Writing your dissertation is different from taking classes; there are no more grades to earn, tests to take, or projects to turn in at the end of the semester. You must structure your own schedule and set your own deadlines. Furthermore, while one or two rewrites of your paper was sufficient for an A grade, you can expect to rewrite each dissertation chapter five to ten times, depending upon your scholarly writing. Because of this difference, over fifty percent of doctoral students, who get to the dissertation stage, never finish. But don’t be discouraged; being aware of these changes, using readily available resources, and incorporating effective writing strategies can positively affect your motivation and greatly increase the possibility of finishing your dissertation. This paper will describe those resources and some simple, but effective strategies for getting through writing obstacles and maintaining your writing momentum until you finish your dissertation.

Your Topic, Your Advisor, and Your Writing Group

Your dissertation process begins with setting up a writing group and selecting of your dissertation topic and advisor. Several studies have shown that no matter what goal you are tackling, whether it is weight loss or sticking to a budget, you are much more likely to reach that goal if you are intrinsically motivated. What does that mean in terms of your dissertation? It means you should pick a topic in which you are genuinely interested. After selecting your general topic, you need to determine if your current advisor fits with you. Your advisor is one of your most important resources for maintaining your motivation throughout the whole process. Two important things to consider in terms of an advisor are: whether your advisor is well versed in your dissertation topic and your advisor’s style of advising. Some advisors are warm and fuzzy and want regular almost constant contact with their advisee. Other advisors prefer a more distant business-like relationship, meeting perhaps once a month to review your progress. Select the advisor that best fits your personality and your life circumstances. Will meeting weekly with your advisor help you to stay on track or will it become a needless time suck? You know yourself best.

Working effectively with a writing group can also be of tremendous help. The members of your writing group need to be people you like and trust, even better if you can have fun with them. If you have not already learned to count on two or three other doctoral students in your program for trenchant critiques of your writing now is the time. Establish a firm timeline for meeting and exchanging written work (this can be done through skype if you cannot meet in person). Setting a deadline for this group will ensure that you do actually do something for the date set—even if it is just in the last two days. While it is important to be supportive of each other’s work, remember it is to everyone’s best interest in the
group that reviews each other’s writing are as critical as possible. The more trenchant your critique of each other’s papers the better you final result will be that you give to your advisor and the sooner you will finish. However, no matter how much your writing group has helped you to perfect your paper, invariably your advisor will have further suggestions. One of the things students have the most difficulty adjusting to during the dissertation stage is the number of rewrites. Be aware that this is the normal process for writing a dissertation.

Taking care of yourself

It is important that you take care of yourself during this time. If you are mentally and physically healthy, you will not be as stressed by events and you will be more efficacious. Exercise is probably the most effective method for maintaining your physical and mental fitness. Select an exercise that fits conveniently into your life. If it is fun for you, even better. It may seem counter-intuitive to take time off during this time to exercise, but it will be one of your better investments of time. For one thing, exercise improves the quality of your sleep, so you need less of it. Exercising also helps your thinking processes; you think faster and more clearly. Many times after exercising, you will suddenly be able to see your way through a writing block. The rest of this paper focuses on specific motivational strategies for writing.

Strategies for Making it Manageable

Break it down: The thought of writing a two to three hundred page document (your dissertation) can be a bit daunting. It may be tempting to just keep on reading and avoid the actual writing. To overcome your trepidations, break down the job of writing your dissertation and focus on once chapter at a time. Think of each chapter of your dissertation as a separate paper. You have written innumerable papers, you know you can do this! For extra long chapters (often your literature review) you may want to break it down even further into three or four subsections and concentrate on one of those sections at a time. Setting deadlines for writing for your writing group will also help you break off the reading and start writing. Also, the first time you write, don’t worry about being perfect, just get your thoughts down. You can go back later and add the proper references, clean up unnecessary verbiage (our first writing is always too wordy), fix any spelling or grammar errors, and ensure that your paragraphs only cover one topic.

Developing and keeping a dissertation work schedule: Another good strategy is to develop and adhere to your own dissertation schedule. Depending upon what your days are like, this could mean scheduling 2-4 hours every day or it could mean setting aside eight hours a day on a weekend for writing and or reading. As much as possible make these times inviolate. Select and organize your environment. Do you need absolute quiet? Does music help you to focus? Sometimes you feel at a complete impasse and feel totally blank. Force yourself to sit down in front of the computer (no TV, no phone calls, nothing to distract you). Sheer boredom will force you to write. It is impossible to sit and do nothing for two hours—just do not give up.

Easing into the writing: A final strategy for getting started is to pick out the part of the writing that is easiest for you and start there. Here are some strategies for easing into the writing: Print off the last section you were wrote and edit it one more time. Then go to your computer and make those changes. It will be much easier to figure out where to go from there, then just writing cold. For some people writing an outline greatly facilitates their writing, for others, getting their ideas down first in prose and then organizing it works better. So find the way that works for you and use it.
Summing it up: The five suggestions of this paper are: 1) Picking the right topic and advisor; 2) breaking down your dissertation into discrete papers; 3) setting up your writing group with firm deadlines; 4) making and sticking to a dissertation working schedule; and 5) easing into the writing. GOOD LUCK!