



Choosing your PhD dissertation **boot camp** format and tutor

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Objective:

This presentation overviews the history of the **dissertation boot camp (DBC)**.

It also discusses alternative formats and objectives of the dissertation boot camp and the pedagogical rationale that underpins their design.

The information in this presentation may assist you to choose the most suitable **DBC** if you are a doctoral graduate research candidate.

The information in this presentation is also useful for those who wish to draw on evidence-based practice to design a **DBC** that is most suitable for their educational institution and the doctoral scholars whom they support.



What is a **boot camp** and a DBC?

Bhattachan, K. (1996), Teaching and learning process in social sciences at Tribhuvan University: A need to move from a boot-camp to a bazaar Model, *Studies in Nepali History and Society*, 1(1), 247-254.

Ness, R. (2016), The rhetoric of composition: How we talk when we talk about dissertations, <<http://writing.wisc.edu/blog/?p=6580>>.

The core traits of a traditional **boot camp** teaching model is the rigid format imposed on those who participate. Scholars are subjected to a regime that is identical or near-identical to their colleagues. Students may pursue a specialist area of instruction in the latter stages of the training course (Bhattachan, 1996, p. 8).

The **DBC** draws parallels from the concept of the indoctrination system imposed on military recruits - a point that has been made by scholars who have written about the DBC over the past decade. The use of the term 'boot camp' refers to the highly structured and managed environment imposed on participants. It is also suggestive that the thesis writing process is an unpleasant chore that can only be surmounted with high levels of self-discipline (e.g. Ness, 2016).

Low doctoral thesis completion rates are a global phenomenon. The **Dissertation Boot Camp (DBC)** is seen as a way to manage 'at risk' students who struggle to write a doctoral thesis to completion.

If you struggle to work alone and experience 'writer's-block' then you should enrol in a DBC.

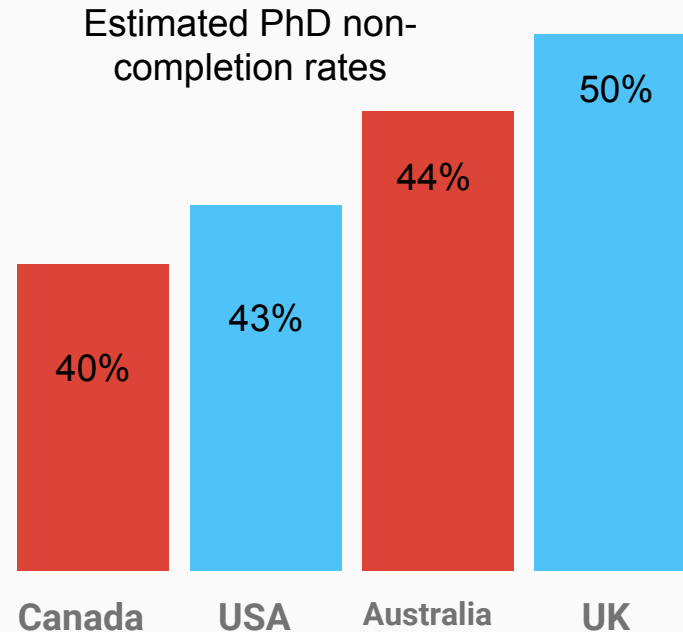
Selected data sources:

cgsnet.org/cgs-occasional-paper-series/university-georgia/chapter-1

chronicle.com/article/PhD-Attrition-How-Much-Is/140045/

www.universityaffairs.ca/opinion/margin-notes/phd-completion-rates-and-times-to-completion-in-canada/

Jiranek, V. (2010), Potential predictors of timely completion among dissertation research Students at an Australian Faculty of Sciences, *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 5, 1-13.



History of the dissertation boot camp (DBC)

The origins of the DBC are traceable to the creation of a privately owned thesis writing retreat that conducted its first session on campus at Colorado Christian University in 1997. Most of America's and Canada's top-ranked universities offer a free boot camp course. Private providers also offer flexible design commercial boot camp services that have a strong customer-service orientation.

University of Pennsylvania's Writing Center offers the first university administered DBC.

Between 2011 and 2015, there is rapid growth in the number of American and Canadian universities that offer the DBC. Prior to 2011, less than 5% of universities offered a free DBC program. The figure is now around 50% in these countries.

