

The CGU Dissertation Workshop
Guest Speaker: Prof. Lori Anne Ferrell
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Notes compiled by Tara Prescott

“Professor Lori Anne Ferrell (Ph.D., Yale University) holds a joint appointment in Early Modern History and Literature in the School of Arts and Humanities. Her research and teaching interests concentrate on the effect of religious and political change on early modern texts--theological, literary, theatrical, and practical--in the turbulent century before the outbreak of civil wars in Britain. Professor Ferrell has been awarded research grants from the Fulbright Commission, the Whiting Foundation, the British Academy, the Huntington Library, and the National Endowment for the Humanities” (www.cgu.edu).

Professor Ferrell kindly stopped by the workshop to answer questions and give advice about the dissertation process.

What was your own experience dissertating?

Back in the late 80s / early 90s, I went through this. I was an anomaly in grad school because I loved grad school.

*“You were expected to be Rapunzel...
go away and spin straw into gold.”*

- Prof. Ferrell on the process of writing a dissertation

Looking at the questions you submitted, I noticed that, at first, all the questions appeared process-oriented. But writing-oriented *is* process oriented. I noticed that the members of this group are either in early stages (proposal) or late stages (finishing, defending). If you were in the middle of writing, you’d have that haunted look. That’s a whole different phase.

When you’re just starting or just finishing writing, you focus on process. You’re managing a social group called “a committee.”

You write a very different way before you have a Ph.D. than after. Right now, you’re trying to get approval. Later, your audience will be the editors who sit in judgment on your work, the bad reviews...all the unfairness but in different places.

My dissertation became my first book.

What do people not realize about this process?

What you may not realize right now is that you're an apprentice—there is a sense of instability and inequality. Your committee members see themselves as your mentors, they're turning you into them, in some sense.

Writing as a demonstration of academic personality
Your writing *is* you. That's why you get so crazy.

You're the last in a line of a cloud of witnesses. Your mentors, their mentors. It feels personal. It *is* personal.

You're asked to jump through hoops; this may not jibe with the kind of writer you think you are.

What are tips for working with a committee?

"I'm not going to invite you over to my house, I'm not going to bake you cookies. But when I'm on your committee, I will answer your e-mails within 24 hours, read your work, and help you improve it."

What are tips for writing?

The habits you learn now you'll take into your careers later.

Writing is not inspiration. It is skill; when you do it as a job. This is true for most people, most of the time.

How many hours a day should I be working on my dissertation? What's the maximum recommended amount?

It does not matter how much you can do in one sitting. It matters if you're consistent. Don't binge-write. You don't feel like you're in control of your writing when you do that (do 6 hours at once instead of spread out over the week).

If you can't establish a routine:

Use a timer. Set it for one hour. When it goes off, *stop*. Next week, add 15 minutes more.

In the humanities, no chapter should be over 40 pages.

Create a Master Plan – plot out the year, the month, the week, the day.

Sample day: (When I was writing my dissertation)

9-12 Write
 12-1 Lunch
 1-3 Go Write
 3-on Son comes home. Rest of day was for me and him.

I took every Sunday off.

You do your best work 4 ½ to 5 hours a day. After that, it's diminishing returns.

Things that give you downtime will make you more productive on the uptime.

I still write on a regular schedule. But now I have to teach. I don't have the luxury of time I had in grad school.

Now, I do an hour a day, 5 hours on Thursdays, 2 hours on the weekend.

You can do anything you *have* to do.

Novelists write this way. John Updike wrote every day from 9 to 12. Stephen King. Five pages a day, stopped at the end of the fifth page, even if it was in the middle of a sentence.

That's the only way that I felt I had any control at all. Making those schedules.

Or it could be, 9-12, research and take notes, then 1 to 3, organize your notes.

"Writing" means "your work" not always sitting at the laptop typing. It can be researching, taking notes.

Never read passively when you're doing research!

"I wish I could still read passively!" joked someone in the group.
 Some day you will! On your day off, read Jane Austen.

It takes about 5 weeks to develop a habit, and about 5 weeks to break one.

You don't write like you preach and you don't write like you talk.

My proposal is only 15 pages...it took me 2 months. What's your advice for slow writers?

I have those days, but I show up to write anyway.

Slowness could be worrying, making a schedule could help. And fast writers have their own set of problems – blurting out everything.

