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This month's column is about a book that I personally have found to be extremely helpful. I recommend it to doctoral students because it helps them prepare for the difficult process of writing the doctoral dissertation. It is indeed project management, but from the perspective of a systems analyst.

The book is Davis and Parker's *Writing the Doctoral Dissertation: A Systematic Approach* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Barrons Educational Series, 1997, 154 pages). It is a short paperback and is available in many university bookstores as well as from online book vendors.

## Writing the Doctoral Dissertation: A Systematic Approach

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### Gordon B. Davis

*is one of the principal founders and intellectual architects of the academic field of information systems. Under his leadership, the Minnesota program in information systems has been consistently ranked as*

*one of the top programs. He has close to 200 items on his publication list with 16 textbooks including the well known Management Information Systems: Conceptual Foundations, Structure, and Development (McGraw-Hill, 1974, 1985). His most recent book (with David Naumann) is Personal Productivity with Information Technology (McGraw-Hill, 1997). Gordon has been involved in most of the major curriculum committees for information systems and has been chair of the International Conference on Information Systems and president of the Association for Information Systems. His involvement with doctoral work in information systems includes being on over 100 dissertation committees and being advisor to a fourth of those. His doctoral advising and review activities have extended to doctoral students in many countries. Professor Davis has been active internationally with lectures in 25 countries and leaves in Belgium and Singapore. His doctorate is from Stanford University but he has also received honorary doctorates from the University of Lyon, France; the University of Zurich, Switzerland; and the Stockholm School of Economics, Sweden.*

The title to my book *Writing the Doctoral Dissertation: A Systematic Approach* may be a little misleading because the emphasis is on management of the dissertation process rather than on writing the text of the dissertation. The first edition of this little guide was used by more than 50,000 doctoral students. This book has a special place in the books I have written. It is the only one that elicits such heartwarming comments as "I read your book, and it saved my life" (figuratively, I assume). I have served as advisor for many dissertations and have been on over 100 dissertation committees. In the guide, I have distilled a process for managing the doing of a doctoral dissertation. The book is short, so it can be read at the beginning of a doctoral program and reread at various times in the process. The underlying message of the book to doctoral students is to take control of the management of the dissertation process.

There is a second, important use for the book. It can be used in advising doctoral students. How does a professor become a good advisor? If one had a really good advising experience, one can emulate it with advisees. The problem is that the advising experience may not have been as good as it should have been, or if good, the process may not have been experienced in a way that can be replicated. The process outlined in the book can be a starting point for formulating a personal faculty approach to advising.

Three propositions underlie the systematic approach to completing a doctoral dissertation:

1. Structuring of the dissertation project can significantly improve performance (by means of topic analyses, proposal documents, plans, schedules, and so on).
2. The student has primary responsibility for the management of the doctoral dissertation project. Advisors and other faculty members can help, but the student should take responsibility.
3. Faculty (advisor and committee) are a scarce, important resource. The student should follow methods of interaction and presentation that effectively use the time and talents of the advisor and committee members.

Since the first proposition implies a large productivity gap between managed and unmanaged doctoral dissertation work, there are process guidelines, suggestions for developing proposal alternatives and selecting among them, estimators to use in establishing a schedule, and ideas about dealing with common problems. The inside back cover has a dissertation management checklist.

The first edition was published in 1979. An 18-year life span prior to revision suggests solid substance in the approach. In these comments, I will first summarize the changes for those who have used the first

edition. I will then describe in more detail the major parts of the book.

The second edition adds an emphasis on identifying the theory or concepts supporting a research topic. There is a chapter on the dissertation as knowledge work. There is discussion of the difference between an "entry-level" doctoral program and a "mid-career" doctoral program, and how these affect course work and the dissertation. The role of the dissertation in a plan for a scholarly career is emphasized. In the first edition, there was strong support for positivist, empirical research; the second edition considers alternative methodologies.

The appendices have changed. The old ones on tools for research, research references, and use of the computer to process analyses were dropped. Up-to-date materials on these topics are very accessible and can be tailored to areas of research. The old appendices explained the use of punched cards in data analysis and provided suggestions and guidelines for applying the cards. Punched cards are no longer used, so those appendices are no longer needed.

