contents; a sample of your analytical methods (if, as is most often the case, you are going to be discussing music), and an exhaustive bibliography. If you aim toward the twenty-page range—again, depending on the nature of the work—you will probably have an idea of the scope of the task. It is good to work with your advisor on the proposal and have him or her look it over before distributing it to the committee.

One piece of wise comforting counsel: don't worry if you feel as though you're spending an awful lot of time and effort on the proposal. All that time and effort will come out of what you were going to expend on the actual paper, and if you play your cards right, much of what you write in the proposal can probably be incorporated into the paper itself.

Chapter Drafts

Start thinking in chapters early, and when you have finished a chapter, show it to your advisor for approval and advice. It doesn't have to be absolutely perfect, but it should also not be in such a state that he or she has to figure out what you intend actually to do. You will likely have to rewrite some chapters several times—an unfamiliar task for most students, who have spent decades of school turning in papers, getting a grade, moving on. Don't let the new experience drive you nuts.

Adopt the Graduate School's somewhat nonstandard formats (margins, page numbers, etc.) from the very beginning: if you have to reformat at the end, you'll cause yourself no end of head- and heartache.

And it is often wise to share chapters with certain other committee members too, depending on their expertise. Don't distribute things to everybody at once: you'll get too much advice, sometimes contradictory, that you won't be able to use efficiently. But your advisor will be able to help decide what order to do things in. It's perfectly okay for some committee members not to have seen anything before the draft to defend. But pleeeeeease, don't just “finish” the whole thing and then distribute it without anyone having seen it. One chapter at a time.

Mostly we will have little things to say: grammar to correct, additions and cuts to suggest. It does occasionally happen that we have to say no, this chapter just isn't ready to show me yet—go back and rewrite it for clarity, or with such-and-such research more firmly in mind. This is frustrating advice to receive, I know, but sometimes it is the only way for this pair of shoes to be both acceptable to the guild and truly yours.

The Draft to Defend

When all your chapters have been looked at by the appropriate committee members and corrected, it is time to assemble the Draft to Defend: this is what you will photocopy and give to the full committee. It should be perfect, at least by your lights, with page numbers continuous throughout, and in the grad school's format. It's good to check with your advisor first to ensure it's really time to make the copies and go. Whatever you do, don't type in any revisions after you've distributed it: if, at the defense, your pagination is different from ours, madness will ensue.

The Defense

The word "Defense" sounds a little more bellicose than the actual event normally is. Essentially the defense is a final meeting of you and your committee, who have now read your dissertation(oid) and are ready to talk about it. It's partly a last editorial session, partly a, we hope, congenial discussion of your work and future.

Whenever I am the advisor, I try to send out a message to the committee at the time the drafts are being distributed saying, if anyone thinks this draft is not ready to defend, please tell me straightaway and we will delay the defense till we see a rewrite. In other words, if we are having this meeting, it means we think the document is basically acceptable and, barring the unforeseen, you will pass.

At the end of the defense, we will give you our marked-up drafts and/or comment sheets for you to take home and spread in front of your computer, making corrections for the final draft.

Bring a copy of the signature page, on the fancy paper, to the defense. Actually it's good to get your advisor, or me, to look over a draft of your signature page before you copy it, so we can spot any errors. Remember that your major is Music, not Performance or Viola. Try to spell our names right and get our degrees right. Then we'll sign it on the spot, while we are all together.

Time Limitations and Deadlines

The Graduate School's website explains the rules on time limitations. Essentially, you have twelve years from the start of your doctoral program to the end of the dissertation. (Also, all coursework, exclusive of dissertation, has to be completed during the first ten years, but normally that's not a problem.) At the end of the twelfth calendar year, the first calendar year drops off and you lose those courses. There are ways to revive expired courses (the Grad School's term is "course validation"), but not all courses can be validated, and you can only revive a certain percentage. In short, do what you can to finish as soon as you can.

The key deadline in the Graduate School's calendar is the date marked "Submit defended & corrected thesis/dissertation." It is a somewhat confusing terminology; essentially this means you must have your defense before or, if desperate, on that date. Let us call it Date X and build a series of guidelines and deadlines around it.

- A month before the defense: distribute your complete draft to the committee; this gives us time to read it at leisure. It's really important to give us enough time, especially those of us who serve on lots of committees.
- Sometime before Date X: have the defense.
- Date X or before: take a copy (on regular paper) over to the Graduate School. Most often it's just a clean copy of what you have just defended, but sometimes, if the formatting or footnotes are known to be problematic, we'll have you make revisions first.
- Date X and just thereafter: start work on the revisions suggested at the defense while you await word from the Grad School. They will look over the draft you gave them and make some suggestions (most often, in my experience, on the title page, table of contents, and so forth). Then when you get theirs, make their corrections too.
- Date X + 14 or so: this is the second deadline, called "Submit final copy of thesis/dissertation," and it refers to the real final copy, after all corrections have been made, photocopied onto the fancy cotton paper.

If you miss a deadline—particularly Date X—your graduation will be postponed till the next semester.

Sticking with It

Here is what happens too often. It is the end of year three; you have finished your coursework, passed comps, and written a successful proposal; your GAsip has run out and you have gotten some sort of interim job. Everything is looking good and you think, hey, I can afford to take the weekend off—I have, after all, nine more years to finish this thing. Eight years elapse. Suddenly you do the math and realize the paper isn't as close to the end as you had thought, and meanwhile other things have happened. Children have been born and entered expensive elementary school. Half your committee has moved on, retired, died, become hopelessly insane. And now you are asking for exceptions and working desperately to write something half-assed but, you pray, acceptable. Please listen to this advice, said with all avuncular love and formed from a cliché: the iron is not getting any hotter. Strike now and keep striking. Or better: the leather is wet and pliable; don't let it dry out.

Two Good Books to Read

William Zinsser, *On Writing Well*, has become a classic textbook for English comp courses, and it's very good at explaining—and, more important, exemplifying—the nature of clear nonfiction writing. It is a much more entertaining book than we deserve, and I read it every couple of years. It will make you want to write better.

And a member of my own committee gave me a copy of David Sternberg, *How to Complete and Survive a Doctoral Dissertation*, which at the time I found helpful and comforting, but also bracing and stern in its way. I see, looking it up on Amazon, that a number of other such books have appeared since then, and they too may be good. There are times in every dissertation when you really need perspective, and books like Sternberg's are there for that.

Why It's Worth It

If I seem to harp on shoes, please understand that it is not a fetish but a memory, a memory of the first time I visited the Museu d'història de la Ciutat in Barcelona many years ago, and stood before this display of gorgeous shoes, shoemakers' masterpieces from centuries ago, thinking about how they have evidently been kept in guild collections, or passed down lovingly through people's families, for hundreds of years. It is very hard to look at these objects and not feel the pull of their meaning to the young men who made them and the old men who approved them. These shoes changed individual lives, and they were the means by which a craft stayed strong and grew stronger. And so it is with your dissertation, and your life, and the cause of scholarship.

For in the end there is no way around it: a doctorate is a big deal. We hope it will help you get a job or promotion, but it is certain, either way, to change your life. It will change what people call you; it will change your standing in the community; it will set you apart forever. It is different from every other degree, and the difference is in the dissertation. Most of the people who start doctorates don't finish, and it's usually the dissertation that stops them. Make it something you can be proud of for the rest of your life ... and count on us to help.