

2. Graduate School: The Basics

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Graduate study in history, like all creative work, is a labour of love for most. Historians are motivated by various intellectual and cultural interests, political passions, and personal, familial, or community commitments. These will help sustain any person contemplating a career as a historian.

Graduate study in history is challenging; it can sometimes be painful and stressful. In most Master's (M.A.) programs, you are expected to do an enormous amount of reading, write a dozen papers that demonstrate your aptitude, and write a major research paper (MRP) or a thesis. Doctoral (PhD) students do all of that, too. They also grasp several loosely defined fields of history and pass demanding minor and major oral and/or written exams, while researching and writing a dissertation of original research.

When you are reading a dozen articles a week to say something vaguely intelligent in seminar, preparing for comprehensive exams, and surviving financially, it is difficult to find the energy to finish a dissertation and do the things to sustain you as a regular human person. It is easy to lose sight of why you ever chose this particular path in the first place.

Surviving graduate study therefore requires balancing the performance of certain regimented tasks with maintaining your own enthusiasm for historical inquiry. It is not easy. But this handbook is designed to give you some foundational understanding of what to expect when considering and/or entering graduate study in history. Some of you might get to the end of it and decide that graduate school is not for you after all. And that's okay. We simply want you to go into the process with your eyes wide open, better prepared to face its challenges of course and ready to embrace its opportunities.

Stages of Graduate School

It is important to understand what will be required of you in graduate school before you commit to it. It may seem like graduate school operates according to a secret code of behaviour that is never clearly explained and everybody else

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implicitly understands. But, while the overarching definition of the discipline sticks to studying the past, the expectations, methods, and administration of getting at the past change quite often within departments and the field at large. Know that you can always ask questions of the staff, students, and faculty around you figure it all out.

Compared to most undergraduate history courses, there is less emphasis on learning "the facts" and more emphasis on the interpretation, analysis, and historiography of the field. Graduate students are also asked to engage more rigorously with a variety of theories, research techniques, and methodological approaches than during their undergraduate degree. It is also important to remember that history is not a discipline in isolation. It is a part of a community of other disciplines in social sciences and the humanities that share approaches and some common ground. Although some will be more useful than others, you need to recognize and interrogate them all the same.

While each history program is different, there are basic similarities. Some history departments in Canada—and almost all graduate programs in the United States—admit students to the PhD program directly from their Bachelor's (BA) degree. Stand-alone M.A. programs usually demand a year of course work and either a MRP or a thesis. They can be one- to two-year programs, with the latter often entailing the thesis option. When I entered my M.A. program at Queen's University in 2011, the department strongly suggested that I take a one-year course-based program. Unsure if I wanted to continue my education beyond my M.A., I countered—with my prospective supervisor's support—that I wanted to attempt to complete a one-year M.A. via the thesis stream so that I could have the experience of a defence. With a potential project in mind, I was accepted into the program; I ended up taking two half-year courses and one full-year course, while my colleagues took the equivalent of three full-year courses, with the realized expectation that I would defend my thesis at the end of the year. This route is becoming less common, as M.A. degrees are increasingly thought of as a test to see if further graduate work is the right fit; course-based M.A.s can, therefore, seem more time- and cost-effective.

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If you think you would like to pursue a PhD, a two-year program that requires an M.A. thesis may prepare you well for doctoral work. There is a widespread assumption that a 2-year thesis M.A. is viewed more favourably when applying for a Ph.D. There is no evidence that's actually the case, especially when measured against other criteria, like grades and recommendations. You can still use the shorter MRP to get you into the archives and produce an original—and potentially publishable—piece of scholarship. Public History M.A. programs may offer a project-based outcome, like an exhibit, walking tour, or digitized collection. Regardless of your route, an M.A. often opens up the possibility of a PhD program later on.

