

The NIU English Doctoral Success Guide

Frontmatter	2
Getting the Degree	4
• Complete the required number and type of COURSES . ¹	
• Complete the FOREIGN LANGUAGE REQUIREMENT <i>or</i> the RESEARCH TOOL REQUIREMENT	
• Pass two FIELD EXAMS	
• Pass the dissertation PROSPECTUS (technically your third exam, but totally different in nature).	5
• <i>*ahem*</i> Write your DISSERTATION	
• Pass the ORAL DEFENSE of the dissertation.	7
• Meet the SUBMISSION standards of the Graduate School.	
Getting a Job ²	8
• Present at CONFERENCES and actively NETWORK in your field.	
• Submit ARTICLES and BOOK REVIEWS for publication.	9
• Compete for FELLOWSHIPS, GRANTS , etc.	
• Build your TEACHING PORTFOLIO	
• Hold multiple SERVICE POSITIONS . ³	10
• Go on the JOB MARKET	
Staying Healthy	11
• Practice PHYSICAL and MENTAL SELFCARE	
• Have a SUPPORT NETWORK	12
• [Take Stock of What DeKalb Area Has to Offer].	
Additional Resources	13
• Other Department Guides	
• Writing / Brainstorming Assistance	
• People Who Understand	
• Annotated Bibliography of Recommended Books	
• 24/7 Services	14

¹ *Some* M.A. courses can fill a few of these course requirements. If you have an M.A., schedule a meeting with the English Grad Director to discuss whether or not this coursework might count toward your Ph.D.

² Indeed, a Ph.D. alone will *not* get you a job. The degree is necessary to apply for most professorships, but it is the minimum requirement. Everyone else applying for those jobs will also have a Ph.D.

³ That is, “multiple” positions over the course of your program, not held simultaneously.

From the contributors:

This resource offers advice and warnings from those who pursued a Ph.D. in the English Department at NIU: Kelle Alden, Ashley Heiberger, Elyse Lamszus, Melina Martin, Justin Ness, Stephanie Opfer, Erika Sparby, [and ...]. As a community united by a shared experience, we distinguish between what we knew at the outset of the program and what we now wish we had known, between the obstacles that challenged us to reach new scholarly heights and those that unnecessarily tore us down, and between those things that seem of value and those that truly are. We wish you success—which is not predicated on graduating—and health, and we assure you that you do not need another degree to prove your worth.

You deserve to be in this program.

You have what it takes to finish.

You are enough as you are.

The Logic of This Resource:

This guide is organized according to a tripartite goal:

1. getting the degree,
2. getting a job,
3. and staying healthy.

These are not listed in chronological order. You must pursue all three at the same time.

The program is difficult—*very* difficult—and it will take a much bigger toll on you than did the M.A. **Doctoral students/candidates are six times more likely to struggle with mental illness than are average American citizens, a struggle that afflicts approximately one-in-three Ph.D. enrollees worldwide.** So when we say that “you must pursue” your degree, your job, and your health simultaneously, it is an earnest recommendation based on data and experience.

That said, we recommend that you and friend or two from the program go through this entire document together (the sooner, the better—take our word for it).

The Elements of This Resource:

Bullet Points: We want this document to be as clear and concise as possible so you can quickly find the answers you need. To this end, we’ve created a bare-bones outline of the essentials.

Sidebar: In striving for objectivity and concision, however, we do not want to neglect the personal motivation underlying this project. Sidebars are topically focused statements by individual Ph.D. graduates addressed directly to you.

Comic Strips: Because you deserve them.

Hyperlinks: There already are several helpful documents created to aid your success. Likewise, there are many offices on (and off) campus that provide assistance and guidance, often for free. We try to avoid duplicating information already available to you by linking you to these resources rather than providing the information directly. In other words, the information you find herein is not found in any other NIU document.

Getting the Degree

Courses

- [Course Requirements](#)
- **Plan out your requirements.** Be aware that some classes are not offered every year.

