

# A PhD by publication allows you to write for real and varied audiences, inviting intellectual exchanges that benefit your research

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*A PhD by publication requires doctoral candidates to submit a set of papers for peer-reviewed journals plus an integrating chapter, rather than the more traditional doctoral dissertation. This remains a less common, sometimes frowned-upon model, but **Jørgen Carling** outlines eight reasons why a PhD by publication might be a good option. It allows you to write for real, varied audiences, with differing levels of ambition, and can help you build a name for yourself in academia, which is important not only for your career but also as it affords you opportunities for vital intellectual exchanges that may benefit your research.*



As a doctoral candidate you may have a choice between submitting a traditional doctoral dissertation and submitting a set of papers for peer-reviewed journals plus an integrating chapter. The latter option, known as a “PhD by publication” or an “article dissertation”, has become the norm in some contexts and is resented in others. I can’t decide for you, but I can give you eight reasons why I think the PhD by publication is often a good model.

First, writing journal articles constitutes **professional training**. It is what academics primarily do, and by writing your dissertation in the form of articles, you learn the craft. (If you abandon academia after completing a PhD it is even more important to know that your work is out there, potentially benefiting others, and not just stored in a dusty library.)

Second, writing journal articles ensures **valuable feedback**. Regardless of the quality of the supervision you get, the review process in a journal can be a valuable supplement. Having your article accepted in a journal also provides a tangible source of independent recognition, different from your supervisor’s assurances that your work is fine. The peer review process can be filled with disappointments and frustration too but living through that is, for better or worse, part of being an academic. Just make sure that you are not handling it all alone.



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Third, writing journal articles means writing for **real audiences**. This is a point with several implications: it is a source of motivation during the writing process, it teaches you about [attentiveness to the needs of your readers](#), and it ensures that the resources devoted to doctoral research flow back to society. By “resources” I don’t mean only taxpayers’ money but also the time and trust that research participants have contributed, for instance.

Fourth, writing a dissertation based on individual papers allows you to write for **different audiences**. In my field, most articles could be targeted to either a disciplinary journal (e.g. *political geography*), a thematic journal (e.g. *International Migration Review*), or a regional journal (e.g. *African Affairs*). Being able to see which parts of your research appeal to different audiences and, not least, to present those parts accordingly is a great skill to develop in the course of doing a PhD.

Fifth, writing journal articles allows you to write with **different levels of ambition**. This is a crucial point that is often ignored. The time available for writing a dissertation is limited, and writing 300 pages of brilliant prose might be beyond reach. But in a series of papers, there might be one that has great potential, deserves to be revised over and over, is accepted in a good journal, and is still being cited ten years after you defended your PhD. Other papers in your dissertation might fall short of such success, and that’s fine.

Sixth, writing a dissertation by publication provides you with **good milestones** in the process. The submission, resubmission, acceptance and publication of articles in the course of a PhD give you a firm sense of progress. Signing off on the proofs for a journal article is different from telling yourself that a chapter is finished but thinking that you might do additional work on it before saying that the dissertation is done.

Seventh, writing articles helps you build **a name for yourself** in academia. There are PhD candidates who do great work but because they are halfway through a traditional dissertation remain virtually invisible. Being visible is not only about being career-conscious, it is also about inviting intellectual exchanges that benefit your research. Conference papers help, of course, but they might not reach many people beyond the handful who were in the room. Writing [articles alongside a traditional dissertation](#) might be an ideal but it increases the workload at the cost of something else – be it your family, [health](#) or intellectual energy.

Finally, a traditional dissertation **is not a book**. It can form the foundation for writing a book but a lot of [hard work](#)

[remains](#). If a book is important in your discipline, then a traditional dissertation is probably the most promising route to follow. But it comes with considerable risk: unless you can secure substantial time for writing the book after the dissertation is submitted, you could be left with no articles and no book.

These are my eight reasons for pursuing a PhD by publication. The biggest counter-argument is a frustrating one but is real nevertheless: in some departments or disciplines a PhD by publication might be formally permissible but frowned upon. Pioneers are needed to swim against the stream and help change attitudes; but whether you want, or can afford, to be such a pioneer is a personal choice.

Beyond the decision to do a PhD by publication, there are [many things to consider](#) about the process if you go for it – such as the number of papers, possibilities for co-authoring, and implications for how you define what the dissertation is about. There are also many institution-specific rules and expectations that you need to explore. Some universities require that a certain number of articles be published, or at least accepted. Going through the review process is a valuable part of the experience but such requirements make me uncomfortable both as a supervisor and an examiner. For instance, I think a candidate should feel free to pursue publication in a top journal, even if it means a review process that lasts way beyond submission of the dissertation. The article in question might be just fine as a component of the dissertation even if the editor of a highly ranked journal demands additional revisions. Conversely, as an examiner, I want freedom to independently assess the quality of the dissertation. Good articles sometimes get rejected by journals while poor ones get accepted. So, while it's useful to know which journals the articles were written for, I wouldn't want to infer their quality from decisions made by reviewers and editors.

The PhD is, in many ways, an odd exercise – partly an introspective learning and qualification process and partly a piece of research that society has reason to value. Doing a PhD by publication offers a chance to bridge the gap between the two.

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our comments policy if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.*

## About the author

**Jørgen Carling** is a Research Professor at the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) where he does [research on global migration and transnationalism](#). With a disciplinary background in human geography he employs diverse methodologies, including statistical analyses and ethnography. He also has a strong interest in research communication. Jørgen maintains the personal web site [www.jorgencarling.org](http://www.jorgencarling.org) and tweets as [@jorgencarling](#).

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