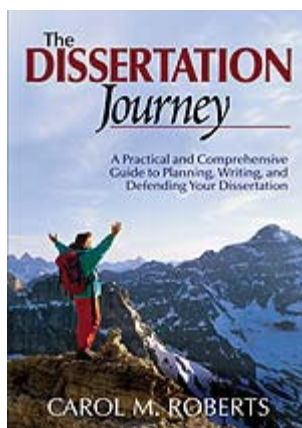


Book Review



The Dissertation Journey: A practical and comprehensive guide to planning, writing and defending your dissertation

by Carol M. Roberts

London: Sage Publications (2004)

Paperback £18.99 (ISBN 9780761938873)

Hardcover £40.00 (ISBN 9780761938866)

Review by **Bipana Bantawa**

In this dissertation guide, Roberts uses the analogy of climbing a mountain to describe the dissertation journey and clearly writes from years of experience as a an advisor to doctoral students and once a student herself. It is clearly not a technical guide on how to conduct research and should not be considered as a research methods text. Simply put, it is a practical guide with helpful hints and tips for doctoral students on managing themselves and their work. As a first year student, I found this book full of useful tips and strategies to deal with some problems I was not even aware of and for which could not turn to my supervisor.

Chapter 1 begins with a question every doctoral student should seriously consider before and regularly throughout the research process: 'why take this journey?' It explores some of the joys of research and makes one seriously consider the pitfalls and obstacles that one may encounter. She provides simple strategies to overcome commonly used excuses by students, such as: writer's block, emotional barriers, and inability to manage ideas. Although I would disagree with her on describing procrastination as being hazardous at all times, her tips may prove to be very helpful to those who might find it difficult to begin writing.

Chapter 2 lists and describes the very basic components and structure of a dissertation, which would be most helpful to first-time researchers. This chapter also briefly introduces the major steps from selecting a topic, preparing a proposal and selecting your advisor to writing the dissertation. It quickly delves into the different roles and responsibilities of the doctoral candidate, dissertation advisor and the committees involved and ends with a short discussion on ethical considerations such as copyright issues and plagiarism.

Chapter 3 lists the six essentials traits for the journey, such as commitment and perseverance before moving on to choosing a topic in Chapter 4. Roberts offers some excellent advice on where to look for inspiration for a topic and argues that students should not wait to be inspired. She lists some of the important criteria for selecting a research topic, which could be helpful not only to first-time researchers, but to first year doctoral students who are constantly grappling with managing their ideas.

Chapter 5 introduces the academic dissertation team, which essentially comprises of an advisor and a dissertation committee. It addresses issues such as how to approach a potential supervisor as well as norms and rules a student should establish when working with the team. I would advise the readers to take the advice offered as being quite general and not to expect their situation to mirror exactly what is mentioned. *Chapter 6* emphasises the importance of having a support group of peers, friends and family, which I strongly advocate as I have personally found it to be invaluable. For those who have little experience forming study groups, there are some general tips on strategies, although I would not agree with Roberts in limiting the discussion to only the dissertation.

Chapter 7 recommends ways to get organised and manage your time by learning to say no to trivial requests, identifying timewasters and scheduling 'joy' breaks. *Chapter 8* is a huge leap into steps in conducting a literature review and what is considered to be a literature review. The purpose of the literature review is very simply explained with advice on managing documents and important pieces of literature using a coding system and annotated bibliography. Many might find *Chapter 9* a bit redundant and outdated since it describes ways in which computers can be used in research.

Chapter 10 addresses the difficulties in academic writing by providing a list of frequently made mistakes and offers some tips on good writing. Roberts encourages students to find their own voice while citing references and lists verbs that can be used to introduce cited work to avoid repetitive variations such as 'says' and 'states' and 'argues'. International students might find this chapter particularly helpful. *Chapter 11* begins with a brief explanation of what a methodology entails and appropriately describes it as not being a linear process. This chapter is very short and only introduces the qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods research, which clearly is not sufficient on its own. However, readers will find a long list of references they can consult for further reading.

Chapter 12 explains what is required in the introduction of a dissertation and provides simple examples of different types of purpose statements. *Chapter 13* deals with explaining the methodology and hastily covers issues from research design, sampling and population to the limitations of the research together with a general checklist of what comprises a methodology chapter. Clearly, the aim is to simply introduce the different elements. *Chapter 14* focuses on how to prepare for a dissertation committee meeting, which might be conducted differently depending on the country or the institution and the advice provided might be best suited in an American institution.

Chapter 15 concentrates on presenting the literature review and presents an example outline for a review. There is a 'to-do' checklist that many would find quite useful, although some of the points may not be relevant to all. For example, Roberts suggests that majority of references must be published in the last five years, which clearly does not apply to historical research. *Chapter 16* is the weakest as it very simplistically addresses the analysis and presentation of the results. The advice of being objective without author bias reflects a particular epistemological stance, which might differ from that of the reader's.

Chapter 17 is a short introduction on how to summarise and present the results chapter and clearly distinguishes results from the conclusion, an important piece of advice that is clearly explained. *Chapter 18* describes a usual oral defense or viva scenario and offers some advice on ways to prepare for the viva. Roberts shares her experience by reassuring the reader that everyone wants him or her to succeed.

The end of journey is summarised in *Chapter 19* by describing commonly felt anxieties as a descent from the peak of the journey. It is helpful in suggesting ways to share the experience, especially by mentoring and disseminating the research and there is also a brief guide on how and where to get the dissertation published.

Roberts accomplishes what she sets out to do in a very readable, concise and encouraging manner with some helpful advice, which I wish I had received early on my research degree. Although some of her suggestions seem relevant only in the American context, most of her advice might of great value to first-time researchers. The research journey is unique for each individual and there is no better way to give back than by sharing your experience in ways that are helpful to novice researchers; and that is what exactly Roberts has achieved. This book is full of practical advice and tips and I would highly recommend it for first-year doctoral students and those who are interested in a doctoral programme.