An Insider's Guide On How To Write A Thesis When You're Short On Time

By Dora Farkas, Ph.D. on Jun 09, 2015 03:00 pm

I thought about quitting graduate school in the beginning of my 6th year.

I was almost certain that there was no way that I could graduate that year, or ever for that matter.

I started several dead-end projects, and most of my data was inconsistent and did not support any of my hypotheses.

I felt stuck and trapped in my own life.

The irony was that I actually created this life for myself because I thought that getting a PhD degree was the road to a better life and a career that I would be passionate about.
I finally summoned the courage to have “the talk” with my supervisor and clarify once and for all what I needed to do to graduate.

As I had expected, I could only use a very small portion of the data I had collected up to that point in my thesis.

My supervisor assigned me a new project, and I had to learn how to use three new instruments that I had no prior experience with.

If I wanted to graduate in a year, I had to make that project work.

In order to meet this ambitious deadline I decided to extend my 10-12 hour days to 15-hour days and learn the methods I needed for the new project.

After 5 months, I was finally able to generate some reproducible data with my new experimental setup.

I still had to run hundreds of samples through my system, but I finally had hope that I might be able to graduate that semester.

The problem was the thesis deadline was only 3 months away and I had no idea where to start.

Which section should I write first?

How should I organize my data?

When should I write?
7 Helpful Guidelines To Writing A Proper Thesis

My 15-hour days turned into 18-hour days fueled by junk food and soda.

Still, I wasn’t getting anywhere.

No one had taught me how to write a thesis.

To make matters worse, I was a perfectionist.

I spent countless hours writing and rewriting paragraphs and jumping back and forth between different chapters because none of the sections ever felt “good enough.”

Eventually, just as I was burning out and spinning into a dark cycle of depression, anxiety, and hopelessness, I finished my thesis.

As I turned the document into my thesis committee, I remember thinking...

There has to be a better way.

Over the next few years after finishing my thesis, I started studying the process and creating a more effective system for writing a thesis.

Since then, I’ve trained hundreds of PhD students on how to write their theses.

Here are 7 tips on how to write a strong thesis I’ve learned and continue to teach to other PhDs students...

1. Know What Questions You’re Asking

You always need to know what your hypothesis is or what questions your thesis is asking.

This may seem obvious, but so many graduate students fail to define their overall hypothesis before beginning their thesis.

You must be able to summarize your thesis in one sentence such as: “The purpose of this thesis is to....”

If you don’t know what your thesis question or hypothesis is, meet with your supervisor (See #3 below).

Over the years, I’ve encountered a few exceptions to this rule.
For example...

Some PhD students spent 8 or 9 years (full-time) in graduate school working on many small projects because no one project was viable enough for an entire thesis.

These students had what I call a “hodge-podge” thesis.

The only reason their thesis committees let these students graduate is because the students had been in school for so long.

While it is possible to pull a group of small projects together into one thesis, you don’t want to be at the mercy of your thesis committee.

It’s best to always know what question you are asking.

Your question will probably evolve over time, but the more clarity you have about the purpose of your thesis, the more efficient your research will be.

2. Break Your Thesis Into Defined Stages

Thesis writing is a process with well-defined stages

The details of each stage will vary slightly depending on your field, but for most thesis writers the stages are, first, idea collection, second, editing and data analysis, and third, polishing.

Perfectionists (like me) will particularly benefit from dividing their writing into discrete stages.

The purpose of the first stage of writing is to get as many ideas as possible on paper, without judging, editing or formatting your document.

By allowing yourself to collect your ideas without criticism, you can spark your creativity and overcome the fear of imperfection that may be holding you back from starting to write your thesis.

It is during the second stage, editing and data analysis phase, that you need to be rigorous with your writing and editing.

At the end of the second phase your goal is to produce a manuscript that has a clear structure and a logical flow of arguments so that you can submit it to your supervisor for review.

In the final polishing phase, you need address the feedback from your committee and fill in any gaps in the logic.

Polish, polish, polish, and polish some more until your document is ready to be handed in to your
3. Don’t Rely On Your Academic Advisor

Your academic advisor will not give you all the answers.

Some advisors are either too busy to mentor you properly or are micro-managers who want daily updates on your progress.

Other academic advisors are simply bad mentors who don’t want you to graduate in the first place.

Either way, you shouldn’t rely on your mentor to give you all the answers.

You also shouldn’t rely on your advisor for a second reason...

Writing your thesis is your job and your job only.

The role of your advisor is to mentor you so you learn how to be an independent researcher, not to hold your hand for the rest of your life.

Your advisor may or may not be a good mentor, but you need to be in agreement regarding the direction of your research because you need their approval to graduate.

