

Navigating the Dissertation: From Day 1 of Classes to a Successful Defense

Tyler T. Reny

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First, I'm indebted to...

- ▶ Gary King <https://gking.harvard.edu/files/diss2.pdf>
- ▶ David Karpf <http://www.shoutingloudly.com/2013/02/11/the-dissertation-as-teacher/>
- ▶ Don Davis
<https://www.columbia.edu/~drd28/Thesis%20Research.pdf>

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At worst, you have 3 separate but thematically connected papers. At best, you have a book.

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It is the hardest part of a PhD! You transition from being a student taking classes (doing as you are told)...

...to being an independent, active professional academic. Nobody will again tell you what to do or when to turn it in.

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This is why so many students drop out of PhD programs at the dissertation writing phase.

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- ▶ Academic job: you want a strong job market paper and several chapters that might be publishable with some work. Or you want a book. Depends on the job!
- ▶ Non-academic: you want a finished dissertation that is good enough to survive a defense and will earn you the credential you need to finish the program and slap a PhD after your name in your email signature.

It's hard...but how do I do it?

Most of my advice today is targeted toward the academic job route, but much of it will hopefully be useful to those in the latter category, too (which is totally fine!)

How to succeed

Extremely practical advice:

- ▶ Sit down and write for one hour every day.

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- ▶ Consider a tomato timer.
- ▶ Find an accountability mechanism that works for you. This might be a carrots (you get a treat each week for working 5 hours) or a stick (you set up automatic donations to Donald Trump...or Gavin Newson, pick your poison...if you don't meet your writing goals)

How to succeed

Extremely practical advice...continued:

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Extremely practical advice...continued:

- ▶ Find a writing buddy and hold weekly check ins. Write at the same time every day. Hold one another accountable.
- ▶ Turn off your phone, block social media, remove distractions.
- ▶ You can write 2 sentences or 10 pages in your one hour. It doesn't matter; it will vary. And it will add up.

When do I start?

When is the best time to start?

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Yesterday! You don't need to (i.e. shouldn't) wait until the last few years of the program.

When do I start?

More practically, you should *never* shoot for the immediate goal, shoot for the one after that (thanks to Gary King for this tip). What do this mean?

Aim for the subsequent goal...

Coursework → Quads → Prospectus → Dissertation

Aim for the subsequent goal...

Coursework —→ Quals —→ Prospectus → Dissertation

You are writing a course paper? No, you are working on a paper for your quals.

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Coursework —→ Quals —→ Prospectus → Dissertation

You are writing a qual? No, you are coming up with a project that will form the core of your prospectus.

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Coursework —→ Quals —→ Prospectus → Dissertation

You're writing a prospectus? No, you're writing a chapter of your dissertation and maybe a job market paper.

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Aim for the subsequent goal...

Coursework —→ Qualls —→ Prospectus → Dissertation

You're writing a dissertation? No, you're writing several papers / a job market paper / and/or a book.

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- ▶ Learning to ask questions
- ▶ Critiquing existing approaches about existing work
- ▶ Discovering the questions that nag at you but aren't being answered

Aim for the subsequent goal...

In your courses take your final papers seriously. Start playing with ideas for a potential dissertation. Write good papers. Get feedback from your professor and advisor, develop it in other classes, take each opportunity to improve it.

By the time you're done with course work, you have a Qual and by the time you finish your Qual you have a prospectus, etc etc.

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Aside from the discipline required to produce ~250 pages of text, this is the hardest part.

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Different approaches:

- ▶ Identify your audience: whose mind do you want to change about what?

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- ▶ Identify your audience: whose mind do you want to change about what?
- ▶ More actionably: what is the puzzle, problem, or paradox you are trying to solve with your work?

How do I choose a topic?

The point of a dissertation is to create new knowledge that did not exist before you came along. Being able to carefully define what the *contribution* of your project is, and how important that contribution is, will determine how good it is. You need an elevator pitch and that pitch needs to be compelling.

How do I choose a topic?

So how do you determine the puzzle, problem, or paradox you are trying to solve?

You have to:

- ▶ **Learn to think like a social scientist.** You have to view the world in terms of social science models. You observe something happening, what social science models would apply? What are their observable implications? Does this phenomena fit the model?

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- ▶ Example: you observe Latino voters swinging toward Trump in 2016, 2020, 2024. What is going on? Models suggest Trump's rhetoric should turn them off. Others suggest that Latinos are conservative so they're aligning their vote with their ideology. But also maybe they are voting retrospectively given SES and exposure to economic trends.