2005

2008

2013

2016

Council of Graduate Schools (2008) issues a report that recommends dissertation retreats (*i.e.* DBCs) as a model of best practice to maximise the quality and quantity of doctoral theses passed for examination.

For a good discussion of the history of the DBC in North America, see Steve Simpson (2016):

New frontiers in graduate writing support and program design, University of Michigan Press,
<www.press.umich.edu/pdf/9780472036684-intro.pdf>.

One size never fits all.

There are numerous boot camps formats. The content and teaching styles varies widely between camps. Program leaders usually try to accommodate participant's preferences to the maximum extent possible.



Tina Turnitin

Tina works best when she has maximum direction from staff and no choices about when to write. She prefers to collaborate with other students as much as possible.



Anthony Bull

Ant works best when he has maximum choice. His productivity is maximised when he is not working with other students. He prefers maximum one tutor-one student engagement.



Beatrice Queen

Bea has no expectations about content and format. She has a 'teaching staff knows best' attitude. She always follows tutors' directions 'to the letter'.



Justin Beaver

Justin prefers an unstructured program that has maximum flexibility so that it can constantly adapt in real-time depending on the energy, skills and needs of the cohort.

Just write format

Lee & Golde (2013, p. 2) argue that there are “two models” of the **DBC**. The first focuses on the “Just Write” process. Participants focus solely or mostly on engaging in long writing blocks. They may request assistance from staff when they encounter problems.

Most **DBCs** allocate most of their program schedule to the ‘just write’ process. Procrastination and writer’s block are among the most common problems that inhibit thesis completion. The ‘just write’ process is the best model to address this problem.

Lee, S. and Golde, C. (2013), Completing the dissertation and beyond: Writing centers and dissertation bootcamps, *The writing lab newsletter*, 37(7-8), 1-16.
<<https://wlnjournal.org/archives/v37/37.7-8.pdf>>. Accessed 18 August 2018.

Thesis instruction format

The other **DBC** format is the “Writing Process” model. Under this structure, a suitably qualified instructor offers formal tuition about dissertation writing skills. This includes topics such as how to structure your: manuscript, chapters, paragraphs and sentences. In many cases, the lecturer offers structured tuition via the workshop format where they stand out the front and use PowerPoint slides to offer a presentation to around 15 scholars.

In some instances, the ‘just write’, format and the ‘thesis instruction format’ may overlap. For example, if a doctoral candidate experiences writer’s block during unsupervised writing time, they may request a tutor to sit with them and offer thesis writing advice that may aid them to surmount this hurdle.

Comprehensive format

Some **DBC**s offer a comprehensive format includes a 'just write' component, a 'thesis instruction format' in addition to other topics related to doctoral and post-doctoral candidature, such as those in this list:

- English for Academic Purposes
- Spelling, grammar, editing
- Academic networking
- Writing journal articles
- Presenting at conferences
- Preparing for your *viva voce*
- Time-management skills
- General study skills
- Library database search skills
- Working with your supervisor
- Applying for a research grant
- Looking after your health
- Applying for scholarships
- Academic referencing
- Copyright laws and Intellectual property

