

Jeanne Hoffman. Welcome to this Kosmos Online podcast! I'm Jeanne Hoffman. Today our topic is dissertation writing and research agendas and my guest is Mike Munger. Dr. Munger is a professor at Duke University in the political science and economics department and the school of public policy as well as a director of the joint UNC-Duke Philosophy, Politics and Economics program. Welcome, Dr. Munger!

Mike Munger. It's a pleasure to be on!

JH. It's a pleasure to have you! So our interview today is based on your essay, "Writing Your Dissertation and Creating Your Research Agenda" which was originally written for IHS's guide for graduate students [Scaling the Ivory Tower](#). Where do you place the importance of these activities in relation to other graduate school responsibilities?

MM. It seems to me that people when they're in graduate school have to recognize that their chief job, what they should think of their task of being, is to redirect their energies from where they were in undergraduate to where they will be as a professional. So a graduate student is somewhere between an undergraduate and a professional. The people who succeed are those who make that transition faster. And what's disturbing about this is that faculty often don't tell you that. This is something you have to pick up on your own. So the problem is, faculty would like you, and I'm no different, faculty would like you to validate their pathetic lives by taking their classes very, very seriously. But you're not going to get a job taking classes. You're going to try to get a job as an independent researcher who has their own ideas who is able to make his or her own ideas clear to someone in writing, and the sooner you start being able to do that, the sooner you will start to make that transition. So I've noticed that in the second or third year of graduate school there is something approaching an inversion where the people who were the real stars in the first or second year, who managed to make the faculty smile and pat them on the head and say, "Good student! Here's a biscuit!" are the ones who after their second or third year are thinking, "You know, I'm going to take more classes" where the other people, and frankly I was one of the other people, were thinking "you know classes are sort of boring I'm going to try and write some stuff on my own", those are the ones who end up succeeding. So the stars the first or second year, a lot of them don't finish their thesis and they don't get a job. So be a good cheer. If you feel like an oddball, if you're someone who's working on research and taking the classes, yes, getting through the classes, that's fine. But you're not going to get a job taking classes; you're going to get a job doing research. Start working on writing, start working on your dissertation as soon as you can.

JH. And in your essay you also listed ten truths about writing. I just want to go through each of them briefly because I think each of them is great advice for students to keep in mind when they're writing. So the first is: writing is an exercise. What do you mean by that?

MM. Suppose you were going to run a marathon six months from now. You wouldn't wait until the night before the marathon and train all night. What you would do is run a little bit at a time. Some days you wouldn't go, you wouldn't feel like it, but you would recognize that your performance in this marathon is going to be based on having practiced in situations where you developed the lung capacity, the muscles in your legs to perform. Writing is the same way. If you write every day, yes, some days it's not

going to be very good, and a lot of it you're going to throw away. But when it comes time to do the marathon, which is the big thesis that you have to finish in order to leave graduate school, and as I often tell graduate students, how will I ever miss you if you won't go away? The key to this is to treat it as an exercise, writing is something that you do every day, and like training for a marathon, you will get better. The fact that some of what you do is a waste isn't the point. The point is to develop the skills so that when the big marathon thesis comes up, you'll be ready.

JH. You also mentioned "set goals." What types of goals should they be setting?

MM. So many people have this fetish about input-based metrics. "I worked for 3 hours today!" Yeah, well you didn't do a thing. You need output-based metrics. "I wrote 3 pages today!" That's a goal. Not "I went to the office." Think of all the times as a graduate student said "Well, I worked for 6 hours today. I read a book." No, what you have to do is set a goal of writing, an output-based metric, focus on that, and once you've done that, yes go do something else. But make sure that you have an output that you produce every day, no input. Nobody cares about the labor pains; they just want to see the baby.

JH. Now this other one sounds really profound, but could you explain it to me? It says, "Write for the ages." What does that mean?