Canadian and American doctoral programs usually involve a year or two of courses, six months to a year of devoted studying for a set of comprehensive examinations, and then another two or more years of full-time attention to researching and writing a dissertation. If your research includes living people and their communities, you will need to go through an ethics approval process with your institution and/or the community under study. These applications take time but are incredibly important, and usually mandatory, to do informed and ethical research.

Sometimes, the community under study has proposed the research that you will undertake. Be sure to establish an ethics plan in advance that clarifies who has the right to share this information and on what terms. Make sure that all parties are aware of their responsibilities and expectations to each other and to the research at hand. The research and writing phase of your dissertation may, as we mentioned, take two or more years to complete. When doing community-based research using proper ethics guidelines, that time can be even greater.

Many Canadian graduate schools talk about "a four-year PhD." Public funding for graduate education is increasingly tied to enrollment numbers and degree completion times. Graduate schools want students to finish faster and administrators often have a misguided worry that students will linger, undecided, in graduate school for many years. Students can be rushed through the PhD because it is difficult to secure funding after four years.

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Realistically, few students finish an history PhD in four years. You need to juggle various commitments beyond teaching and research, and you may need to work outside of the university in order to survive financially. Note, too, that some dissertations simply take longer than others to complete. In an era when many candidates want to have a "publishable" thesis to help them get a book out and crack into the job market, there is serious pressure to write a competent and *ground-breaking* thesis. You will need to work efficiently and effectively to focus on your academics, juggle general life responsibilities, financially survive, and take advantage of related opportunities that will diversify your skills.

Coursework

All graduate programs involve some degree of coursework. Taking courses is an important part of your graduate training in history and should not be viewed as a bothersome hurdle that is delaying your progress in the "comps" or your thesis. Courses introduce you to different bodies of scholarship. Your seminar papers may become the basis of your MA thesis, your first conference paper, or your first publication. They may give you an opportunity to test out avenues for your thesis and will help you formulate a dissertation topic. Graduate seminars are also where faculty and students first get to know each other as *colleagues*. They are often the main vehicle for building community amongst faculty and students. Your classmates may form the nuclei of your social and intellectual network for years to come. Be kind to them.

Graduate courses may be very small directed reading seminars involving one, two, or three students working under a single professor, or they may be larger classes of 10 to 20 students. Some courses will be research-oriented, involving the preparation of major essays based on primary research, while others will be wholly historiographical and oriented toward the critical analysis of scholarly works to prepare students for their comprehensive examinations in a given field. Faculty generally teach courses in their areas of expertise so that students can benefit from taking a course in, say, Cultural History, Cold War America, or Crime and Punishment in Early Modern France from a leading scholar in the field.

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Some departments require students to take a historical methods course and/or show competency in another language(s). Most students will take all their courses within the history department, but some may enroll in a course or two outside of their "home" department in a related field such as Political Science, or in an interdisciplinary program, such as East Asian or Religious Studies. Check your degree requirements to see if there are limits on the number of interdisciplinary courses you can take in your program. During my MA, I took an identity politics course through the Political Science department to gain a better grounding in Québécois nationalism. Doing so exposes historians to the ideas of other disciplines and allows them to develop contacts with faculty and students outside their departments. Such connections will be important to your intellectual development and emotional survival in graduate school.

Moreover, courses are the main way that graduate students are introduced to scholarly culture. You will be exposed to a wide variety of views, both in your readings and by discussing them with students and faculty. You will learn to think analytically to criticize—rather than automatically accept or dismissively trash—the scholarship of other historians. You will also receive criticism of your own research, writing, and analysis. While overly harsh criticism is unproductive, most feedback will help you improve your work. Use it.

Courses can also be a way to gain experience and understanding of the practice of history in government, museums, public history sites and other professional spaces. Your program may offer experiential learning opportunities or course work that introduce you to the processes of writing, research, and communication outside of universities. You could also explore whether directed readings courses can be used to work with a historian in a non-university context. If your research interest connects to collections, projects and practices undertaken by organizations outside the university, you could explore these options to help build knowledge and experience from those working in the area.