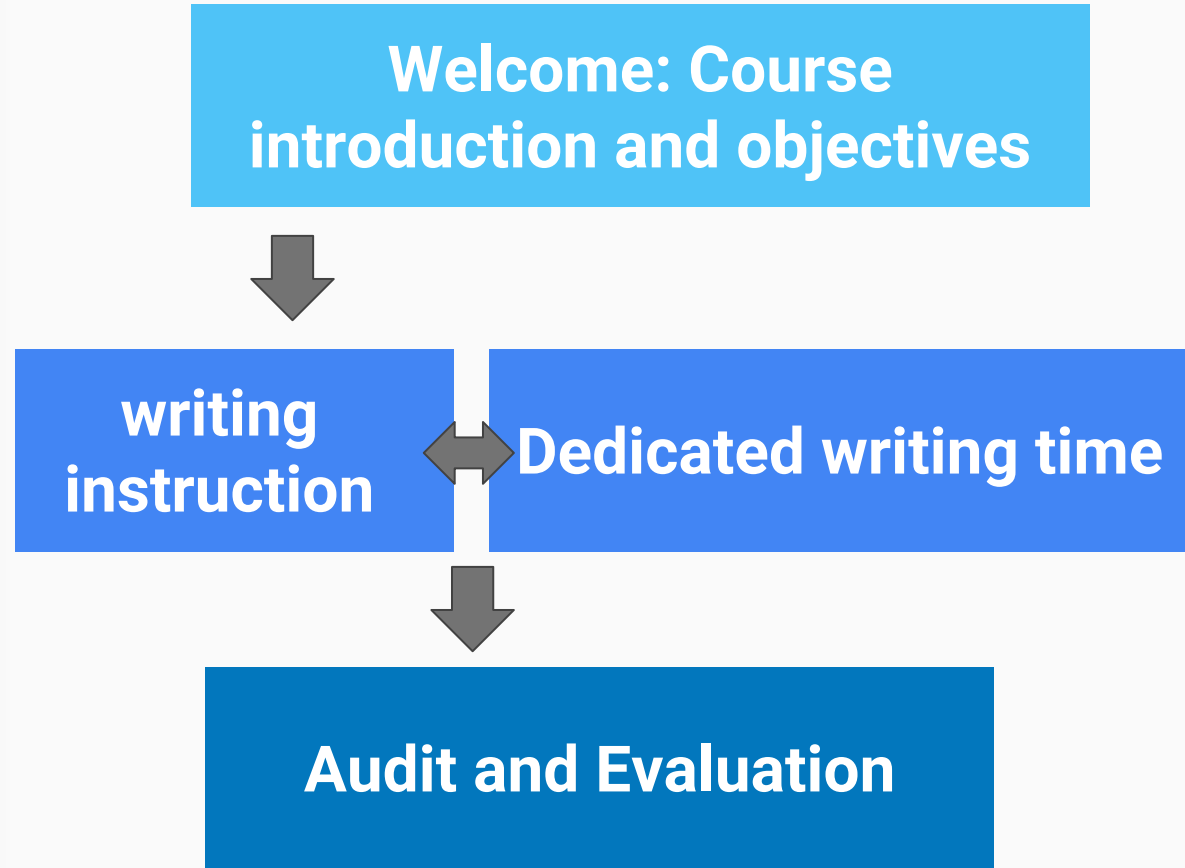
The author of this presentation takes the view that the DBC normally works best when the format includes the 'thesis instruction' component followed by multiple extended 'just write' formats. For most doctoral candidates, completing a research thesis is a monumental task that requires intense focus and much practice. I argue that DBCs that engage in other topics distract from the core focus of the DBC. Furthermore, most of these skills can be gained by consulting other professionals such as the graduate student union, the university health center, university librarians and self-help resources such as YouTube presentations and scholarly handbooks.

Best Practice

Most **DBC**s commence with formal instruction so that participants can be briefed about the basic requirements involved in writing a PhD.

Most **DBC**s offer blocks of dedicated writing after this writing instruction. These blocks of time are usually much longer in duration than writing instruction lessons.

Writers may usually request one-on-one assistance when they experience 'writer's-block'.



The **DBC** in Canada and the United States

The **DBC** isolates writing instructors and doctoral students. Instruction takes place over a narrow period of time. The time period of virtually all **DBC**s ranges from a few days (Bakker, 2014, NP) to two weeks (Lee & Golde, 2013). Some DBCs are offered as day sessions on weekdays or weekends, comparable to 9 to 5 office hours. Others are run in the evenings (Lee & Golde, 2013). Other **DBC**s are run by private providers. These may be offered as resident programs where participants may temporarily live in a shared space such as a rented university dormitory (Smallwood, 2004).

Bakker, C. (2014), The SFU thesis bootcamp: Empowering students to make serious progress, *British Columbia Library Association*, 6(2), NP.

Lee, S. and Golde, C. (2013), Completing the dissertation and beyond: Writing centers and dissertation bootcamps, *The writing lab newsletter*, 37(7-8), 1-16.

Smallwood, S. (2004), A Week at camp dissertation, *The chronicle of higher education*, 50,A.10-A.12.