MM. This comes from an experience I had that was pretty darn embarrassing. I was interviewing in 1984 at George Mason University and one of the people I was interviewing with was James Buchanan. Now this was two years before he won the Nobel Prize in Economics, he won it in 1986, this was 1984, but he was pretty scary even without a Nobel Prize. And the first question he asked me in our interview, and this was a job I really wanted, I so wanted to be at George Mason, and so this meant the world to me, and his first question was, "What are you working on, what are you writing, that somebody might read 10 or 100 years from now?" and I went "ahub, ahuh, uh." I had nothing. So his point, and he says this pretty often, is you have to be working on something people are going to want to read years from now because if you know when you're working on it that it's really of no consequence, why are you spending your time on it? How are you going to stay excited enough about it to be able to produce a decent quality piece of work if you already know that it's trivial? Now a lot of things that you think are interesting at first turn out to not be as interesting as you had hoped, but you have to have some aspiration to write on the kinds of questions that people care about and that might conceivably they would want to read in 10, or even 100 years.

JH. Next you have "Give yourself time." Do you mean time to write?

MM. I certainly do mean time to write. Most of us, and I was like this, as undergraduates were used to being pat on the head for our prolixity for even the night before a paper was due, we could produce a decent quality paper. Well, if you try and carry that over into graduate school or into your professional career, you're going to fail. The fact is, if you look at something Adam Smith wrote, or Ayn Rand wrote, or some writer that you care about produced, they didn't sit down the night before it was due and write the whole thing! They wrote it, they went for a walk, they had dinner, they talked to someone, they wrote it again, they worked on it over and over again. And so, in a way, this is the same thing as "write for the ages", this is, take your work seriously enough to treat it as something that is worthy of your full

attention and over an extended period. Not, I work really well under pressure. The fact is, nobody works really well under pressure. You're just smart enough that you've been able to get away with it up until now. Stop!

JH. Speaking of people leaving things until the last minute, you have as your fifth truth "edit your work" which I know a lot of undergraduates don't get to because they do their paper overnight, but what does this mean for graduate students who have an extended amount of time to work on their papers?

MM. A lot of people don't like the idea of editing their work and I think there's two reasons, maybe they're related, but they give two different reasons. One is, it's boring to edit it, and it's more interesting and fun to work on something new. The other is they hate to waste anything that they've written. But once you get used to editing, it's really quite liberating. Try and find if you can shorten everything into something that's better. When you're writing, often less is more. The first paper I published came out in the *Journal of Public Choice* in 1984, started off at 22 pages in calculus and proofs. When it came out in the journal it was 2.5 pages and had 2 short equations. It bore no resemblance to the paper I started out with, but it was much better. That first paper was un-publishable. If I had sent it to the journal it would have just been turned down and I would think I was born under a dark star. No! I was too lazy to edit the thing. So if you don't like editing your own papers, find another graduate student and switch. It's often much easier to edit and find the mistakes or infelicities that other people have made, and one of the things that we're all good at is criticizing. So find a writing buddy and switch papers and edit each other's stuff. And there's one other thing about editing that Deirdre McCloskey always says. Deirdre's claim is, let editors edit, which means if an editor or a friend who you got to edit your paper volunteers that there's a problem with that sentence, there is! Nobody cares what you think, the fact is that when someone else looks at it and says I don't understand that or I think you should reword it, you should. Don't get defensive, just do it. Let the editor edit.

JH. OK, now here you have "pick a puzzle". That is a puzzle to me. What do you mean by that?

MM. There are a lot of ways of making a paper you are working on seem more interesting, and one of the key ways to do that when setting it up is to choose one of the classic kinds of puzzle formulations. Some examples that I could give are, well there are a lot of people that have noticed empirically x happens. But, the theory says that y should happen. Why is it that our theory implies something different than what we actually observe? Or another famous and common puzzle that is quite useful is, there is this theory about phenomenon x and there's another theory about apparently very different phenomenon y . It turns out the same underlying explanation accounts for both these apparently very different things. Well, there again, if you start with that you have the reader's interest. It's a way of organizing your discussion, it's a way of getting started, and a lot of people have trouble writing the first page of their paper. So we sometimes say jokingly, ok well start with the second page. But, it's hard to set the thing up. So using a puzzle, even if it seems mechanical at first, is a good way of getting past that first hurdle of presenting your work, and it has the bonus of being interesting to the reader.

