

### Staying Productive in the Summer Months

Dear Graduate Student,

*“Ahhh. The summer break. So much more free time! I’ll really get a lot done on my dissertation.” Sound familiar? It’s a universal belief. Free time = get more accomplished. Too bad it’s not always true. What are the reasons that free time doesn’t necessarily lead to productivity? Let’s look at it step by step. Here is a typical scenario – OK, maybe it’s slightly exaggerated.*

*Day 1. You sit down in front of the computer. You think about how much writing you need to do. It’s almost overwhelming. So you check your email. A friend calls, and you meet him for lunch. Soon the day is shot. It doesn’t matter; there’s a whole summer ahead.*

*Day 2-30. Repeat versions of Day 1.*

*Day 31. You have begun to be nervous. A month has passed and you’ve barely gotten anything done. You resolve to put in at least 4 solid hours of writing a day. Starting tomorrow.*

*Day 32. Just thinking about those 4 hours of writing makes you ill. You end up playing solitaire on the computer, cleaning your closet, and hating yourself.*

*Day 33. Someone asks you how the dissertation is going, and you realize you want to punch them. Why do people keep asking you that? Are they trying to torture you? You no longer feel as carefree and optimistic about finishing. The burden of getting something done feels so pressing that it causes you to procrastinate further. Your procrastination lowers your self-esteem. “After all,” says your completely logical mind, “with all this time available, I really should have gotten substantial work done.” (Hiatt, n.d., Don’t waste your summer, <http://www.abdsurvivalguide.com/News/051905.htm>).*

So, is it possible to stay productive with the distraction of summer outside your window? It is! The following tips may help you to make the most of the summer months while also making the most of your dissertation.

- **Plan to succeed.** Before the summer semester gets into full swing, make a list of the big projects you want to accomplish over the next four months. Break these large tasks into many smaller tasks and then make a plan to achieve them. It is helpful to post this plan where you can see it so that you have a constant reminder of the tasks ahead of you (Hiatt, n.d.).
- **Every day matters.** Each night before you go to bed, write down what work you will start with the next day. It is always easier to plan what you will work on before you sit down to do it. At the end of each work period, make a list as to what you will do when you start up the next time (Hiatt, n.d.).
- **Change your mind.** A change in mindset can help you to feel better about your progress. Instead of judging your productivity on the quality of the writing produced, try to measure success in time spent writing. Set a reasonable time goal and then enjoy the good feeling that comes with successfully meeting that goal (“Three psychological tricks for staying motivated”, 2008).

- **Rewards.** Reward yourself for meeting your goals. Rewards should be immediate and positive. Look for rewards that reflect the summer season: take a walk in the sun, visit a local farmer's market, eat a bowl of the local in-season fruit, or run through your sprinkler ("Three psychological tricks for staying motivated", 2008).
- **Write it down.** Maintaining productivity on your dissertation can be hard when your friends are at the beach. Try writing down the reasons why you began your graduate degree in the first place and refer to it when you are questioning why you are still in school (Su, 2011).
- **Birds of a feather stick together.** Form your own dissertation writing group, or join SDC's Thesis Support Group. A group is a powerful source of motivation. Regularly meeting with people who are engaged in graduate work can help you to stay productive, particularly in the summer months when it can seem like you are the only person on campus (Jensen, n.d.).
- **Make time for fun.** Create a schedule that makes time for work and play. It is important to achieve a healthy balance between your dissertation and your social life. Book in time daily to enjoy the summer season. A trip to the beach, a picnic in the park, or a game of catch can help you feel more rejuvenated when you sit back down to work (Su, 2011).
- **Enjoy the outdoors.** If you have a laptop, consider working outside for some of the day. The fresh air will help to keep you focused. If working outside isn't possible, bring the outdoors in. Pick some flowers and put them in a vase at your work station, change your desktop background to a picture of you at the lake, or keep the window open to enjoy the warm breeze (South University Online Programs, 2011).
- **Visit Us!** Learning Skills Services is open all summer, Monday-Friday, 8:30am-4:00pm. Learning Skills Counsellors are available to help you maintain your productivity throughout the entirety of your graduate degree.

Best wishes for a fun *and* productive summer!

## References

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- South University Online Programs (2011). Attending school in the summer: how to stay motivated. Retrieved from <http://online.southuniversity.edu/blog/post/Attending-School-in-the-Summer-How-to-Stay-Motivated.aspx>
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