Language or Research Requirement

- [Description of Foreign Language Proficiency / Research Requirement](#)
- **You might partially (or completely) have this already.** Check with the graduate director if you're not sure whether your language work from your master's and/or bachelor's is transferable to fill this requirement.
- **Knock out your languages over the summer.** NIU does summer classes specifically for grad students to finish language reqs. You can satisfy a language requirement in eight weeks via two (back-to-back) four-week courses; classes are four hours a day, Mon.-Thurs. It might sound like a lot, but it's the path of least resistance.

Field Exams

- [Field Reading Lists](#)
- **Do an independent study.** Use one (or both) of your allotted independent studies on field exam prep. is extremely helpful, especially for the field in which you're weakest. Keep in mind, though, that professors do *not* get paid for independent studies; don't be offended if they decline your request, but don't be afraid to ask, either.
- **Find a study buddy in your field.** They'll keep you accountable as you trek through the seemingly endless reading lists, help you better understand your readings through discussion, and simply be someone who understands *exactly* what you're going through.
- **Find any study buddy.** Even if no other test-taker is in your field, find someone who will sit with you as you read your own stuff. *Don't let yourself be alone.*
- **Practice with old exams.** Ask to see the English Ph.D. exams at Founders Library's reserves desk. You can't check these out, but you can make copies and/or scan-and-send them to yourself.
- **Schedule your time in advance.** Create a few schedules that accommodate two-, three-, and four-question exams. This is crucial to ensure that you don't spend too much time on any one question. Remember to schedule meals, snacks, breaks, and sleep!

- **Know how to reset your mind.** Playing a video game for thirty minutes forces your concentration elsewhere. Taking a walk outside changes your environment. Talking to someone helps you get outside your own head. Know what works best for you.
- **Have food on hand.** These are your cheat days. Have on hand everything you might crave. The last thing you want to do during exams is go grocery shopping.
- **Ask a partner or friend to be on-call.** You might crave Thai, or something you forgot to pick up. You might need a book from the library. You might run out of toilet paper. It is a *huge* help if you can just ask someone to take care of everything else during these days.
- **Plan something enjoyable for after the exams.** Plan a party with the other test-takers. Plan a get-away. Plan on binging a show or a game. Having something that you're looking forward to is a great way to balance your anxiety during the test and to take your mind off of it afterward.

SIDEBAR: Preparing for Test Anxiety

The field exams themselves can be traumatizing (this is not a figure of speech). Even if you don't normally have test anxiety, they can increase stress levels, induce panic attacks, and disrupt your sleep with nightmares even after you've passed them. So if you do regularly suffer from test anxiety, consider going to counseling the semester before your exam to learn how to cope with it better. (NIU's Counseling & Consultation Services is a great resource, but they limit the longevity of a student's counseling period, generally to one semester. Also, upon the conclusion of this period, you have to wait at least a full year before you can do counseling there again.)

Justin, 2019 Graduate

Prospectus

- **Find a question that you want answered.** Your dissertation is going to take up *sooo* much of your time; ensure that one of your many motivations to get to the end is the pure curiosity of learning. If you lose this, the dissertation goes from difficult to hellish.
- **Review your predecessors' dissertations.** On ulib.niu.edu, go to "Article Databases" and then to "ProQuest Digital Dissertations & Theses @ NIU." Search "English" and "Ph.D." By browsing their titles and abstracts, you'll get a sense for what can be done and what constitutes a reasonable scope.
- **Remember that your project will change.** This is a near certainty. You're just now digging into this new topic. You don't know where it's going to take you, and that's OK. Actually, if you're prepared for it, it can be pretty exciting.

Dissertation

- **Avoid procrastination by taking breaks.** Avoiding breaks leads to burnout, which leads to procrastination. Procrastination takes up more time than do breaks—MUCH more

time. Plan on breaks daily, and do not let yourself skip them. Plan on days off, and do not let yourself work on them. Plan on doing things with friends and/or family, and do not let yourself reschedule. *This importance of this point cannot be overstated.*