A new appendix focuses on effective use of computer software to improve productivity. Computer software is perhaps the most important tool for improving productivity in dissertation activities. It may be used in such activities as:

1. Searching for prior research or other relevant background data,
2. Doing research tasks such as experiments or modeling,
3. Storing and retrieving data,
4. Analyzing data,
5. Writing the dissertation, and
6. Editing the dissertation.

In the search for prior research and other relevant materials, the concepts of a search strategy and stopping rules are presented. These fit the concept of management of the dissertation process. The section on using software for writing the dissertation makes the case for a doctoral student investing in touch typing (data entry) to reduce entry time, use of style functions in word processors, and for use of preferences and options to improve productivity. Sug-

gestions are made relative to references and bibliographies, table of contents, and other useful functions.

The book has 15 short chapters. The approach is normative, that is, it describes what should be done in applying rational management. Of course, life is never so simple, but students are able to adapt to specific, local conditions if they understand the ideal approach.

The three introductory chapters describe the need for a systematic approach to management of the dissertation process. Two case studies are composites from real students who managed poorly or well. There is an overview of the dissertation management approach. The third chapter is new to the second edition. It positions the dissertation as a prime example of knowledge work. Since those who get advanced degrees are likely to have careers largely composed of knowledge work, it is helpful to understand knowledge work and how to improve productivity in doing it. The focus of the discussion is on improving motivation, task management, conserving scarce attention, reducing errors and omissions, and eliminating redundant processes. If these principles are applied well to the dissertation, they will have a life-long impact on personal productivity. The chapter also explains the role of the dissertation in a plan for a scholarly career.

After the introductory chapters, the essence of the systematic approach is outlined in eight chapters:

1. Selection of an advisor and a dissertation committee,
2. Pre-dissertation development activities,
3. Selection of a dissertation topic,
4. Investigation of existing knowledge on a topic,
5. Dissertation proposal,
6. Dissertation time schedule and budget,
7. Work interaction with an advisor and a dissertation committee, and
8. Defense and publishing the results.

The chapters provide concrete suggestions for process and also raise issues and suggest possible ways to resolve the problems. The variety involved in dissertation

projects with respect to the people involved, institutional rules, and individual expectations mean that the chapters will not always fit perfectly, but they provide a basis for tailoring to meet individual needs.

A key idea in the systematic approach is to start early and think dissertation during course work. An important tool in developing a dissertation proposal is to use topic analyses. This method has not changed from the first to the second edition. Topic analyses are short presentation of research ideas done in a way to facilitate evaluation as potential dissertation topics. The evaluation includes an assessment of the effect of different outcomes.

Most doctoral students (and most professors) tend to be poor at estimating the total time for knowledge work projects such as a dissertation. An important benefit of the guide is the set of estimators for planning the dissertation work. These have been altered only slightly from the first to the second edition. No estimators are perfect, but these have been shown over time to be reasonable and very useful.

In summary, the 1979 first edition of *Writing the Doctoral Dissertation* by Davis and Parker was found to be very useful by a significant number of doctoral students. The 1997 second edition retains the main features of the systematic approach, removes some reference materials that is readily available elsewhere, and removes the instructions about using punched cards. It adds some ideas about the dissertation as knowledge work and the role of a dissertation in plans for a scholarly career. The book helps doctoral students to be more in control and more responsible for their dissertations. It helps advisors to instruct students in a good dissertation process and to advise their students relative to special requirements. ■

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Writing the Doctoral Dissertation book. Read 10 reviews from the world's largest community for readers. Here is the first book every prospective doctoral... Goodreads helps you keep track of books you want to read. Start by marking "Writing the Doctoral Dissertation: A Systematic Approach" as Want to Read: Want to Read saving... Want to Read. Admittedly, writing the doctoral dissertation IS producing text and data and analyses and results, but I'm not sure we ought to treat the work as three 40 pages papers plus an introduction and a conclusion and WHAM BAM we have a PhD dissertation. I think there's more to life as a doctoral student than producing pages. Ideal student-advisor relationship. I think I have this relationship with my advisees. A Systematic Approach Gordon B. Davis, Carlson School of Management, University of Minnesota. The title to my book Writing the Doc- Three propositions underlie the systematic approach to completing a doctoral dissertation: because the emphasis is on management 1. Structuring of the dissertation project of the dissertation process rather than on writing the text of the dissertation. The first (by means of topic analyses, proposal Gordon B. Davis edition of this little guide was used by