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So how do you determine the puzzle, problem, or paradox you are trying to solve?

You have to:

- ▶ **Read a lot!** I know that focusing enough to read is hard. It is for me, too. But you need to know the literature in your field. Who is working on similar questions? What have they found? What are their methods? What are you telling us that they haven't? Where did they go wrong? If you don't know the literature you don't know your contribution and you'll never convince your audience (job talk, journal referees, dissertation committee, etc.)

How do I choose a topic?

- ▶ Do not chase trends. The "hot topic" when you start writing a dissertation might be ice cold by the time you hit the job market. You don't want to be the 20th best dissertation on the same topic by the time you're competing for a handful of jobs.

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- ▶ Find something that generally interests you and with which you are happy spending a few years working on.
- ▶ But also try and find something that is *important*.

How do I choose a topic?

How important (big) should your question be? There are two views here:

- ▶ An important question helps solve a big debate in literature.
- ▶ An important question helps us puzzle through salient social/political problems.

Either way, you want to be able to convince the biggest skeptic who asks you "why should I care?" that they should care.

A quick detour on generating ideas

Many ways to come up with ideas:

- ▶ Disagreements in the literature
- ▶ Being an active consumer of news and events in the world.
- ▶ Being an active observer of your immediate surroundings.
- ▶ Poking around datasets.

How do I find these?

Disagreements in the literature:

- ▶ Know the literature, see if you can reconcile disagreements / gaps in existing findings

How do I find these?

Being an active consumer of news and events in the world.

- ▶ SB1070 and anti-immigrant ads in Arizona in 2010s
- ▶ Media discussions of Trump in 2016 and economic deprivation
- ▶ Masculinity and COVID
- ▶ "China virus"
- ▶ Floyd protests
- ▶ Valentim's supply side theory of populism
- ▶ Trump baby policies

How do I find these?

Being an active observer of your immediate surroundings.

- ▶ St. Louis and street barriers
- ▶ Biking through Arts District and Skidrow
- ▶ Tesler's pitbulls and race

How do I find these?

Poking around datasets:

- ▶ Rising sea levels and climate mitigation policy
- ▶ D.W. Griffith's newspaper archives
- ▶ 1964 Prop 14 Election Results

In sum...

- ▶ Be an active consumer of information both (inter)nationally and locally.
- ▶ Develop a command of the literature as quickly as possible.

Some anticipated challenges!

Floundering?

- ▶ Find an advisor you like and work closely with them on your project. Faculty tend to be pretty smart and can help you navigate the process, choose a question, etc. You don't have to figure this out on your own. Get help! Get feedback!

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- ▶ But show up to them with results, not to schmooze. We don't want to meet with you if you haven't done the work.

Some anticipated challenges!

Writer's block?

- ▶ Start small! When you're starting on an idea, write up a memo: here is my puzzle/problem/paradox, here is my theory, here are my observable implications and hypotheses, here is the design I intend to use to test my hypotheses, here's the data I intend to use.

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- ▶ You should not be writing until you have this nailed down.
- ▶ Iterate with feedback until the outline is rock solid before you put "pen to paper."

Some anticipated challenges!

Taking forever?

- ▶ Yes, welcome to research. Expect 1-3 years. Original research is *hard!* You might have to recast your argument, collect new data, read new work as comes out, grapple with confusing and conflicting findings, reanalyze your data, etcetera. Don't get discouraged. It's hard for a reason; if graduate school were easy, many more people would have PhDs.

Some anticipated challenges!

Cannot settle on the scope of project?

- ▶ The biggest challenge for me was asking questions that were too big to answer satisfactorily with a dissertation. How do we zoom in on something that we can actually tackle. Did I zoom too much? Is it still important enough? This is, again, where your advisor can help. Get feedback early and often.

Additional perspective

The finished product is not the only outcome. The process also matters. It forces you to learn the *habits of a successful academic* which are entirely different from the habits of a successful graduate student.