- **Take your time.** When you start your diss., you won't know how to write a diss. because no one knows how to write a diss. until they've written a diss. Writing a dissertation is its own kind of task, and you're only now learning how to do it. In other words, comparing your progress to that of your previous projects is dangerously misleading.
- **Take your time.** The first chapter of the dissertation often takes as long to write as does the rest of your dissertation combined, so don't worry if it takes you a while to submit that first installment. It takes not only persistence but patience to really understand your project (which is harder than it sounds).
- **Pace yourself.** Burn out is real and can be devastating. Your inclination likely will be to spend all of your time working or feeling guilty for not working. The facts are that you can get a lot done in six hours and that a two-hour workday isn't wasted if it means you're fresh for tomorrow.
- **Be flexible.** The schedule you set for dissertation deadlines will change, perhaps drastically so. That's OK. So long as your deadlines motivate you to work, they're working.
- **Focus on sections of chapters.** Break up each chapter into manageable sections of about ten pages. (You might have to expand later, but ten pages is plenty when starting out.) As a result, your mindset is not "I have to work on my dissertation," which is a seemingly insurmountable task, but "I have to work on [this small section] today," which is something you've done dozens of times.
- **Remember your options.** It's OK to change your dissertation topic (and even your committee) after defending the prospectus. Carefully consider both of these the first time around, but sometimes things don't work out like you had intended. Do what you need to do. This is *your* project.
- **Have an accountability partner.** Find someone who is willing to hold you accountable (not everyone can do this). Ask this person to check up on you, to ask you if you've been productive and, if not what they can do to help you get back on track. Ask this person also to reward you (or allow you to have rewards you've gotten for yourself) when you hit writing goals.
- **Have a writing group.** Don't isolate yourself. Meet with other dissertators on at least a weekly basis. Doing so will help you remember that you're not alone and also help prevent you from burning out.
- **Establish boundaries.** If you share a living space (roommate, family, etc), establish boundaries and ensure they respect them (e.g., just as they have a right to watch TV or

play their music sometimes, you have a right to sometimes enjoying a quiet workspace in your living space).

Oral Defense

- **Just relax.** Your committee will not let you defend until you're ready. So, once you submit the Oral Defense Application, take some deep breaths and just relax—you're on your way outta here.

Submission

- [NIU Graduation Deadlines](#) (document subject to change)
- **Familiarize yourself with the submission process.** You need to submit the full dissertation to your committee at the end of the semester *before* the semester in which you want to graduate. Your committee will need time to read it, and then they must sign off on it by the *midpoint* of your final semester.

GETTING A JOB

Conferences & Networking

- **Find conferences.** Check out [UPenn](#) and [MLA](#). Also check out the conferences, regional and national, associated with the major organizations in your field. And, of course, talk to those professors in your field and ask them what conferences they recommend.
- **Be at conferences.** You get to hear—and meet, if you’re bold enough—the leading scholars in your field and stay up-to-date on the critical discussions. If you apply to a research university, you will need to demonstrate your acute familiarity with the current trends and debates in your field; going to as many panels as possible at a conference is one of the best ways to do this.
- **Make friends with peers.** Making friends with other doctoral students/candidates in your field—at conferences or field-specific study programs—will help integrate you into the field, help keep you on the cutting edge, and keep you apprised of various opportunities. (Also, conferences are *way* more fun when you get to catch up with the people you met the previous year.)
- **Apply to non-NIU seminars.** Most (all?) fields have a few doctoral seminars that last anywhere from a few days to a semester. It’s almost impossible not to network at these seminars. These programs also make your CV look more appealing, especially to research institutions. See “Compete for Fellowships, Grants, etc.” below.
- **Reach out to leading scholars in your field.** Reach out, that is, as a young scholar with a thoughtful question or comment. Prominent scholars are often delighted to respond to emails from students who appreciate their work. They might be big deals at conferences, but they’re usually just teachers trying to get their students to turn in assignments.

Submit Book Reviews and Articles for Publication

- **Book reviews are a good place to start.** Having *something* in your “Publications” section on your CV is important, and book reviews are an easy way to do this. Also, whereas your publications should pertain to your specialization (lest schools think you’re unfocused), it’s OK to review a book outside of your field.
- **Publish early.** It’s pretty awkward to apply for jobs without a “Publications” section. The most time you’ll have to work on this is while you are taking classes (first two or three years). Also, pushing yourself to hit your own deadlines will help ease you into the unstructured years of the program.
- **Submit what you got.** One of the easiest ways to publish something is to take a paper you wrote for a class and think about how to expand it and where to submit it.