How do I keep going?

Writer Anne Lamott writes about KFKD (“K fucked”) – an imaginary radio station that plays in your head. The radio station that can play while you’re teaching, saying “That’s enough! They hate your guts! You’re going to get bad evaluations!”

“Listening to KFKD is a waste of time.”
- Prof. Ferrell on overzealous self-criticism

Should I have picked a topic that was better suited to the market?

You’ll learn to write by writing about what you love. If you picked a topic for the market and not for what you love, I feel sorry for you.

“What if your advisor says you must do x, and you don’t love it?” asked someone.
“Then you need another advisor.”

Of course, you want to get a job but never forget you are an amateur. In the oldest and best sense of the word. You do it because you love it. You have to. If you were doing this for the market, none of you would be doing the Ph.D.

*“You do it because you’re in love, but you have to be hard-headed about it.
You can’t be all gooey and wait for the flowers and candy. Writing a
dissertation is one of the most marvelously scary and supposedly-useless-to
the-rest-of-the-world thing... just like love.”*
- Prof. Lori Anne Ferrell

You chose this topic for a reason. Trust your instincts on why you chose it.

Q: What are some strategies for getting feedback from your committee? Do you have any strategies for nonresponsive / busy committee members?

A: The reason that we work here is to work with graduate students who do this.

Whenever I petition the Dean for a sabbatical, that’s when everyone wants to finish! When I’m on sabbatical, CGU exempts me from serving on certain committees but not from working with working on their dissertations.

Your committee members are supposed to be able to respond to you. If you haven't talked to them in three years and now you want everything in two weeks, yeah, I'd get testy too. So cut faculty some slack.

What's a good turnaround time for a chapter, a letter of recommendation?

I think its good to ask them that. A healthy timeframe is the time you've decided in advance.

Remember, they have other advisees besides you. If you say to everyone, "What do you want? How much time do you need? How do you see your role in this committee?"

Many students avoid asking hard questions. They're afraid of offending.

With respect, you can ask anything. Ask the way you'd like to be asked.

When I am not on sabbatical, I will answer your e-mail within 24 hours.

You negotiate what you think is a fair amount of time.

Your chair is primarily responsible, should be reading the most.

If you don't know this about your committee members, then you haven't asked.

I won't be a copy editor. That's not fair. I'll do that for only a few pages, and then make general suggestions on sound, tone, fluency.

What about Committee Members Who Are Outside CGU? I have some, and the relationship is tenuous. They're not obligated to help us and we don't want to lose them because they're doing *us* a favor.

Your chair has to be responsive. Your chair is the one you have to worry about in terms of reading. The other members could just show up at your defense. The second and third readers? There's no rule specifically for what they have to do. When I'm the third reader and I see something wrong, I'll go to the chair.

Q: How do I get a reader who is outside CGU? Is it inappropriate to say, "Listen, I really need just a third reader, I don't need someone who's really engaged or involved."

A: It's rude coming from you. It should be coming from your chair.

Don't cold-call readers. Say to your chair, "I'm happy to find someone, but I'd like you to write the note."

Go with a letter of introduction from your chair. You should be introduced first. It could be just an e-mail, "You'll be hearing from a student of mine named Jane..."

I feel that there's not much collegiality here. Should I be worried about going to the 5Cs professors?

The occasionally fractious relationship at the colleges is partly because too many CGU students just show up on their doorsteps.

One general remark for all of you: have an open, mutually respectful, candid, grown-up relationship with your chair. The chair should be running interference for you. If your chair will not or can not do that, you talk to the Dean. If your chair *is* the Dean, then talk to Jim Whitaker.

How many dissertation committees are you serving on right now?

In the next few years, 8, maybe 10. And those are ones I'm chairing. I'm second or third reader on 6 or 7 more. I'm practically sitting on every committee in History.

Do you read it differently as a third reader...like, do you say, "I can't be as vicious on this one"?

I would prefer "interactive." If the chair is happy, that's not my job. If I see a dealbreaker, I talk to the chair.

What would a dealbreaker for you be, being a second or third reader?

Plagiarism, obviously. Grammar problems, you can go to the Writing Center. I'm looking at flow, seeing if you sound like someone in the field.

What about really autonomous students? Is it risky if the student doesn't contact the chair every week and just works alone?