Coursework can be an intimidating and confusing experience. Some professors may seem to favour certain students who have a particular viewpoint and

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belittle students who don't seem to measure up to some unknown standard. Students sometimes compete with each other for the spotlight or for faculty attention. Students with limited direct or familial experience in the academy may feel overwhelmed and/or marginalized in weekly seminars.

Some women are put off by male students and professors who seem overly aggressive, while BIPOC students may be unnecessarily exposed to or expected to respond to insensitive remarks for the learning of others. Many other factors can make a student feel like an outsider; being a racialized, ethnic, or linguistic minority, holding "different" political or religious beliefs, having children, or even just studying a vastly "different" topic can intensify those experiences. Most students and faculty have moments when they feel inadequate. "Imposter syndrome" is real. But all graduate students are unclear about what exactly they are supposed to do in courses. Ask questions. You're all students who are there to learn.

The pedagogical and interpersonal difficulties many students experience in coursework, combined with any additional financial stress and external responsibilities, is not easy. The most intense phase of coursework occurs in the first years of graduate school, when many students are settling into a new city, coping with separation from family and friends, and perhaps negotiating a long-distance relationship or even the realities of a growing family. Graduate students are as varied as people in any other workplace.

It's ok if you feel isolated and/or confused, so try to use the intellectual and social opportunities presented by coursework. Remember that your courses are not the sum total of your intellectual life; learn what you can from the professor, the reading list, and your assignments while you're there. You do not need to know everything, and you should do your best to not lose sleep trying to anticipate what the professor will ask or want to hear. Most professors want some indication that you have engaged with the literature and have something interesting to say about it; they do not want you to sacrifice collegiality or your intellectual development for an "A." Treat other students with respect. Try to give and receive helpful criticism without being harsh or defensive. Courses are places for collective learning and informed debate.

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If you have trouble speaking up in seminar, don't understand the material, or encounter other problems that affect your performance in class, discuss your situation with the professor and with other students you trust. I said very little in my upper-year undergraduate seminars, but was able to change my approach by the time I got to my M.A.

Professors often have helpful advice because they've gone through and/or guided other students through similar problems. Like-minded students may find that creating a study group is a useful way to work through the course reading or resolve specific concerns. Amplification of ideas from like-minded students can also be an important strategy to defend against difficult situations in the classroom. But if you encounter serious problems with the course material, requirements, or classroom environment, discuss them with the professor, your graduate history students' association, your graduate director, or other appropriate authorities.

And, all the while, try to remember that courses are not forever. Treat them as best you can as a terrific opportunity to learn about new topics, test new skills, and practice the demanding but interesting work of a historian.

PhD Fields

Early on in your PhD program, you will be asked to choose your "fields". This is common among other disciplines in the Social Sciences and Humanities. Fields are your areas of scholarly specialization. They are often defined by national histories or geo-political boundaries (such as Canadian, US, African, or Latin American history) or by time period (for example, Medieval Europe, Modern China, or Ancient History) or by both. Many departments also offer thematic fields. These may be very broad, like cultural history or comparative women, genders, and sexualities. They may also be quite specific, like the history of medicine, or colonialism, or migration. Some thematic fields, such as North American labour history, are confined to two national historiographies.

Consult your department's guidelines and ask your advisor, graduate director,

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and fellow students about how to pick your fields. Try to select fields that match your interests and that complement each other. Draw on the strengths of your academic background and the resources available in your department. It is best to choose your fields early on in your career to avoid scattering your efforts. Remain receptive to new possibilities, as your interests may change during your first years, as you encounter new topics, professors, and scholarly literatures.

Your fields are part of your intellectual development. Most graduate programs will accommodate requests for program changes. When choosing fields, give limited consideration to topics that you and your professors think will translate into teaching jobs. Do not worry about coming up with the *perfect* combination of fields to get you a tenure-track job. You cannot possibly predict what particular constellation of specialties a future hiring committee will want.