Stanford University case study

Most American and Canadian universities ranked in the top 100 of the 2016 Shanghai Jing Tao Index offer a **DBC** that is a hybrid of the 'Just Write' model and the 'Thesis Instruction' model. These programs are easy to find using a Google search using the 'university name' (e.g. Yale University) and the string 'dissertation boot camp'.

Stanford University's **DBC** is often cited as a model of good practice (e.g. UConn, 2016).

The six alternative formats offered by Stanford University is similar to those run by most of these top 100 universities. In most cases, the DBC is offered as an intense course that is conducted outside of the normal teaching semester/trimester such as during Summer School. In contrast to Stanford University, most of these universities do not offer multiple formats, but offer one format similar to the the six options (1A, 1B, 1C, 2A, 2B, 2C).

University of Connecticut (UConn) (2016), Writing retreats,
<<http://writingcenter.uconn.edu/writing-retreats/>>. Accessed 18 August 2016.

Stanford University **DBC** format (2016)

www.stanford.app.box.com/s/jwwdcq2gsqhz562drxarg3m9elpv3j35

Cost	\$100 deposit is refunded if the registrant attends all sessions.
Interdisciplinary format	Open to those from all disciplines.
Number of days: Option 1 (Summer School) Option 2 (Winter, Fall, Spring)	5 10
Total contact hours per day: Option A 'Before dawn' (7am to 10am) Option B 'Classic' (9am to 1pm) Option C 'After dark' (5pm to 9pm)	3 hours 4 hours 4 hours
Frequency	Four sessions <i>per annum</i>
Total contact hours	15 minimum (Option 1A) 40 hours (Option 2B, 2C)
Maximum participants	16

Delivery	University Writing Center
Structure 10 day course: Options 2A, 2B, 2C	Day 1: Workshop style instruction from staff. Days 9 to 10: Dedicated thesis writing time. Participants may substitute dedicated writing time for one-on-one coaching for up to one hour on any day during days 9 to 10.
Location	On campus (no live-in residency option)
Other	Preference for those who have not attended a Stanford University boot camp session.

'Typical' DBC program schedule

Day 1 (Monday)

9am	Welcome, meet-and-greet
9.30am	Expectations of the PhD thesis
10.30am	Break (refreshments provided)
10.45am	Planning your thesis structure
11.30am	Planning your first chapter
12.30pm	Group lunch (catering provided)
1.15pm	Overcoming writer's block
2.00pm	Break (refreshments provided)
2.15-4pm	Supervised writing block

Day 2, 3, 4, 5 (Tuesday to Friday)

9am	Welcome - bridge previous class; questions
9.30am	Topic of the day (Tuesday) : Literature review chapter
10.30am	Break (refreshments provided)
10.45 am	Supervised writing block (roaming tutors)
12.30pm	Group lunch (catering provided)
1.30 pm	Unsupervised writing block
	Participants may take a break at any time
3.45pm	Program coordinator - end of day summary
4pm	Training concludes

The number and disciplinary mix of participants is important. The advantage of one model is normally the disadvantage of the alternative.

Small cohorts

1 tutor-1 student; paired tutoring; less than 10 students with multiple writing instructors.

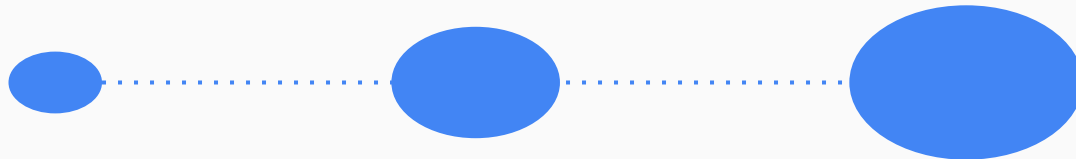
Medium cohorts

10 to 24 students with multiple writing instructors. Medium cohorts may be a good 'compromise' model.

Large cohorts

25+ scholars with a ratio of at least one instructor per ten students.

A small cohort model may be most effective as it emulates the master-apprentice set up. However it is more expensive per student. Students in very small settings may not benefit from the dynamics of hearing multiple ideas shared with the room and there are less opportunities to network. Large cohorts are cheaper per student and allow more opportunity to enrol participants. However, some students may be distracted by the large amount of energy and noise created by larger groups.