I like being checked in with a lot. I won't be angry if you don't check in, but it is risky for *you*. The less you see your advisor, the less real this process will feel to you.

I love to look at people's thesis statements. I'm a monster about them. If you can't say what a chapter is about, you're in trouble.

What advice do you have for the defense?

Avoid being surprised by the response. Ask your chair, "Are all the committee members on board with this?" Some professors like the pop quiz approach / see you think on your feet. That's fine too, but then know *that* about them.

Don't answer immediately! Take out a pen and paper. "Can I repeat your question back to you?" Take a breath. Think! Buy yourself time. Don't let KFKD play in your mind. Say, "When you ask a question, I'm going to write it down."

Never go into a defense without talking to your chair the day before.

Don't bullshit! If you don't know, you don't know.

What if I think the chair hates me?

If the chair hates you... that's your chair. They're working with you. If it's too much for you, you can't do it. If you can deal with the person not being warm, etc, but they do what you need them to do, that's enough. You need to have a *working* relationship. You can ask questions in writing, in e-mail. Not for litigious reasons, but just to remind the professor.

Is there more pressure on the student if it is an open defense? Or is your committee less likely to squash you if your grandma is there?

No. They'll say the same thing either way. I have been to one where the person failed in front of everybody.

In that case, they took the student out and said, "We're not gonna pass this." The student did not use due diligence.

You're all looking horrified, but it's important to know it's possible not to pass. Because what kind of school would this be otherwise?

I'm going to pull the defense if I think it's not going to pass (when I'm the chair).

You can't walk into the defense already knowing that you'll pass. That would make CGU a diploma mill.

Defenses are never as awful as you think. There's a variety of ways that a dissertation can squeak through. It can pass with corrections, lots of ways to negotiate.

My experience is that most people pass. However, nobody goes in and they put a crown on their heads and praise them for two hours.

How long is a defense?

It can be anywhere between 45 minutes and 2 hours.

Q. But why does the defense have to be open to the whole CGU community?

A: It's a good thing that we have open defenses. The mystery of it is taken away when it's open.

Just remember how much static is coming from Radio KFKD when you're in there.

Take a break. If you're getting upset, ask, "Can I stop for a moment? I feel like I'm going off base here."

The way you're seeing the world during the defense, is not as bad as you think.

You can say, "Can I have a different question? Can I restate that? Can you restate that?" The worst they can say is no.

This is not a secret. This is an honest academic talk.

Your defense will be like prom, like quals: it's always anticlimactic.

Is it easier when you have defense committee members that were also on your qualifying exams?

I've had some people on my quals that were also on my Ph.D. defense. I thought they were harder on the dissertation defense, as they should be.

What if you've heard about someone you could add to your committee, but that person is an outsider, or has a very different perspective that might conflict?

Do *you* want to work with this person? No? Then don't.

Do you have any advice about getting an academic job afterwards?

The first thing – they’ll see how long it took you to write your dissertation. They’ll place that. So address that up front in your letter: “I was teaching, etc.” They’ll look at time in degree.

Give a professional reason: “I interrupted my studies for family, working, whatever.” Don’t expect to dodge it.

When I’m on a hiring committee, I look for time in degree, a finished dissertation. When someone’s ABD, I call and ask. If you’re not defending in May, don’t say you are. Don’t be slippery. I wouldn’t ask, but I’d think if a person in your field at your school is not on your committee, and wonder why.

Letters of rec: overrated or not?

I read them absolutely. I never look at transcripts or grades. Writing samples, talk to diss chair if they say they’re going to defend and I want to make sure that’s the case.

You’re almost always at an advantage if you have a defense date set (or done).

Remember: open communication = working relationship

Mutual respect, honesty, and trust – not necessarily friendly. You have a right to the first three.

My chair’s comments are crushing my soul. What should I do?

Say, “I’m having a hard time with this feedback.”

Address it. They might squash you, but too many people just quit contacting their chair. Silence doesn’t solve anything.

“Too many people just quit contacting their chair. Silence doesn’t solve anything.”

- Prof. Lori Anne Ferrell

You should be able to go them when you’re stuck. Not in a “child-saying-I’ve-been-bad” kind of way.

If you want to talk more, you can come and find me. I don’t want to hear names, and I don’t want to know who is on your committee, but I’d be happy to talk further.