It is important to specialize, but do not become overly narrow. Think seriously about demonstrating a breadth of knowledge and versatility for both future teaching and research purposes. For instance, if your major field is African history, you might take a secondary field in Empire and Colonization and a third in the Atlantic World. If you are interested primarily in Medieval Europe but hope to write a thesis dealing with family and community, you might choose women's/gender history for your second field; for added breadth, a third field in religious history, ancient history, or European antiquity may be useful. For my PhD dissertation on human rights museums in Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom, my major field was in Canadian History while my minor fields were on the British Empire and Memory Studies. I chose these fields because my research required foundational understandings of Canadian historiography as well as a solid grounding in the transatlantic slave trade and museology, and such courses were as close as I could get with McMaster's offerings that year.

Comprehensive Exams

In most North American programs, doctoral students complete their comprehensive or qualifying exams in their first years of study. These are

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known as “comps.” Students are examined on one, two, or three fields, but there is a great deal of variation across departments. Each requires mastery of a list of books and articles set by the department or developed by the student in consultation with the examining faculty. Some programs require only written exams, while others demand an oral performance, but many require that students demonstrate their acquired knowledge both in written exams and in an oral defense before a faculty committee. Programs outside of Canada do not always require comps. You need to balance the training and international costs of a given program with the degree and experience that you are seeking.

When I started my PhD program, I was the only Canadianist in the cohort. I met with a rotating faculty of four to go through the major works in the field on a biweekly basis. This was to give me a handle on Canadian historiography should I ever have the opportunity to teach it. I was not given the opportunity to help develop the reading list, but I very much wish I could have!

Nevertheless, these sessions gave me the opportunity to read widely on people, events, and topics that gave me a breadth of knowledge under some solid professional guidance. By the end, I sat for a three-hour written comprehensive exam. For my two minor fields, I took two half-year courses where I was required to read more widely, write more in-depth research papers, and write final exams for each—none of which my M.A. colleagues had to do. My coursework and comps were completed in my first year of PhD study. Other departments at other universities do this differently. It was done this way at McMaster with an understanding that the oral component of the comps would simply be a repeat of the evaluation that occurred biweekly during my fields.

Unfortunately, comprehensive exams have become the object of a great deal of student anxiety, folklore, and grief. On one level, comps are a rite of passage that mark the transition from that of a promising student to a mature scholar-in-training who has demonstrated a capacity for in-depth reading and analytical thought; they now possess a breadth of foundational knowledge necessary for teaching. Most departments tend to categorize PhD students as pre- and post-comps, differentiating the PhD *student* from the PhD *candidate*.¹ Some faculty

¹This has given rise to the unique phenomenon in the United States of students officially listing themselves as A.B.D., “all but dissertation” on their business cards.

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are more tough-minded than others about grading the quality of performance they expect in an exam, but no one intends for comps to be an instrument of intellectual humiliation or torture.

You will find that preparing for comps is demanding and, at times, can be quite stressful. But remember that this is a tremendously unique opportunity for you to read and reflect. Preparing for comprehensive exams actually entitles you to spend a prolonged period of time reading widely and contemplating existing scholarship. You will not have much time for this in the years that follow.

You will be asked to discuss and evaluate secondary sources in your comps, but you do not have to have the "correct" answer. Faculty are looking for intelligent reflection on what you have read. You will be asked to read and comment on historical developments or scholarly works that do not necessarily reflect your particular interests. If you are going to claim expertise in an area of history, this will help you master the broad parameters of the field beyond your own specialization. And, if you get a teaching job, you will be required to cover events and literatures outside the narrow confines of your dissertation research. The major objective of comps is to give you breadth in the discipline and prepare you for future teaching. Try to enjoy your reading, concentrate on what you do know, and avoid panicking about what you have yet to learn.

