

Tips on Finding a Dissertation Topic

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After finishing all the course requirements, a Ph.D. student is faced with a transition from absorbing information and knowledge to creating it. This is a hard transition, not only for Ph.D. students at the George Washington University, but for doctoral students in the nation's top Economics programs as well. Even in those top Economics Ph.D. programs, there are students who are not able to achieve the transition and fall through the cracks.

Finding a dissertation topic is the first step of achieving this transition. In order to make sure that you do not fall through the crack, you must be both **proactive** and **persistent**.

First I would like to recommend you to read Hal Varian's paper, (2009). "[How to Build an Economic Model in Your Spare Time](#)." The paper gives valuable advice on where to get ideas, when to read the literature and how to build models. His paper is one of the most informative articles on this topic. Certainly every economist has his or her own way of conducting economic research. If you are interested in how successful economists do and have done their creative work, there is a very good book edited by Michael Szenberg, titled "Passion and Craft: Economists at Work", published by the University of Michigan Press.

Now I would like to talk about being proactive and persistent. Being proactive means that

1. You need to make sure that you have a solid understanding of the course materials in the first and second years. Besides that, you need to master necessary research tools. For example, if you plan to work on quantitative Macroeconomics topics, you need to know either Matlab, or Fortran, or Dynare, or other statistical packages if econometric studies are needed.
2. You need to form a habit of reading academic papers early on, preferably even before you finish all your course requirements. While you read those academic papers, it is important to train yourself for critical reading, that is, thinking about ways to improve a paper.
3. H. Varian (2009) discusses in his papers where to get ideas. There are two ways, outside academic journals and inside academic journals. To benefit from ideas outside academic journals, you need to be tuned to economic events and discussions in newspapers, magazines and blogs. I find James D. Hamilton's blog <http://www.econbrowser.com/> a very good source for original ideas. Similar blogs also include the RGE monitor at <http://www.rgemonitor.com/>. To search for ideas inside academic journals, you can read journal articles in your field, NBER Working Papers (www.nber.org), and other working

paper series. In particular, *Journal of Economic Literature* often contains surveys of research on particular topics. NBER also regularly issues program reports of individual program, which outline the frontiers of research in their individual fields. These are good places to start.

4. **Never conduct your research in complete isolation.** As a Ph.D. student, you are very likely a newcomer in this profession. At this stage it is very important that you stay connected with a broad research community and benefit from communications with other researchers. Here is what you can do:

First, talk with the faculty in the department. You need to be proactive in initiating the contact. H. Varian (2009) discusses this in detail in his paper.

Second, go to seminars and learn to be a critical audience. Other than seminars at the Economics department, there are also many high quality seminars in our neighboring institutions. For example, the IMF, the Federal Reserve, Bureau of Labor Statistics, all have regular seminar series, let alone other universities in the D.C. area. If there are conferences in town, you should not only become a listener, but also an active participant by presenting your own work.

Third, form study groups or reading groups with your fellow classmates, with or without the involvement of faculty. You should try to help each other to get out of here. You could form a group to read and discuss papers of common interest, read and critique each other's papers, and provide each other comfort and support.

5. I have often heard about a possible way to get your research started in quantitative Macroeconomics, by replicating and extending others' work. When you read papers, you might find a paper which you like and which is simple enough for you to handle. You may consider replicate the model, program it and compute the model solutions. The act of replication certainly is not creative research, but it can be a valuable exercise for you to learn the nuts and bolts of writing a model and solving it. If you can replicate a paper, the next step is to extend the model using your own ideas. These extensions may not be significant enough to be creative research, but it is a valuable learning process and may turn into something substantial.

Certainly it is possible that even if you try everything above, you are still struggling to locate a suitable dissertation topic. As said above, it is a hard transition from being an absorber to a creator. There will be many false starts. You may have spent months and even years working on something, only to find out that somebody have already written on this topic. If this is the case, do not consider your time wasted. You have learned a lot from this process and all the knowledge you have learned from these failures can be readily put into use when a good idea strikes. You may decide that a Ph.D. degree is really not for you, but if you decide that a Ph.D. degree is what you want, you need to be persistent and keep on trying. Good luck!