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Holiday strategies to honor your all-important academic project

NOVEMBER 24, 2015 BY [NOELLE STERNE, PH.D.](#) 0 COMMENTS

The holidays can be wonderful times for reconnecting with family and friends, taking breathers from the daily-weekly-yearly chase of accomplishment, kindling or rekindling feelings of love, warmth, and generosity even to those who have published much more than you, and indulging in delectable seasonal goodies. But we academics often feel conflicted about how much time to “take off.” Maybe we’re feeling the pressure of having to participate in holiday events. Maybe we’re worried about being grilled by well-intentioned family or friends about the progress of our dissertation, article, or book. Maybe we’re very aware of the dangerous loss of momentum from our work. Maybe we just don’t like all those jolly gatherings.



Here, from clients who have suffered through such “maybes,” I suggest three holiday strategies you can apply, depending on the severity of your “maybes” and your fortitude. We don’t have to be at the mercy of the holidays!

Family and Friend Jobs

When you receive that verbal invitation for dinner/the day/the weekend and clear your throat instead of replying immediately, the other person instantly knows your real feelings. The comeback usually goes like this: “Oh, come on. It’s only an afternoon (or day or weekend). You can take a break to see your family (or group of best friends) for that long.”

To such responses, I have found particularly bolstering a letter I quoted in an earlier article. The letter is from Charles Dickens on why he declined invitations:

It is only “half an hour”—“it is only an afternoon”—“it is only an evening” people say to me over and over again—but they don’t know that it is impossible to command oneself sometimes to any stipulated and set disposal of five minutes—or that the mere consciousness of an engagement will sometimes worry a whole day. (In Gail Godwin, “Tips on Getting Unstuck,” *The Writer*, January 2008, vol. 121, issue 1, p, 34)

As Dickens well knew, family and friends may not understand your need for solitude or have much sympathy with your explanation that you’re on the tantalizing cusp of a really great problem statement or brilliant synthesis of the literature. They may not fathom your actual enthusiasm for your work, not to mention the pervasive holiday anxiety about being with relatives or forcedly jovial with friends.

Your urge to decline may also be fueled by last year’s embarrassing holiday questions from the most intrusive relatives (“How come you’re still single?”) or friends (“Will you get any money for that project?”). You realize that when you do get together, they’ll ask more and get more ammunition knowing about your dissertation or article or book aspirations.

With family, it’s a fact of family systems that when we’re with generations of relatives, most of us revert into our earlier, family-defined roles and the rut of family dynamics (see James R. Bitter, *Theory and practice of family therapy and counseling*, 2013, Belmont, CA: Brooks/Cole; and Lisa Esposito, “Holiday anxiety—The gift that keeps on giving,” *U.S. News & World Report*, December 19, 2014). With friends, we often revert, similarly, to the “roles” we’ve accepted from the group. If you’re “the brain” or “erudite one,” your friends may pounce all the more quickly when they hear you’re not

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finished with your project.

If we've been sincerely working on growing emotionally, we can gain some distance and not react in our old ways, even though Great-Uncle Harley or your friend Angelique the anti-scholar continue to try to suck us in. So, for your holiday strategies, I recommend one of two basic positions.

