

Writing a Humanities and Interdisciplinary Dissertation 2: Body, Conclusions, Abstract

STUDENT LEARNING SUPPORT
Graduate Student Support



RYERSON
UNIVERSITY

*Ryerson University sits on the
Traditional Territory of the
Mississauga's of New Credit
First Nation. We are
honoured to be a part of this
community of our Indigenous
colleagues and students.*

- Chi Miigwetch



Overview

Body: Methods & Results

Discussion

Conclusion

Abstract

General Writing Strategies

Body: Methods & Results

Purpose

Describe and justify your methods and/or analyses

Your theory may be a methodology (e.g. Discourse Analysis, Phenomenology)

Include enough detail to allow a peer to replicate

Present the main results

Link the results to the research questions

Show relationship of primary research to other studies

Highlight agreements or disagreements between your work and other published studies.

Major Challenges

Determining when you are ready to start

Having trouble deciding where to start

Choosing and justifying methodology

Describing results and analyses (technical terms)

Being unsure of what to include

Strategies for Writing the Body

Make an outline

Discuss and agree upon methodology with your supervisor and committee before writing

Find examples of research using the same methodology to see how they describe it (terminology, format)

Check formatting guidelines (e.g. APA) for reporting results of analyses

Consider using tables and figures to present complicated analyses and results

Methods

Discuss your theoretical framework and approach

Provide a complete account of all the steps in your study

Present those steps in logical order

Describe your methods for collecting and analyzing data

Methods- Structure

Introduction

Research perspective

Research Design

Research Questions and Hypotheses

Subjects, Participants, Population, and Sample

Research Variables

Instruments and measures of data collection and data analysis

Validity, reliability and/or triangulation

Summary

Methods – Questions to Consider

1. What expectations exist for you in your discipline, university, among your committee members?
2. What are some terms and keywords specific to your chosen methods?
3. Describe a methodological insight you gained while doing your research?
4. What “rules” of method have you broken or “bent” and to what effect?

Biklen, Sari K. and Ronnie Casella. *A Practical Guide to the Qualitative Dissertation*. 71-88.

Results

Report as accurately and precisely as possible without adding interpretation

Report ethically

Report in accordance with the requirements of your discipline

Report consistently with the norms of your academic department

Organizing the Results

How could you organize your results?

There is no one “correct” way! Here are some possible ways

Visual: charts, graphs, tables, figures, maps, blueprints, drawings, matrices, etc.

If relevant, first – response rate and respondents demographics

By research questions or hypotheses

By themes

By stages in the experiment

Other

Results - Questions to Consider

How should you adapt your report of results to the needs of your audience?

How do you make the distinction between conclusions based on substantive data and those that may appear to be speculative?

How do you ensure that your report of results continues to address issues of confidentiality?

Discussion

Purpose of Discussion

Explain your argument within the context of your field, and the larger application of your work

Comment on the significance of your work

State the limitations of your study/research design/methods/methodologies

Offer potential future avenues for research, or ways of developing this research further

Strategies for Writing the Discussion

State the relation between your results and research questions

Do not try to minimize data that are contrary to your conclusions

provide an alternative account and describe how your theory could be tested

Defend your conclusions, but be respectful to contrary studies

Conclusions can be numbered consecutively, grouped thematically, or organized in another logical way.

Strategies for Writing the Discussion 2

If you speculate, keep it plausible

Try to think of what a prominent researcher from a different camp would argue about your results

Do you agree? Why or why not?

If there are inconsistencies or the evidence is mixed, how could they be resolved in the future?

Conclusion

Purpose of Conclusion

Synthesis of your analyses and results

Summarize the evidence for the conclusions of your work

Answer your research questions

Conclusions - Structure

Discussion of your findings

Contribution

Discussion of future research: identifying gaps, inconsistencies, controversies, etc.

