



Research: Preparing for the Dissertation¹

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In polite company they are called *misunderstandings*. In media slang they are called *bloopers*. Sometimes “goofs” and sometimes, more politely, “slip-ups.” No matter what they are called, misunderstandings or mistaken impressions, can create many problems for the researcher! Following is a list of the most dangerous for doctoral students. Dangerous, because they underlie grave mistakes. Dangerous because they lead down unwise pathways and cause untold grief in the long run. They begin so simply, quietly, and apparently harmlessly. So **Heads Up**, Please! Following are some of the worst:

1. *It is easier to do a descriptive (qualitative) research for your dissertation.* Look carefully at the vast amount of reading it will require and the tricky problems of data-gathering before you jump to this conclusion.
2. *But it surely is quicker than designing an experimental study and getting all those subjects lined up, tested and interviewed.* Wrong again, if you want *quick*, just replicate a sure-fire experiment that has already been done ten times.
3. *I'd rather do something that hasn't been done before.* Great idea, why not try brain-grafting. That's rather unusual.
4. *No, seriously, dissertations really aren't important anyway.* Can you think of anything that will affect your career and your validity as a newcomer to the scholarly world any more significantly than your dissertation?
5. *OK. I'll just do whatever my major professor suggests.* If there ever was a time to take responsibility for your own ideas, imagination, and creativity, the dissertation is it. Go for it.
6. *But I really don't know what to do.* Now you're talking sense. Re-double your reading efforts. Particularly get into the *Encyclopedia of Educational Research*. It is incredibly large, but well organized and *very* useful for building understanding and research ideas. But yes, it takes time and effort.
7. *When I get my course work done, I'll really dig into it.* Sorry, too late. I think this is the biggest mistake doctoral students make: assuming that the dissertation comes last, and you should get everything else out of the way first. It's the way you do things in elementary school. Save the tough stuff until last. No. Your dissertation ideas should emerge as you move

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along through course work and all the rest. Keep playing with inquiry. At every step ask yourself, “What would I do differently if I were teaching? Where does that thought come from? Why is prof suggesting that? What else do we need in order to be more confident before we move on? Where do I turn for a better grasp of that possibility? Ideally you should have developed these thought-habits in your previous schooling, but for crying out loud, get into it *now*! And no, the dissertation isn’t “Last.” It should be a grand fulfillment of mental habits and reasoning processes that you have learned to use over a period of years, not days.

So are you telling me that I’ve been taught incorrectly? Yes and no. Each of us could have done more with our potential. But the real issue now is “What is *your* doctoral study process all about? Is it a grand transition or a fond farewell?” It can be a glorious opportunity for those who are aware of their own value and potentiality as *thinkers*. Creative and fertile minds are extremely valuable in this world. A sacred trust. A glory of God. Use it, build it, exercise it, strengthen it. Your commitments to the kingdom are for his glory. Go.