Additional perspective

As an academic, I have:

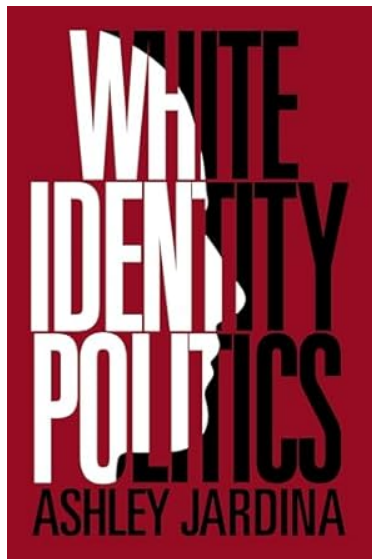
- ▶ teaching and mentoring obligations
- ▶ faculty meetings and conferences to attend
- ▶ letters of recommendation to craft

But when I am not in that structured time, I am expected to produce research. Nobody tells me what to research, where to do the research, when to conduct it, or how, or on what timeline. I succeed as an academic by taking full advantage of these unstructured time allotments to get work done. It's the same when writing a dissertation.

Examples of successful dissertations

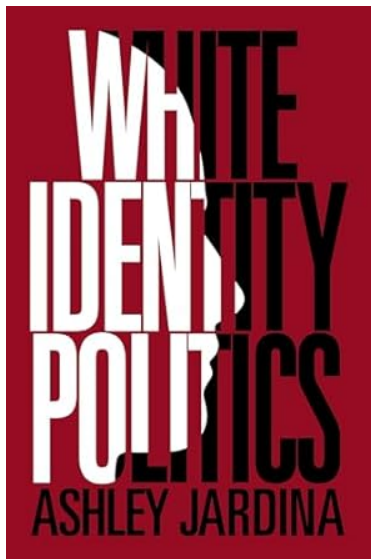
Ashley Jardina's *White Identity Politics*.

Motivation: Lots of work on causes and consequences of racial identity among racial and ethnic minorities in US and abroad. But little on White racial identity. Why?



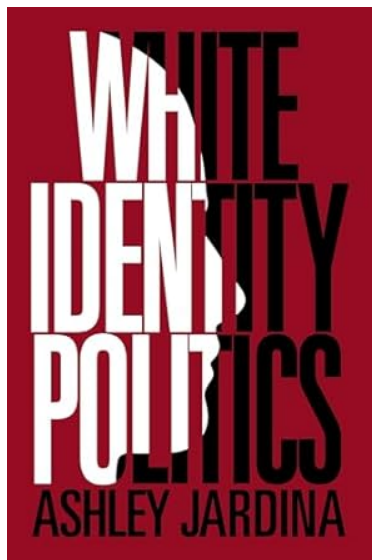
Examples of successful dissertations

Existing Lit: White racial identity doesn't matter (leading scholars Sears, Hutchings, etc). Whiteness is "invisible."



Examples of successful dissertations

Contribution: Theoretically should matter, new measurement strategy, lots of original data, who has white identity, how does it matter for policy attitudes and for voting? Got her a TT job at Duke and tenure at UVA.

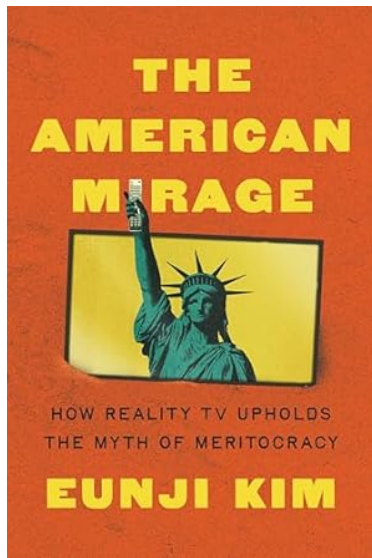


Examples of successful dissertations

Eunji Kim's *The American Mirage*.

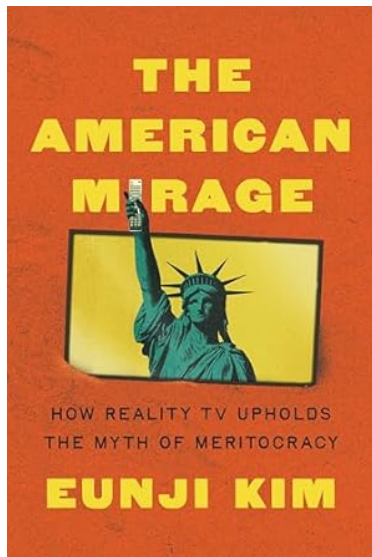
Motivation: Lots of work on effect of news media on political behavior. But almost no work on entertainment media, which is what most Americans watch.

Why?