Almost everyone passes their comps on the first attempt. Generally, faculty members do not want to see students do badly on exams; they want students to do as well as possible. If something does go awry and you fail an exam, it is not the end of the world. Most departments will let you try again. Find out why your committee was unsatisfied with your performance and ask how you can improve. If you think that you were treated unfairly, educate yourself on your rights and develop a strategy to deal with the problem. Consult with sympathetic faculty members and administrators. Talk to the graduate program director, the school of graduate studies, and maybe your union. They may have avenues to suggest.

At worst, comprehensive examinations are something to struggle through. But, at best, they are a useful vehicle for mastering several bodies of historical

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literature. And these may very well be the last set of exams you will ever have to write.

The PhD Dissertation

Courses and comprehensive examinations take up a large amount of time and energy, but the MRP, M.A. thesis, or PhD dissertation is the most important part of graduate study in history. The completion of an interesting, well-executed MRP, M.A. thesis, or PhD dissertation is a significant accomplishment. Your PhD dissertation can define your career and determine how others in the historical profession will see you, but it can also be just part of your journey toward a given career. This is where you make your individual mark as a scholar. No matter how impressive your seminar performance has been, and no matter how challenging you found your comprehensive exams, your PhD dissertation will most directly determine your success on the academic job market. While this section focuses on researching and writing the PhD dissertation, some of the general advice is also applicable to the MRP or MA thesis.

I. Choosing a Thesis Topic

When choosing a dissertation topic, try to select a subject that fits with current scholarly trends while simultaneously striking out in some new directions. The best topics are those that break fresh ground through empirical findings, conceiving questions differently, or interpretive innovations. It is a good idea to select a topic with potential for publication as a book, but focus most on choosing something that interests you. It will dominate your thoughts for a long time.

It is also important to make sure your topic is “do-able.” Can you find and access sufficient primary sources? Can you complete it in two to four years? Your supervisor and other faculty members can help you identify resources and assist in shaping your idea or inspiration into a workable topic. Do not, however, allow faculty concerns to dominate your own. Make your own choice, but listen carefully to your professors’ concerns if they hesitate to approve your

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topic. Contact historians in the field about sources, scout out the archives, and follow-up on leads in published periodicals to make sure your planned thesis is something you can actually do—and hasn't already been done.

Importantly, not all topics are proposed on your own. Some students work on research that a given community has requested that they do. Be sure to work together with your institution, the department, and the community under study so that everyone has a clear understanding of the responsibilities everyone holds in the research as well as its dissemination.

When you have chosen a topic, your graduate program should submit it to the Canadian Historical Association and American Historical Association for inclusion in their databases of history dissertations. This will ensure that the larger historical community is aware of your topic of study. You can also use these databases to find out what topics are currently underway.

II. Choosing your Committee

Alongside thinking through your dissertation topic, you will have already put some thought into who you would like to work with in your department. Many programs require that you have already secured a supervisor prior to applying for your program; others will set you up with a faculty member they think fits best with your prospective study. I consulted with my former M.A. supervisor prior to submitting my application to pursue PhD study at the university he was now working at. He connected me with a Canadian human rights historian, who agreed to co-supervise the project with him. I chose the last member of my committee based on my minor field in Memory Studies, thinking he was the closest person on faculty to help guide the museology parts of my dissertation. Together, these three committee members will use their expertise to advise me on the literature, primary source material, and methodology for the dissertation. We have annual committee meetings to check-in and make sure I'm on the right track. Alongside a chairperson and an external examiner, they will be the people who will adjudicate your defence.

III. Writing the Proposal

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Most universities require you to submit a dissertation proposal, prospectus, or problématique. This step prevents students from trying projects that are impossible, unethical, or otherwise unwise. Requirements for the dissertation proposal or problématique vary widely. In every province, new research protocols have enlarged and complicated the process. Check with your graduate program office for the specific requirements of your program. At McMaster, I was required to defend a 30-page prospectus in front of my committee members outlining my approach, methods, and sources to prove my capacity for and understanding of the project. It is an irreplaceable opportunity to think through your research before you really get down to it.