Professors love to help grad students publish work that they started in class, and they can also guide you to relevant conferences and journals.

- **Be creative.** Academic blogs and podcasts don't qualify as peer-reviewed scholarship, of course, but these will distinguish you from other candidates. Non-peer-reviewed publications can do the same, but be sure you don't create an imbalance here.

Compete for Fellowships, Grants, etc.

- [NIU Graduate Funding Opportunities](#)
- [NIU English Graduate Awards & Scholarships](#)
- **Apply for non-NIU fellowships and grants.** You'll find great lists of opportunities at the following sites: [MLA](#), [UCLA](#), [CCCC](#).
- **Consider leaving NIU for a semester or two.** On the above-linked UCLA site, you will also find dissertation fellowships that will pay you, sometimes quite a bit, to continue working on your dissertation at the offering school.
- **Just apply!** If you think there's no way you could ever win a contest or get into a special program, try anyway. The same goes for your conference proposals and journal submissions. (And sometimes only two or three people apply to these things. Really.)
- **Consider getting a certificate.** Check out the [graduate certificates](#) that NIU offers. Common certificates among English graduates are those in Women's and Gender Studies; Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies; Technical Writing; and Applied Statistics.

Teaching Portfolio

- **TA for a non-FYComp class.** Ask a professor if you can TA for one of their classes. If you're a grad assistant through the English department, TAing counts as one of your assignments. Note that these opportunities are competitive, and they depend on the availability of non-FYComp postings for that particular semester.
- **Guest lecture.** Ask professors if you can be a guest lecturer in their classes. It lacks the opportunity of learning how to teach your field-specific content, which you get as a TA and can be extremely valuable, but you could feasibly do this multiple times and create a decently varied list of courses taught on your CV.
- **Keep your evaluations.** Make copies of the student evaluations, quantitative and qualitative, of all of your classes. If you apply to a teaching university or community college, you'll likely have to provide these.

Hold Multiple Service Positions

- **Be involved.** Run for EGSA. Apply to be on the MCLLM committee. Ask to serve on the FYComp committee. Be a peer mentor. Become a [CODE facilitator](#). Service will help prepare you for the administrative tasks of your professorship, and needing to stay in touch and work together with people on projects unrelated to your dissertation is a good way to keep you active during those unstructured years.
- **Be involved.** Be sure you contribute to the committee you're serving on. Ask what needs done, and do it. Eventually, you may be given a surprising amount of leadership, which is great. You want to be able to say that you did more than just show up for meetings.
- **Diversify your service portfolio.** Some schools look for three types of service positions: those serving your department, those serving your university, and those serving a regional or national organization (such as conference).
- **Again, pace yourself.** Don't burn out on service by being on three committees at once. Serve in one role at a time. Doing so will also demonstrate a consistency and longevity in your service to the department.

Going on the Job Market

- **Look at job descriptions in advance.** This will help you get a sense for what schools are looking for. You can find job listings at the following sites: the [MLA Jobs Information List](#) (after Sept. 15), [Chronicle Vitae](#), [Inside Higher Ed](#), [Academic Wiki](#), and [Higher Ed Jobs](#). If you set up an account on Academia.edu (free), you can also search here.
- **Be sure you're ready.** Being on the job market is ridiculously time-consuming—so much time that it can delay your graduation by preventing you from finishing your diss. If you don't think you'll be done with your dissertation by December, discuss with your director and the Job Placement Coordinator whether or not it'd be wiser for you to wait until next year.
- **Prepare templates the summer beforehand.** You can ask the Job Placement Coordinator which documents you should start with. Because you will have to revise these over and over (and over and over...), it's best to get an early start on them. Also, though most schools set their application deadlines at November 1 or later, *some* schools post them earlier, some even in September.
- **Think about your digital presence.** This includes your social media accounts as well as your professional accounts. Just be aware that the image you project online is the one you want your prospective colleagues to see.