Summary, elaboration and review of your previous chapters and of your major arguments

Implications of your research

Applications

Speculations, interesting questions, relating your topic to new contexts

Strategies for Writing the Conclusion

Nothing new is presented here: each conclusion is based on previously discussed information

Each conclusion is brief

Format: Often a numbered list in descending order of importance

Strategies for Writing the Conclusion 2

As you write the other sections of the paper, take note of possible implications or future research directions as they occur to you

Re-read your literature review section before starting

Discuss each result independently

Start with the immediate implications of your conclusions (i.e. next steps) and then think of more distal implications

Common Errors

Too vague and general

Including material not previously mentioned in the dissertation.

Checklist

- ✓ Everything in the Conclusions section has been mentioned previously
- ✓ Each conclusion is well supported by information in the dissertation
- ✓ The main conclusion is first
- ✓ The conclusions are in descending order of importance, or another logical structure

General Writing Strategies for Body Section

Section/Paragraph Structure

State your point or conclusion and give a brief summary of the section

Start and end with strength

- State the main point and the strongest arguments first

- Optionally, state the second strongest point just before conclusion

Restate your point or conclusion again in the final paragraph.

Give short chapter summaries at the beginning of each chapter (if desired)

Word Choice

Avoid prove

Use show, demonstrate, indicate, support, suggest, imply, appear, etc.

Hedging terms such as may be, might be, could be, probably, possibly may be used as needed, but avoid using too many hedges in one sentence and/or overall

Verb Tense

Past tense for results of completed primary research studies (e.g. interviews)

Present tense for outcomes: the answer to the research question, facts, current situations, enduring material

Common Errors

The main point is not clear

Too wordy, unorganized

Too short: not all implications have been discussed; not enough familiarity with the literature to contextualize your work

Not beginning with the most important outcomes

Not enough discussion of the significance of the outcomes; the outcomes are not put into context

Unjustifiable conclusions

Some material informed by the primary research is ignored or interpreted without adequate discussion/justification

Checklist

- ✓ Body paragraphs/sections/chapters are well structured
- ✓ The main point is at the beginning
- ✓ The other points appear in descending order of importance
- ✓ The primary research is adequately interpreted
- ✓ Discussions are placed in the context of your literature review/your field

Checklist Continued

- ✓ Each conclusion is based on evidence
- ✓ All hypotheses are reasonable
- ✓ There are no vague statements/hedging is not overdone
- ✓ Fair and accurate treatment of other related studies
- ✓ All anomalous outcomes are presented and explained (if applicable)

Dissertation Abstract

Purpose of Abstract

Allows the reader to see the main points at a glance

Provides a “road map” for the dissertation

Enables the reader to decide whether or not to read the entire document

Challenges

Being descriptive and not informative

Deciding what to include

Giving adequate coverage

Giving balanced coverage

Giving a coherent narrative

Achieving the desired length

General Format

A not-too-general statement placing the work in context

Methods

Main conclusions

Main discussion points

Main implications

Advice

Complete the dissertation before writing the Abstract

Make it informative

Add no new information

Do not cite figures, tables, or references

Length

Master's dissertation: approximately 300-500 words.

Ph.D. dissertation: approximately 500-800 words.

Varies according to length and complexity of the content.

