

A SIMPLE PLAN TO FINISH YOUR DISSERTATION THAT REALLY WORKS

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"For the first twenty-five years of my life, I wanted freedom. For the next twenty-five years, I wanted order. For the next twenty-five years, I realized that order is freedom."

~Winston Churchill

How serious are you about finishing your doctoral program?

Nothing important gets accomplished by whim or chance. Of course, deep down, you already know this. What do you need? A plan!

Sages have warned: "Failing to plan is planning to fail."

We are told that "a good plan today is better than the perfect plan tomorrow." Modern productivity guru [David Allen](#) insists that the real secret is keeping your planned list of "next actions" on hand at all times.

These planning advocates are on the right track, but not all plans are created equal. Does your plan for academic success look something like this?

- *Write more*
- *Socialize less*

These may *look* like plans, but they are doomed to failure. Why? Because they leave out the most important details. You need to ask yourself these critical questions:

- "WHEN and WHAT and WHERE do I plan to write?"
- "HOW much less will I socialize? "

The devil may indeed lie in the details, but they don't need to be complicated.

Continuing research by Dr. Peter Gollwitzer (1997, 2011) reveals a surprisingly simple way to create plans that really work. He calls it "if-then planning." Repeated demonstrations show its power and user-friendliness.

In his first study, Gollwitzer and his collaborators asked students on their way to their final exams if they would participate in a study about how people spend the holidays. Those who agreed were asked to write an essay on how they spent Christmas and to mail it in no later than December 27. On the researcher's clip board, half of the participants were asked to note their plan for *when* and *where* they would write it.

Participant essays poured in after Christmas, with responses from just 32% of the students with no particular plan, but from a whopping 71% of the students with a plan.

In other words, just stating when and where the work would be done more than doubled the likelihood of getting it done!

Additional research found that this simple planning strategy works not only for academic goals but also for just about any other endeavor--from shedding pounds to greater recycling.

In her book *Succeed*, Dr. Heidi Grant Halvorson (2010) noted that if-then planning has been used effectively by individuals with schizophrenia and by individuals struggling with heroin addiction. If it can work for them, it can work for you.

Why does such a simple formulation work?

First, by having a specific plan about when and where you will act, you have set up automatic triggers (the "if" part).

These triggers help propel you into action (the "then" part). Think of it this way: When you see a red light, you automatically stop. *You don't waste any vital energy mulling over the decision--you just do it.*

Let's apply this to your dissertation. Is your next step reading and summarizing journal articles for the literature review? You can tell yourself, "**If** I have finished breakfast, **then** I will sit down at my desk and read the next article and summarize it."

Then when you've finished that bowl of granola, voila! A little switch goes off inside your head: "It is now after breakfast--that means it is time to sit down and read that article."

Instead of spinning your wheels and losing an opportunity to make progress, your brain nudges you to close that little "if-then" loop by getting to work. Without this simple plan, many students waste time hemming and hawing: "Should I check my email now?" "Shall I go for a run?" Then before you know it, it's time for lunch.

The "if-then" loop is more powerful than it may seem on the surface.

If-then planning conserves our precious energy so that we can make the most of our scheduled work sessions! This mental energy gets called willpower, self-control, discipline, and so on. Whatever you call it, it's important to note that this precious mental resource is depleted over the course of the day, replenished by proper rest.

By automating your personal systems via routines, schedules, and plans, you reserve more of this limited energy resource for when you really need it.

Fortunately, willpower is also a renewable resource. Think of it like a muscle--you can exercise it to the point of exhaustion, but then you need to rest it before using it again. Just as you can strengthen a muscle with repeated use, you can also build up your willpower by sticking to your "if-then" plans. *That means that sticking to your exercise or food plan can give you more willpower to follow through on your dissertation--and vice versa.*

We are just beginning to understand the dynamics of willpower and "decision fatigue." [See the [New York Times Magazine article](#) below and the book [Willpower](#) for more] Have you ever felt too tired to decide something as easy as what to fix for dinner? That happens because at the end of the day, you've already made countless decisions: what to do, what not to do, how to do it, and so on. Each of these decisions gnaws away at your precious willpower.

Remember this: Every time you are forced to make a decision or resist temptation, you deplete your willpower. How can you conserve it in order to leverage it where most needed? Here are two key suggestions:

(1) Minimize the number of decisions you need to make by having plans and routines.

(2) Separate the deciding/planning stage from the action stage.

By following these suggestions you will likely consume less willpower overall and your willpower reserves will have sufficient time to replenish themselves. A simple "if-then" plan assures that you'll have more of the energy you need when you sit down to work.

When you make your simple plan, it is also important to identify the next concrete step you plan to take. What do you intend to do to reach your goal? This is as critical as deciding on your goal in the first place.

Simply saying "I will work on my research after breakfast" still leaves you floundering when the time rolls around for action. Will you read another article? Edit the chapter you wrote yesterday?

In your plan, state just which dissertation task you propose to finish. For each task, ask yourself, "What will 'done' look like?"

Looking up at an entire mountain to be scaled can be paralyzing. However, looking down at the next step allows you to move forward with less anxiety.

Be ready for hidden obstacles and nasty surprises as well. You can also use "if-then" plans to deal with potential distractions, temptations, and saboteurs:

- **"If the phone rings while I am working, then I will let voice mail get it."**
- **"If I am tempted to start baking brownies while working, then I will drink a glass of water."**
- **"If a little voice inside my head starts whispering my work is not good enough, then I will boot the little devil into outer space, take three deep breaths, and write another sentence!"**

Athletes, dieters, scholars, and others have used the "if-then plan" approach with great success. In fact, those with such plans are usually more than twice as likely to reach their goal compared to those without such plans, concludes Halvorson. How do you plan to set yourself up for success?

Once you start to experience the power of "if-then" planning, you can take it further. Consider other kinds of daily actions to routinize in order to save on willpower. What about a routine for going to bed and getting up? I've had clients that swear by weekly menu plans, exercise routines, family time, and other schedules. Spontaneity and freedom have their charms, they agree, but enjoying them judiciously gives one more control in the long run.

What other "if-then" plans could you institute in order to reach your goal of finishing that dissertation? Try this one: "If I have finished reading the latest *ABD Survival Guide* column, then I will take the next step in writing my dissertation."

My prediction is that if you put this research-based strategy to work for you, then you are much more likely to earn that coveted title of "Doctor." The odds are high. In fact, I'll even bet on it!

Recommended Reading (with Amazon links)

Baumeister, Roy and Tierney, John. [*Willpower: Rediscovering the Greatest Human Strength*](#)

Halvorson, Heidi Grant. [*Succeed: How We Can Reach Our Goals*](#)

About Gayle Scroggs, Ph.D., P.C.C.

As a professor and certified coach, Dr. Gayle Scroggs has helped countless students and clients leverage their strengths to achieve meaningful goals. Want to finish a dissertation, change your career, or move abroad? Need to become more productive, and positive? Engage her as your coach and see why her clients say that Gayle's coaching support is the best investment they ever made in themselves. Clients appreciate her warm, compassionate manner as well as her deep expertise in sharing the principles of positive psychology for promoting human flourishing. As a former expat in Argentina currently living in the D.C. area, Gayle offers coaching in English or Spanish to highly motivated clients. Contact her at gayle@essencecoaching.com. Also see [*Women's Paths to Happiness*](#), for more positive psychology perspectives, including hers.

[Adapted from Dr. Scroggs's 2012 article in www.abdsurvivalguide.com](http://www.abdsurvivalguide.com)