BEING HEALTHY

Practice Physical and Mental Selfcare

- **Tend to your physical health.** Amidst the stress and the tremendous workload, your body can suffer a number of maladies: weakened immune system, ulcers, carpal tunnel, chronic migraines, high blood pressure, etc. Also, be mindful of exercise and diet: a healthy body lends toward a healthy mind.
- **Tend to your mental health.** Burnout is almost inevitable. Most doctoral candidates spend weeks, or even months (or even years), doing nothing. These can be dangerous periods for your mental health. Depression and anxiety are common side-effects of writing a dissertation, and they occasionally lead to suicidal ideation. In pursuing a Ph.D., you are taking [a risk](#). Be aware of this risk, and be ready to reach out if you need help. *There is no shame in seeing a therapist.* (Many of us have.)
- **Make a plan B.** You probably already have a timeline in mind of when you want to take exams and when you want to finish the diss. and then graduate. And that's good. But you need a plan B in order to reassure yourself that even if plan A doesn't work out everything will be OK.
- **Read a novel for pleasure.** You *do* have time to read a novel that has nothing to do with your work. Actually, it might even help you do your work better by taking your mind off the stressful parts of your work and reminding you of your love for reading.
- **Read an *academic journal* for pleasure.** The main point here is that this is *not* homework, not even studying; it's just casually keeping up on the field of study about which you're most curious. It's really easy to begin associating the things you are most interested in with the stress imposed by deadlines. Taking a break by looking into some study with no pressure or expectation to take notes, integrate a theory, or respond to an argument can help you keep in mind why you're doing what you do: it's because you love it.
- **Be strategically happy.** Yeah, happiness is a strategy. Being happy will keep you healthy and help you be more productive. That said, be sure you're making time every week to do things that make you happy.

Have a Support Network

- [NIU Graduate Colloquium](#) Lists guest lectures around campus. Great way to take a breather outside the English discipline. (Remember: You *love* learning. Resist the tendency to associate all scholarship as "work.")

- **Have a support network.** *Everyone in a Ph.D. program needs help.* Do not be afraid to ask for it.

Take Stock of What DeKalb Area Has to Offer

- **[forthcoming]**

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Other Department Guides

- [English Graduate Student Handbook](#) (Ph.D. stuff starts on p. 30.)
- [Department of English Dissertation Manual: How to Successfully Complete a Good Dissertation](#)

Writing / Brainstorming Assistance

- [Thesis & Dissertation Office](#)
- [Writing Center](#) You know how to write, but this is an excellent resource for proofreading. Also, you can ask to work with a Ph.D. student.
- [Dissertation Bootcamp](#). This is hosted by and in the Writing Center every summer.
- [Graduate School](#) Provides a schedule of helpful workshops. Also lists upcoming dissertation defenses across campus. (All defenses are public. You can attend.)

People Who Understand

- **OUR OWN DEPARTMENT!** It is easy to avoid English faculty, especially your director, when you feel you haven't been productive. But this is one of the *most important* reasons to stop in and chat with your director, the director of Graduate Studies, or just a professor you have a good relationship. They've gone through the process themselves, and they've guided dozens of other candidates through it.
- [NIU Counseling and Consultation Services](#) - (815) 753-1206
You can specify that you'd like to talk with someone who has a Ph.D., and thereby understands.

Annotated Bibliography of Recommended Books

- **Kelsky, Karen L., *The Professor Is In*** (2015)
Kelsky gives a *ton* of information on how to land a job, from building your CV to the interview process itself. She also gives advice on how to apply for grants and postdocs and discusses options for those who decide the Ph.D. isn't for them. You can also check out her website, [TheProfessorIsIn.com](#).
- **Seeber, Barbara K., and Maggie Berg, *The Slow Professor*** (2016)
Seeber and Berg offer a type of manifesto to protest the corporitization of the university, which has imposed unhealthy demands on professors. They offer helpful insights about

how to approach the academic life in a manner that is holistic beneficial to our scholarship, teaching, relationships with our colleagues, and even personal lives.

24/7 Services

- [NIU Crisis Services](#) · (815) 753-1206
Provides support to NIU students in dangerous mental health situations. Faculty, staff, family, and friends also can call to alert NIU students.
- **Kishwaukee Behavioral Health Crisis Line · (866) 242-0111**
- [Suicide Prevention Resource Center](#) · (800) 273-8255
- [The National Grad Crisis Line](#) · (877) 472-3457
- [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#) · (800) 273-8255
- [Crisis Text Line](#) · Text “HOME” to 741-741.