JH. Now your seventh truth seems to tie into your fourth truth, your "give yourself time" one, and its "schedule time for writing."

MM. The reason that it's different is the "give yourself time" means that you start long before it's due. Scheduling means you have to think, when is my most productive time? Am I morning person? Am I a night person? And then make sure you schedule your writing during your most productive times. So if you have some say in your teaching, when you are teaching classes, or when you are taking classes. Take classes, or teach them as the case may be, at a time that doesn't conflict with your most productive writing time. Now, it's perfectly true that when I teach I get enough of an adrenaline rush...it happens that I'm a morning person so I always schedule my writing in the morning and I teach in the late afternoon. In the late afternoon, a lot of times I might need a little nap. I'm a little tired after lunch and I'm kind of nodding off. When it comes to teaching, I get a rush of adrenaline, so it's like having two different peak times because you spend your writing time when you're naturally most productive, and then you do your teaching at a time that would otherwise be your down time. It makes you enormously more productive. The problem that I see is that people say, well I'm so busy and so I'll write when I get a chance, it's a residual category, it's what I do after I've done everything else. You have to turn that on its head. Schedule your writing first and make everything else fit. First and foremost, if you're going to succeed, you need to be a writer.

JH. Now I want to tie your 8th and 9th together because I think one flows from the other one. Your 8th truth is "not all of your thoughts are profound" and your 9th is "your most profound thoughts are often wrong." So why aren't all my thoughts profound? I think they are.

MM. And you know, they are as long as they're thoughts. Actually this is going to tie into the next one also, so let me tie all of them together. Everyone, when I think of an idea, or when I talk about an idea in a bar to my friend, we're having cigarettes and beers and it's 1:30 at night, think that's really clever, that's something. The problem is, when I sit down to write it, it turns out to be much more complicated than I thought it was. So when I was in graduate school or when I was a beginning assistant professor would keep a list of what I thought were interesting ideas. But half of them, when I worked on them for a day, turned out to not be that important. So a lot of things that seem interesting and important are not as important once you start to write them. That means that you need to start to write them as soon as possible. So the one that says "not all of your thoughts are profound" you learn about your own thoughts by trying to write them, not by just repeating them and have other people say, oh that's a clever nugget. Writing is how you learn they're profound. The 9th one that you mentioned, "your most profound thoughts are often wrong" I have a friend who made this suggestion and he says you should kill your children. And what he means by kill your children is after you finish your paper and you think it's almost ready to send to the journal, go through the paper and underline the 3 most clever and profound sentences and delete them, because you're bored with this paper. You have read it so many times and thought about it so much the 3 sentences that you think are the best are almost all non sequiturs. They're usually something that have nothing to do with the paper or they're an ad homonym attack on someone you should leave alone. You think, oh I really got that guy! So go through, and the things that you think are most profound in the paper, take them out, because they're the things that are going to make referees angry, or they're going to sidetrack the reader because you're no longer competent to judge whether these thoughts are profound. And then the 10th, which I said this goes over into, was everyone's unwritten work is brilliant. And in my essay I try to conjure a figure that we've all