1. **Take the Scrooge position.** Negotiate, bargain, promise, vow to do anything later for your family or friends as long as everyone leaves you alone for most of the day. Hole up in your study or other favorite cave and steadfastly ignore passing merrymakers. Clients have told me that when they've taken this position, they prefer the complete solitude of their home, or possibly a European-style café for intellectuals, who are apt to be like-minded and crunched over their laptops. Scrooge advocates realize they risk "offending" the host relatives or friends and take pains to phone, email, or Skype to "explain" why they just can't make it (keeping Dickens' observations in mind) but know everyone will have a grand time. They encourage their families and other friends to go and promise to make it up to the hosts (a dinner, a football game together, appearance at another holiday—in two years after the academic project is completed).
2. **Take the Semi-Scrooge position.** I learned this variation from my own dissertation days. Several fellow students at similar writing stages were comparing how we spent Christmas. When it was Hugh's turn, he said, "I told my wife I'd go to the big dinner at the grandparents' house with her and our kids but on one condition: that I work on my dissertation in their spare room upstairs." We all stared at him, incredulous. He continued, "Sure, I wore a Christmas vest, but right after dinner I took my pie and briefcase upstairs and worked for the next four hours. When my family was ready to leave, they called me down, and, surprisingly, everyone was civil. A cousin even wished me well with my dissertation." All in our group praised Hugh to the skies at the time, and I still appreciate what he did. He set his standards and didn't care what the rest of the relatives thought about his stipulation. And he was ready to stay behind if necessary. If you feel comfortable with some variation of Hugh's semi-Scrooge position, by all means use it (arrive late or for dessert, leave early, appear for the after-dinner games, use the host's version of Hugh's spare room for several hours). Your compromise will appease your relatives or friends and, more important, will satisfy your drive to continue working on your project. But, if you can't quite muster Hugh's courage, or actually look forward to the holiday gatherings or even the people . . .
3. **Take the Santa position.** Get up early and inform your family that you must put in two hours on your project before you all leave for the celebration. Your academic superego will be satisfied, and you will make real headway. Once you tear yourself away, hide your work under a red blanket with white trim and gostuff yourself. Listen raptly to your brother-in-law sounding off on the political commentator whom he love-hates. Get into the backyard touch football game, with its own peculiar family rules. Cheer raucously with everyone at the playoffs. Or praise (extravagantly and sincerely) the hostess's side dish recipes and ask for copies. Empathize with your best friend's latest six disastrous blind dates. Offer to research the best grass carpet squares for your neighbor's fading front lawn. Or let the kids climb all over you for the day. Watch cartoons and giggle with them (I love *Curious George*). Your cousin the full professor may even give you an idea for your work. Your friend Angelique may even give you a grudging compliment on your determination. Everyone will love you, and your brain will likely benefit from the respite.

Choose Your Position

Whatever position you take, decide on it beforehand and inform your most significant others. That way, your spouse or friends won't be shocked when you suddenly disappear after the hors d'œuvres and before the traditional teary-eyed choruses around the piano. Or when you roll on the rug with kids pummeling your head.

The holidays are to be enjoyed—one way or another. If you choose not to show up, or to show up for only part of the day as a gesture, you may risk some disapproval, but so what? The relatives or friends will get over it, and they may secretly admire you for your stand and dedication. The basis for your choice should be what makes *you* feel good and serves your best interests. When you make that choice, you will employ your best strategies that honor and advance your academic project, and you will enjoy the holidays on your own terms.

Adapted from Noelle Sterne, *Challenges in Writing Your Dissertation: Coping With the Emotional, Interpersonal, and Spiritual Struggles* (Rowman & Littlefield Education, 2015).

Dissertation coach, editor, scholarly and mainstream writing consultant, author, and spiritual counselor, Noelle has published over 300 pieces in print and online venues, including *Author Magazine*, *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, *Children's Book Insider*, *Graduate Schools Magazine*, *GradShare*, *InnerSelf*, *Inspire Me Today*, *Transformation Magazine*, *Unity Magazine*, *Women in Higher Education*, *Women on Writing*, *Writer's Digest*, and *The Writer*. With a Ph.D. from Columbia University, Noelle has for 30 years helped doctoral candidates wrestle their dissertations to completion (finally). Based on her practice, her *Challenges in*



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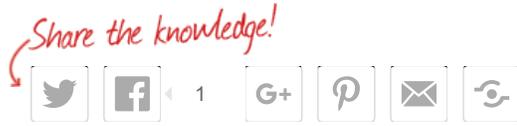
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Writing Your Dissertation: Coping with the Emotional, Interpersonal, and Spiritual Struggles (Rowman & Littlefield Education, September 2015) addresses students' often overlooked or ignored but crucial nonacademic difficulties that can seriously prolong their agony. See the PowerPoint teaser here. In Noelle's *Trust Your Life: Forgive Yourself and Go After Your Dreams* (Unity Books, 2011), she draws examples from her academic consulting and other aspects of life to help readers release regrets and reach lifelong yearnings. Visit Noelle at www.trustyourlifenow.com



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