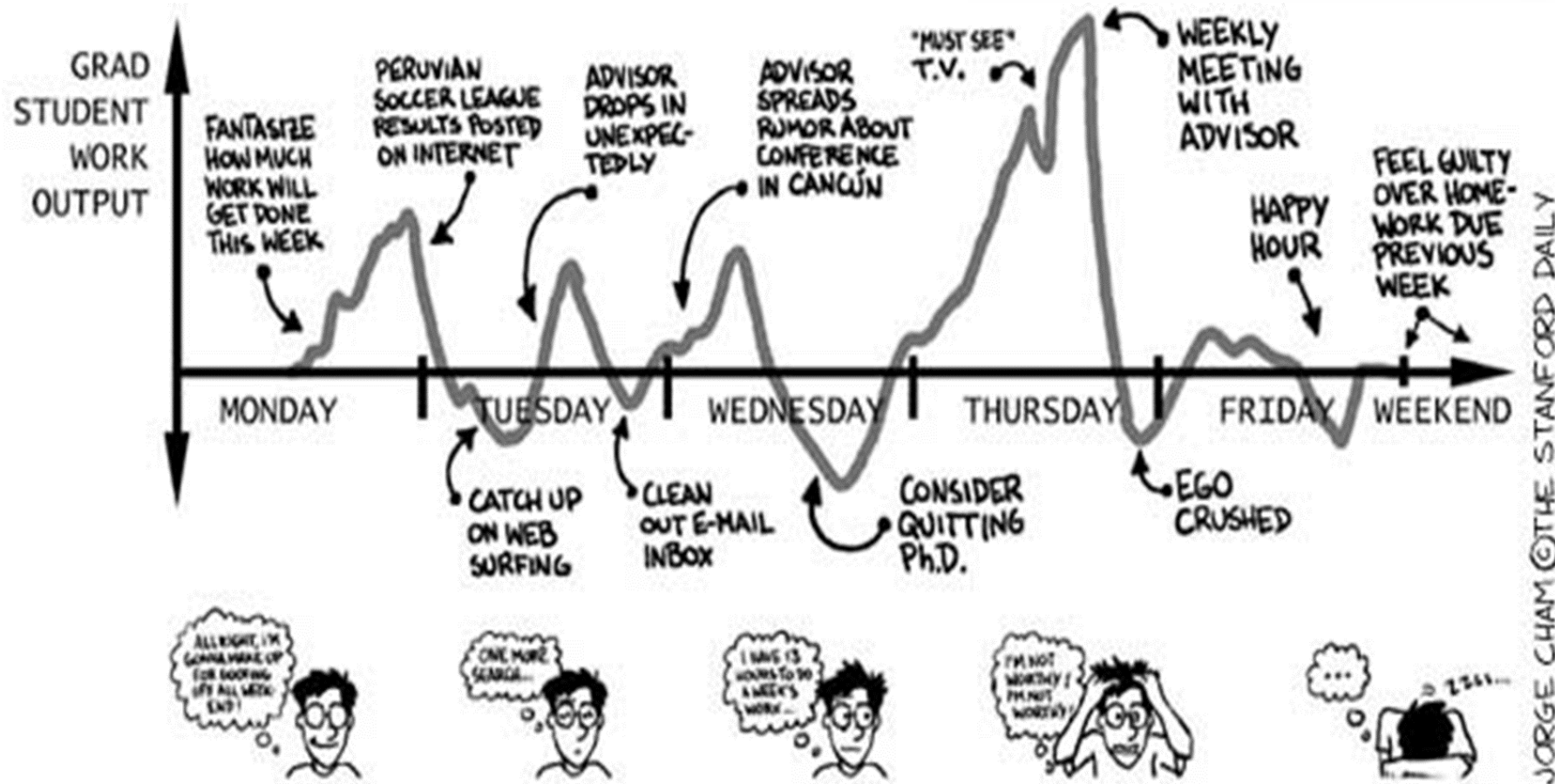
See also your style guide of choice.

Checklist

- ✓ Contains the basic elements
- ✓ It is informative, rather than descriptive
- ✓ Contains no new information
- ✓ Was written after the dissertation was completed

Dissertation: Work Strategies

Surviving your Graduate Thesis



JORGE CHAM © THE STANFORD DAILY

Keys to Success - Overview

Developing a writing habit

Understanding the writing process

Develop and maintain a stress-free relationship with writing

Organizing your research and writing

Managing your time and deadlines

Coping with stress and procrastination

Using your advisor well

Finishing

Start with Writing

Write your way in.

Writing isn't only about expressing your ideas.
It is also about discovering them.

Develop Good Writing Habits

The #1 Secret to Thesis Success:

Develop routine writing hours

Are you a lark or an owl?