met and that is usually like a 7th year graduate student and it could be a 4th year assistant professor who hasn't published anything. But he's extremely cool, he probably has a cigarette or black turtleneck sweater and an imported beer, probably a hefferveisen from Germany, so a person of extremely good taste, and he holds court in this bar or in this coffee shop with his cigarette, and tells you a 300 or 400 word summary on what he's going to write his dissertation on or his next book on, in the case of the professor, you think wow that's so interesting! And he asks you, what are you working on, and you're a little confused, because the chapter that you're working on, you're not quite sure that its going right, the direction isn't as good, you've finished another chapter but you're not sure it hangs together, and so you stutter, and from this guy you get a smug smile, its hard isn't it? Well the truth is, that guy is a poser. He's not actually working on anything. The reason that his glib, superficial description of his work is so impressive is because he's been saying the same thing for 5 years. You are the winner here. You're the one who is actually working on something. You've written several pages today, you wrote several pages yesterday, you finished a chapter last month, and it's hard to know because you're in the middle of a project. So beware these people that have this description of their work that is practiced and sounds like its good. People that are writing are often confused, embittered and angry, and in fact, I think if you're not a little confused, embittered and angry, you're not working hard enough on your writing. So this guy's work is unwritten, that's why it sounds brilliant. Everyone's unwritten work is brilliant. You have to encounter how hard your idea is by writing it.

JH. If you could give grad students just one piece of advice overall about their dissertation, what would that be?

MM. I'm going to give three. I'm a professor, I hard time giving just one.

JH. OK, I'm a lawyer and I can negotiate, so that's fine!

MM. I'll try to be brief about it, though. The first is that graduate students elevate the dissertation in their mind to the status of something that's enormous and in a way that absolves them of the responsibility of not finishing it very quickly. So you should think of the dissertation as being sort of a glorified class requirement. It doesn't have to be publishable, it doesn't have to be close to publishable, and in fact, when you start to think of your dissertation, what you're doing is saying, I have to write something that 4 or 5 people who may not like each other very much have to all sign off on, which brings me to the second, how good does your dissertation have to be? Well, a professor when I was in graduate school told me a good dissertation is a done dissertation and a done dissertation is good! You've already accomplished the first piece of advice which was, don't elevate this to the status of some giant, important book. Now, you recognize it's just a glorified class requirement. Now you look and there are 4 different people on the committee. Maybe they don't like each other very much, maybe they don't even talk to each other so they communicate only through you, where you bring a draft to one, and they give you corrections, you make the changes and the other one says change all that back. Well what you need to do is have them talk to each other. But what you really need to do is recognize that a done dissertation is good. Just finish what they say, don't let them use you as a pawn in a personal war that for them goes back 10 years. Just get the work finished, and once you're in a position to have it done, then you can work on a book where you won't have to please four masters who are

making different demands on your time, and the way to do that is the third piece of advice which is, don't read, write. I ask my students, who work on their dissertations, to put up a 3x5 card in their cubicle or workspace that says don't read, write, because writing is an output-based metric, reading is an input-based metric. You should always avoid input-based metrics. So reading two books means you did nothing. If you wrote something, then you had an accomplishment. When are you supposed to read, though? The answer is, let other people, including your faculty, be your research assistants! You can hire them as research assistants, and you don't have to pay them. You give them a draft, and they say, oh, here are 4 things you should cite. Well go look up those 4 things, add those 4 things precisely to your references, because then you're not reading to decide whether or not it's relevant, you already know that it is! You have used your faculty advisers as unpaid, really smart, highly trained research assistants! Make the system work for you.

JH. That's brilliant. You mention that students make the mistake of elevating their dissertation much higher than it should be. What are some other common mistakes you see students making as they work on their dissertation?

MM. I guess an elaboration on that first one would be the one that's most important, which is, after I've been working on it for 6 months, and I haven't written anything, the explanation has to be that it's really hard and really profound. And after 18 months or 2 years, I knew a guy who worked for 7 years on his dissertation, he had 600 pages written, but since he had been working on it for 6 years, it had to be something enormous. Now he could have turned in what he had and it would have been fine, but it wouldn't have been fantastic, and so it wasn't good enough because he couldn't explain to himself why he had done it for 6 years. He ended up not finishing although he had 600 pages written. Well believe me, by that time, the faculty just really wanted him to go away. Write an introduction, write a conclusion, and hand it in! Say, that's enough, I'm done.

JH. So what else separates a student who gets their dissertation done from a student who doesn't get their dissertation done on time?