The process of preparing a dissertation proposal will help you clarify your thesis plan. Your proposal should provide a clear research outline covering the subject you intend to pursue and some general questions of inquiry. It should include a brief discussion of the relevant secondary literature as well as some of the archival and other primary sources you intend to explore. Do not worry if you are unsure about some of these details; the proposal is a series of working questions and hypotheses, not a solid road-map. You should show that you have a concrete research agenda. Perhaps you can comment on the quality of some of your primary sources, too.

This is also an opportunity to think through research organization. You are approaching what will, to date, most likely be the largest single-authored project of your life. How are you going to collect, sort, and use your sources in an efficient and ethical way? How much time will you need to speak to archivists, seek out sources, and reach out to prospective collaborators? Do you need to go through an ethics process with your university or with a given community group? How long will post-production work like transcribing oral histories, organizing digitized sources, or making sense of citations take? Will you be able to employ digital tools or outside help to get these completed quickly and ethically? My dissertation was never going to be a four-year project because of the oral history and gallery overview components that I built into work. My ethics application took longer than expected (about nine months), whereas my three city visits were about three months each. As my oral history

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project garnered more interest than expected, I have double the interviews and, therefore, two times the transcription work. Do your best to organize yourself well at the outset so that you can adjust for contingencies when they, inevitably, come up.

You won't already know the answers to your questions. Your dissertation will take shape as you research and write. Until you produce chapters, your proposal may well be some of the only written work—apart from coursework—that your committee and department have for evaluating your performance. It can be an important source for any references they might write for you. It can also serve as the basis for preparing personal statements for fellowship or job applications. Some university funding opportunities require a formally accepted proposal before you can apply for awards. Take this exercise seriously, but get it finished and submitted in a timely fashion because you can update and revise it as the occasion demands.

IV. Researching the Thesis

Whatever systems of support may be available through your department and advisor(s), you are researching and writing your thesis. Some programs encourage students to work primarily with one advisor, while others facilitate a committee system. As stated above, I have two co-supervisors and a third committee member. Adapt your approach to the prevailing system of your department, the preferences of your supervisor, and your own needs. Speak to your advisor or dissertation committee to clarify their expectations of how you will proceed. Maintain a good working relationship with your committee: Talk to them and figure out how regularly they expect you to communicate with them, and how you'd like them to support you. Given the realities of power structures in departments and universities, this may not be easy. Accommodate your relationships with clear lines of communication, ask questions about form and process and remember that your professors, whatever their shortcomings, have knowledge and skills that you do not, even if you're becoming the expert of your dissertation topic.

The process of research is what many historians identify as their favourite

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aspect of academia. At this stage, you are entitled to immerse yourself completely in your own research. Do not put off going into the archives or beginning the daily grind of reading old newspapers in the microfilm room. Jump in! Research for a thesis, especially when it involves travel or archival work, takes time. It usually involves many seemingly unproductive days sifting through materials that yield absolutely no results. At this stage, perseverance may prove more important than brilliance. It is useful to begin with secondary sources and then move on to analyzing your primary sources, but you will revisit and reengage with secondary material.

New research avenues come up and personal lives take shape, taking you off the expected course at times. For me, funding availability, ethics approval for my research, and getting married have all altered, to varying degrees, my travel schedule and possible research avenues. Doing oral history competently and respectfully requires a degree of patience because you cannot predict prospective interviewees' willingness to participate or whether your schedules will match up. Methods like oral history dictate your timeline in ways that online archival research, for example, does not. It will be difficult to predict how long your dissertation research will take, but the sooner you start, the better you'll set yourself up.

V. Writing the Thesis

Many senior students actually find it difficult to stop researching. Even after a few years of research, they are curious to know what is in the unseen archival boxes or want to talk to yet another person about their experiences. No matter how satisfying archival work can be, you should start to write.

Many historians find it helpful to write as they research, so that they are not faced with a daunting pile of research at the end of a year or two. Some students prepare chapters as they research, while others use conference papers as vehicles for getting preliminary thoughts down on paper. Others prefer to gather all of their data before turning to the task of analysis and presentation.

