

SMART Goals for Dissertation and Thesis 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 each 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. Determine exactly what will you write, when will you write, where will you write.

Measurable

Your goal needs to be observable – something tangible that another person can see, count, or 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 can help you gauge progress and motivate you. 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're 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.

Other Tips

- *Set goals you control.* If your goals depend on the actions of others, have a Plan B, or shift focus to a goal you can control. If your 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. Ask what you need to achieve by a particular date, then work backward.
- *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, achieving, and reflecting on goals will support you now and in the future.