MM. I would say getting a dissertation done on time largely just requires you sitting down and writing yourself a timeline that starts with finishing and then give yourself reasonable amounts of time to do all the things you need to do in the middle, and work backwards to now. Now, I finished my dissertation when I was 25. I wrote the whole thing in 6 months. Was it good? No, it was terrible. But a good dissertation is a done dissertation. So after I finished it, I was able to, on my own, without the in-fighting and bickering of faculty members looking over my shoulder, to be able to fix the problems and send it to journals and I got it published. So thinking of it as a job, thinking of it as a schedule that you can produce, rather than, I'm working on this and my lack of productivity is a sign of my profundity, which is a trap many of us fall into (I wrote nothing today, it must be really hard!). Well, make sure you produce something because you know you have a deadline, and having a deadline is an important part of becoming a professional because you have to learn to generate internal deadlines. Journal editors do not have deadlines, they would prefer that you don't send your paper to them! So the editor of a philosophy journal, economics journal, political science journal, they're not going to call you and say, hey are you going to send that paper in? They hope you don't. You have to generate your own internal

deadlines so you might as well start doing it now. Think of it as a job, have deadlines, and meet the deadlines. If it isn't perfect, that's fine, the faculty will tell you what you have to add.

JH. So in this timeline you talk about, other than sending your work to journals, what other steps should people consider when making it?

MM. I guess I would suggest you send papers to journals before a lot of people actually send their papers to journals. Now let me see if I can explain that. For anyone who does computer programming, you know of something called machine intensive debugging. Machine intensive debugging means I don't stare at the program and try and see what errors in programming or logic are in it, I send it to the computer and it comes back with error messages. Now there are no obvious mistakes, I don't send it to the computer so it bombs in the first line, I do the best I can so that it doesn't immediately bomb, well you can think of journals the same way since I myself was the editor of the journal *Public Choice* for 5 years, let me say immediately that doesn't mean send in half-finished papers. It means get the paper to a certain point of being good, then finish it in the sense that you edit it, you correct the references, you make sure the title page is right, there's no typos, there's no hanging widow titles, it looks like a professional paper. And then, the referees are going to tell you what you should work on. So you need to have a portfolio of papers. People are surprised when they first come out, you know they're teaching, they're spending time trying to get their dissertation into shape, and 2 or 3 years pass by. Start sending your journals right away, and that sort of generates its own momentum, its own logic. You get the paper back, and you've got comments, basically they're like error messages from the computer, fix those, send it back again and you'll be publishing papers before you know it. So send the paper out before you think it's perfect, because the editors aren't going to think it's perfect anyways. Even the paper you worked on for 3 years is going to come back with error messages.

JH. Now this is my final question, so do you have any advice on how to generate really interesting ideas that spark quality papers?

MM. I do, and the answer is write a lot of different papers and recognize that not all of your ideas are as profound as you thought they were, as we've already discussed. So when the paper comes back from the journal, this has happened to me several times, one of my most cited papers is the 1986 *American Political Science* paper with Arthur Denzau and with that one we had sent it to 4 other journals before it was finally accepted. When the paper started out, it wasn't very good. But we got comments from referees that were, you know this is stupid, but if you were really going to do this, here is what you could go and do. Well we took those seriously and by the time I had worked on it for 2.5 years, it had been turned down at 4 places, we had gotten comments from 12 different referees, the paper was excellent and it was partly because of the important ideas that we had gotten from machine intensive debugging, from having those smart, anonymous referees make suggestions. So again, you can use smart people as your unpaid research assistants as long as you keep at it and take comments seriously, let the editors edit, let the referees tell you that if they think there is something wrong with the passage, there is. Don't be defensive about it, fix it.

JH. Well thank you very much for joining us Dr. Munger and for your great advice!

MM. It was a pleasure!

JH. And for more career advice, or to download a free copy of [Scaling the Ivory Tower](#), visit kosmosonline.org, connecting the network of liberty advancing academics, and this is Jeanne Hoffman, signing off.