Design your DBC format with a private tutor

When choosing a DBC or designing your own DBC model, you may consider these issues in addition to other factors presented in this slideshow:

- Is it essential that you work with a tutor who has specialist knowledge about writing in your: broad Faculty area (e.g. Social Sciences) or your Discipline (e.g. Sociology) or sub-field (Economic Sociology) specifically?
- Do you prefer to work with a tutor who allows you to work/write at any speed and allows you to take breaks any time that you wish? Or do you prefer a coach who is demanding?
- Do you prefer a militant (boot camp) atmosphere or a fun/enjoy approach?
- Do you thrive from the dynamics of working alongside at least one other student in the room? For example would paired tutoring work best (the one tutor and two students model)?
- Do you require a tutor with specialist skills beyond PhD coaching? For example, do you need a tutor who also is trained to work with students who speak and writing using English as a Second Language?
- What physical 'retreat' (environment) maximises your productivity? For example, do you prefer to work in a busy area that has windows or in an area that is isolated and does not have windows?

Free self-help dissertation books

Scholars who cannot attend a scheduled **DBC** and cannot afford a private tutor may consult 'self-help' dissertation writing handbooks if they need assistance beyond what is provided by their supervisors and services offered by their university's writing center.

Comprehensive open-access handbook

Murray, R. (2011). *How to write a thesis*. London, England: McGraw-Hill Education.

http://www.academia.edu/download/31055962/How_to_Write_a_Thesis.pdf

Comprehensive open-access handbook

Dunleavy, P. (2003). *Authoring a PhD: How to plan, draft, write and finish a doctoral thesis or dissertation*, London, England: Palgrave Macmillan.

http://www.academia.edu/download/35311756/Authoring_a_PhD_Thesis_How_to_Plan_Draft_Write_and_Finish_a_Doctoral_Dissertation_2003_1.pdf

Brief open-access journal article

Ahmad, H. R. (2016). How to write a Doctoral thesis, *Pakistan journal of medical sciences*, 32(2), 270. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4859004/>

Dissertation **boot camps** offered by universities

The following university pages offer comprehensive details about their **DBC**.

Stanford University (2016b), *Dissertation boot camp*:

<https://undergrad.stanford.edu/tutoring-support/hume-center/writing/graduate-students/dissertation-boot-camp> see also <https://stanford.app.box.com/s/jwwdcq2gsqhz562drxarg3m9elpv3j35>

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (2016), *What is dissertation boot camp?*,

<http://writingcenter.unc.edu/about/dissertation-boot-camp/>

University of Regina (2006), *Thesis boot camp*,

<http://www.uregina.ca/gradstudies/current-students/thesisbootcamp.html>

http://www.uregina.ca/gradstudies/assets/docs/pdf/Thesis_Boot_Camp-Daily_Schedule.pdf

University of Toronto (2016), *ELWS writing intensives (Dissertation Boot Camp: August 23 - 25, 2016)*, <https://www.sgs.utoronto.ca/currentstudents/Pages/ELWS-Writing-Intensives.aspx>

Scholarly readings: the dissertation boot camp

Simpson, S. (2012), The problem of graduate-level writing support: Building a cross-campus graduate writing initiative, *Writing program administration journal*, 36(1), 95-118. <http://www.wpacouncil.org/archives/36n1/36n1all.pdf#page=96>

Simpson, S. et al. (2015), Creating a culture of communication: A graduate-level STEM communication fellows program at a Science and Engineering University, *Across the disciplines*, 12(3), NP. http://wac.colostate.edu/ATD/graduate_wac/simpsonetal2015.cfm

Sundstrom, C. (2014), The graduate writing program at the University of Kansas: An inter-disciplinary, rhetorical genre-based approach to developing professional identities, *Composition forum*, 29, NP. <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1022020.pdf>

Design your own DBC



CollegeProfessor offers a 'choose your own **DBC**' format for the following structures:

One tutor, one instructor;

Paired learning and small groups (e.g. one instructor, three participants)

Medium and large group workshops.

We have staff based in Sydney, Australia; Toronto, Canada and New England, USA.

Our staff may travel and we may appoint consultants in other regions.

Most of our staff will consider temporary live-in (residency) assignments.

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A pdf version of this slideshow is available at
<http://www.collegeprofessor.ca/phd-writing-project.html>