If you have disagreements with your advisor, or you have a dead-end project, it may take several meetings to determine the overall direction of your thesis.

The most effective way to meet with your advisor is to schedule meetings far in advance and come to every meeting with a clear agenda.

Students who plan proactively before talking with their supervisors have much more efficient meetings than those who don’t plan.

If your advisor is a difficult person, continue to be proactive about planning meetings and developing solutions to your problems.

Keep a record of every meeting you have or every meeting he or she refuses to have with you.

Finally, reframe your situation into a learning experience for your career.

4. Realize You Will Never Feel Like Writing
You will never feel like writing your thesis.

Even the most famous and prolific authors in history had daily battles with writer’s block.

You won’t be any different. There will be times when you sit down to write when you feel like you’re dying.

That’s okay—just start typing gibberish. Type sentence fragments. Type anything. Just get something down on paper.

Also...

Don’t wait to be inspired to write. Instead, go out and look for inspiration.

Listen to music that puts you in the mood to write. Watch a short video that motivates you to take action. Visualize all the things you will do once your thesis is done.

Warming up your “writing muscles” and seeking out inspiration are the only cures for writer’s block.

Once you’re warmed up and inspired, words will start to flow more naturally. They may even start to form cohesive sentences and paragraphs.

Overtime, your warm-up period will get shorter and shorter until clicking into writing gear becomes an automatic habit.

5. Don’t Write Your Thesis Chapters In Order

When I started writing my thesis, I thought I had to begin with the abstract, then the introduction, then an in-depth literature search, then chapter one, chapter two, on and on all the way to the conclusion.

This is the worst way to write your thesis.

Writing your thesis in order can lead to several months of agonizing writer’s block.

Don’t start writing your thesis by writing the abstract first.

Instead, the abstract of your thesis should be the last section you write.

By definition, the abstract is a summary of the highlights of your thesis, and therefore you should only be able to write a quality abstract once you finish all of your chapters.
Don’t start writing your thesis by diving into the most difficult chapter either.

If you do, you will inevitably face writer’s block.

Starting your thesis by writing the most difficult chapter first is like trying to deadlift a 500-pound weight without any prior training.

You’ll keep trying to lift the heavy weight unsuccessfully until you’re completely exhausted. Eventually, you’ll give up entirely and label yourself as simply not good enough to do the exercise.

Instead, start writing your thesis by writing the easiest section first—the methods section.

The methods section is the easiest section to get started and the quickest to finish. Start here to get a few pages under your belt and boost your confidence before you try any heavy lifting.

6. Never Write “work on thesis” In Your Calendar

“Work on thesis” is too vague.

If you put this phrase in your calendar it will either lead to you taking a nap, surfing the web, or staring at a blank computer screen.

Even if you do manage to put some words on paper or analyze some data, you’ll do so randomly.

Instead, you need to turn your work hours into measurable progress.

You need to be very deliberate with how you allocate your time.

Once you decide on the order in which you will write your chapters, continue breaking them down into smaller chunks.

This will allow you to set up specific goals for every block of time you have.

Instead of inserting “work on thesis” into your calendar, insert measurable goals like “finish Figure 1” or “write two pages of Chapter 2.”

7. Write In Very Short Bursts

Writing in several short bursts is more efficient than writing in a few, long extended periods of time.
If you ever tried to write for several hours in a row, you may have noticed that your concentration becomes weaker after about 45-60 minutes.

Writing requires creativity, and it is difficult to sustain your focus for several hours in a row over the course of months (or even years) until you finish your thesis.

**If you have a 3-4-hour block of time in your calendar, resist the temptation to glue yourself to the chair for the entire period.**

You’re only fooling yourself if you think that more hours of writing leads to more progress.

Instead, break up your writing time into short blocks with rest periods in between.

I suggest alternating 45 minutes of writing with 15 minutes of rest.

These rest periods are crucial. Many students get sudden insights when they are away from their desks and they become more efficient when they return to work.

Also...  

**Turn off your email and phone alerts when you’re writing.**

Don’t be tempted to check these updates during the rest periods. It’s far too easy for an update to distract you from your work and derail your next writing period.

Bad writing habits are tough to break. If you try to eliminate your bad habits overnight, your brain and body might rebel against you. A better strategy is to change your habits slowly and one at a time. **Don’t take on all 7 of the above thesis writing guidelines at once.** Instead, take on one, complete it or master it, and then move on to the next tip. The toughest part of writing is the beginning. **The sooner you start writing your thesis, the easier writing it becomes.** A good writer is not someone who never struggles, but someone who keeps writing even when they’re struggling.

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