Goal Setting for Dissertation Writers

Setting incremental, weekly goals will help you complete your dissertation. It’s important to put your goals in writing and to measure your success at the end of the week. Try the SMART approach for goal-setting. Write goals that are:

Specific
The more clearly you articulate exactly what you need to do, the more successful you will be. Vague aims are your enemy. “Write a lot” or “just get this done” are a good intentions, but those aims are not specific goals. Determine exactly what will you write, when will you write, where will you write. Make decisions rather than hoping something good will happen.

Measurable
Your goal needs to be observable. Something tangible that another person can see, count, acknowledge. Define your goal in numerical terms—the number of pages you’ll produce, hours you’ll stay on task, concepts you’ll address. Putting your goals in this form will help you gauge progress and help motivate you to move through the process. Take inventory at the end of each work session to begin to develop a sense of what you can produce in a defined period of time when you are on task. How many pages can you write in an hour? How long does it take to format a table? How much time does it take you to revise/rework something?

Achievable
Consider the size of your goals this week. Set goals that you can realistically achieve in the time available. Determining what’s achievable may be challenging if you haven’t worked consistently to this point. If you haven’t worked with targets before, think in small, defined increments. If you reach your goal earlier than you expect, use the remaining time to work toward your next goal.

Relevant
When writing, goal-setting may be useful for a variety of purposes—producing texts, developing work habits, improving your writing style or knowledge. Consider which goals seem most productive and important for you at the moment and set goals accordingly. Are you trying to develop work habits? Experiment with new writing techniques? Produce pages? Choose.
Time-limited
In order to assess how well you are meeting your goals, set an endpoint when you will review, evaluate, and set your next targets. You’ll be most successful if you set small weekly or daily goals that lead toward your ultimate goal—a complete draft of your dissertation. Systematically evaluating what’s working for you and what’s not will help you celebrate, troubleshoot, and stay engaged with the task.

A Few Other Tips/Approaches

Set goals you control—if your goals depend on the actions of others, have Plan B or shift focus to a goal you can control. So, if the book you’re awaiting doesn’t come through from interlibrary loan, move on to another aspect of the project. If you advisor is late returning comments on a chapter, shift to writing or revising another section.

State your goals in positive terms. Write what you want to happen not just what you want to avoid.

Prioritize. After you’ve made a list of goals, identify your top 3. Focus energy there.

Work backward. Not sure where to begin setting an appropriate goal? Start with the end result and work backward step by step. What do you need to achieve by this date? Then move backward on the calendar until the current date.

Practice. Goal-setting is learned behavior, not something you automatically do well, should know how to do, or will “just happen.” The self-awareness you develop in the process of setting, measuring, and achieving goals will support you in your future career.