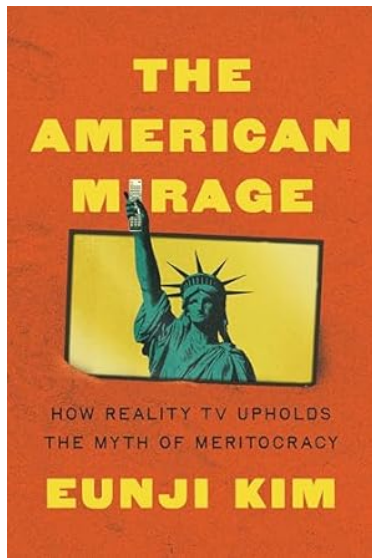
Examples of successful dissertations

Existing Lit: news media conveys information about the political world, entertainment media does not.



Examples of successful dissertations

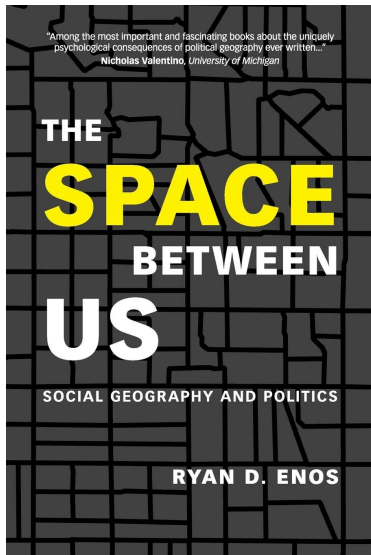
Contribution: Entertainment media is full of political content, just need to know where to look. Theoretical development, content analysis, cross-sectional regression-based analyses, survey experiments, field experiments, natural experiments, etc. Got her a TT job at Vanderbilt and Columbia.



Examples of successful dissertations

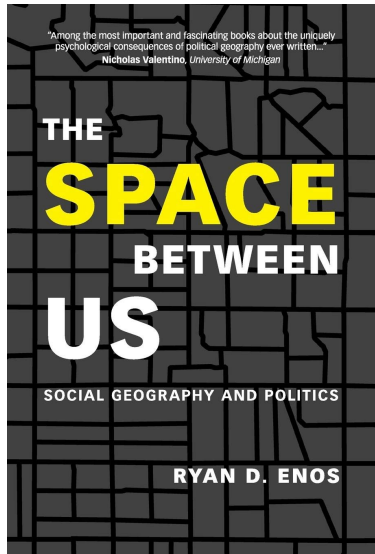
Ryan Enos *Space Between Us*.

Motivation: Lots of work on racial context and politics but little formalized theory on how and why the racial makeup of our communities matters.



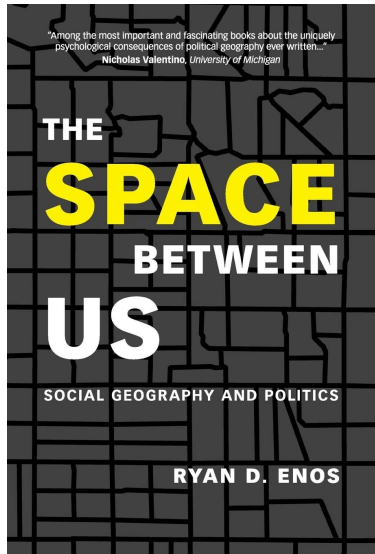
Examples of successful dissertations

Existing Lit: Conflicting findings on relationship between context and politics. Poor methodological work.



Examples of successful dissertations

Contribution: Formalized a theory of context, $\text{Reaction} = f(\text{distance, size, segregation})$, creative natural and field experiments. Got him a tenured position at Harvard.



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Yes and no!

Nobody will care what your course paper was about after it is graded. Nobody cares what your qual is once you pass. Nobody cares what your prospectus after you defend and pass it. And most shockingly, nobody cares about the specifics of your dissertation 5 minutes after you successfully defend it (though your job market paper will matter).

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Each is just a step toward your end goal after graduate school.

Wrapping Up

- ▶ Start early. Your course papers can (should) develop into qual, prospectus, and dissertation.
- ▶ Figure out what interests you and find an important puzzle, problem, or paradox related to that topic.
- ▶ Find an advisor and get feedback early and often.
- ▶ Write every day.
- ▶ Take comfort in the fact that it is hard and that is okay. Most of these things will not matter once you leave graduate school. They are means to an end.

Most important quote

Take solace in the old adage:

"The best dissertation is a finished dissertation"

Questions and Contact

Reach out anytime: tyler.reny@cgu.edu