Whatever the case, start writing the section you are most confident about to

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give yourself a confident spot to start. This is rarely the "Introduction." Expect that some days you will seem to get nothing done, but your mind will always be working; the next day, or the next week, might be extremely productive. And, in any event, keep track of the ideas and inspirations you have as you research. Ruminates and think about your work, then write it down; these may be an important base for the larger arguments in your dissertation. Get a notebook or keep a computer file entirely devoted to jotting down your ideas, resolutions, and speed bumps as you research.

Writing is a skill that takes time and practice and writing a thesis involves plenty of outlines, drafts, and re-writes. Even those who have the luxury of being able to devote full-time hours to thesis writing will take at least a year. Start earlier rather than later and do your best not to be discouraged. Some faculty advise that you spend as much time writing as you do researching your thesis.

Once you begin writing, how you proceed and present work to your committee will vary according to departmental protocol, individual preference, and the demands of your committee. You may be asked to hand in chapters at regular intervals, which allows students to revise gradually and professors to make sure you're still on track. But you may prefer to write substantial amounts of your thesis before seeking committee feedback. While the latter method has the benefit of allowing you to develop ideas and arguments continuously, it also means that you run the risk of having a large amount of work rejected or seriously criticized by your committee. This can feel like a major setback.

The amount and character of faculty feedback varies enormously: some professors offer detailed analytic and stylistic commentary, while others provide a few short remarks. Some students receive feedback from their entire committee throughout the writing process, while others consult only their supervisor until their final revisions. Whatever your particular case, listen seriously to faculty feedback and remember that the writing process will definitely involve major revisions. Think of revisions not as an impediment to, but a vital part of, the writing process.

VI. Keeping focus

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Most students must make an effort to overcome the isolation of daily dissertation work. Those with economic pressures or family responsibilities must work extra hard to carve out the time to write. Group support, whether formal or casual, can be the key to success and survival. Lunches at the archives have sustained many a historian-in-training. Informal student groups dedicated to the helpful discussion of work-in-progress often provide a crucial place for developing ideas in a supportive environment, as do more formal research seminars. Having lived in other parts of the country before returning to my hometown to do my PhD, taking my weekends to spend time with my immediate family has been vital to my weekday progress. Some people with "writer's block" find it useful to be given concrete deadlines with rewards for meeting them. Others have made use of helpful services on campus, like counselors to help with serious writing difficulties. "Writer's block" may also stem from vicarious trauma, some of which is linked to carrying difficult knowledge. It can be challenging to write about. Seek out access to counselling services and other supports, as necessary and appropriate.

The dissertation is the last stage of your graduate education and you should not let it become a stumbling block that keeps you from moving on. It is not your magnum opus. The dissertation is an extended essay, or series of inter-related essays, on a subject about which you have learned a great deal. Think of the thesis that you will defend as the first draft of the book you will one day publish. Graduate school is a stage. Know that any delay is not a personal failure, but do tap the resources available to you to complete your degree requirements.

VII. The Defense

After the entire committee has seen a full draft of your dissertation and agreed that it is acceptable, the final stage of the process is the defense. For about two hours, you will answer questions on your dissertation by an external examiner who is an expert in your field, one or two university representatives, and the members of your committee. The process varies between universities, so find out how the defense operates in your department.

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If defenses are public, attend one to find out how it operates in practice and invite family, friends, and collaborators to see yours. Above all, enjoy the defense. You know more about your dissertation than anyone else in the room. Take control of the conversation and know that, like the comps, it is okay to admit when you don't know the answer.

Graduate study in history can be taxing at times, but it is also a highly rewarding experience. Capitalizing on the benefits and minimizing the difficulties of graduate school will help you navigate this stage of being a historian. Find what works for you and makes you the best historian you can be. Doing so will remind you of the passions, joys, and interests that led you to history in the first place. It will arm you with knowledge in your strengths as a historian regardless of the future career avenues you will take.