Set realistic goals

- How many hours per day can you work without feeling burnt out the next day?
- Respect your physical and emotional well-being

Practice “Free writing”

Learn about writing with a Dissertation Journal

Make 'mindful' entries each day

Your research

Your writing

Your wellbeing

Record your thoughts, worries, interests, hunches, and insights

Create a dialogue with your research: note shortcomings, useful ideas etc.

Ask Questions

Summarize your understanding of ideas

Good Writing Habits

Maintain routine writing hours

Create a routine writing space

- Minimize distractions

- Minimize environmental shifts

- Create a unique environment for writing

Set daily goals

- Minutes, hours or pages

Continually evaluate and adjust your writing process

- Monitor your actual progress and adherence to your routine

- Unrealistic goals will discourage you

- Be open to change if you are not meeting your goals

Reward yourself

SMART Goals

S- Specific

Be clear: write 200 words, edit subsection 2.3, read one article

M-Measurable

set a limit that you can measure so you know when you have accomplished it

A- Attainable

R- Realistic

set goals that you can achieve

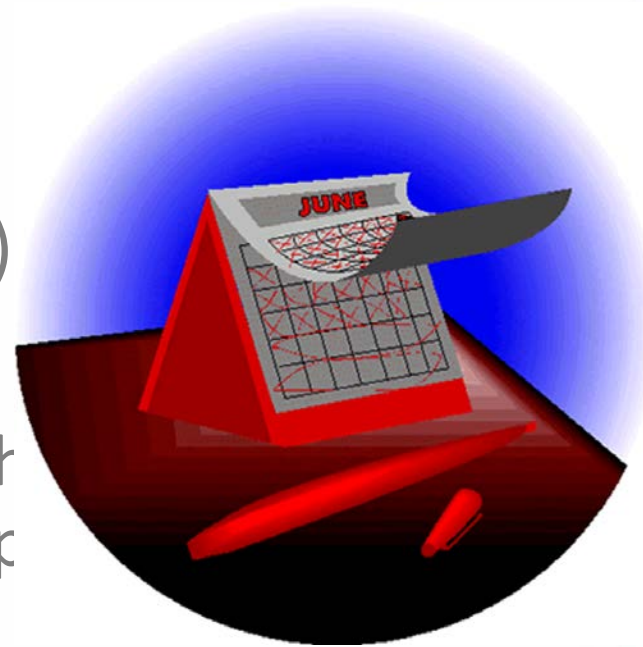
T- Timely

Prioritize goals that will help you most now

Time Management

MONTHLY Schedule: record general events and activities that you know (birthdays, weddings, holidays, etc.)

WEEKLY Schedule: create a spreadsheet for each day of the week, and set up hours for yourself



well as

our
leisure

Time Management Continued

How to fill in your weekly schedule:

- Schedule routine meals for yourself

- Account for classes, other jobs, and extra-curricular activities

- Set specific times for checking e-mail, Facebook, etc.

- Leave blank flex hours/days

- Schedule your core writing hours

Deadlines

Begin by setting generous deadlines that you know you can meet.

If you think you can realistically accomplish your goal in 2 weeks, give yourself 3 weeks and aim to finish early.

Set small deadlines for yourself:

If Chap. 1 is due in 4 weeks, set 4 or 5 interim deadlines to help you reach your goal

Set small daily goals for paragraphs, sections, editing

Reward yourself for meeting deadlines

Don't punish yourself for not!

If you did not meet your goal, your goal was unrealistic

Time Management Strategies

Determine your end point, and work backwards from your deadline to create smaller goalposts.

Post your short and long-term goals in a visible place

Determine Priorities

Consider other things that will take up your time: conference applications, conference papers, scholarship applications, TAships, etc.

Keep a weekly tab of how many hours were actually needed for each task.

Time Management Strategies 2

Keep asking yourself "Is this important to do right now?" If it is not, then pick something that is more important to work on

Be mindful: are you doing less important tasks because you dread writing?

Tackle the Worst First

If you struggle with anxiety, consider getting to work straight away after you get up and begin with the task that you dread the most. Having courageously faced your fears, you will be free to work on other things

Time Management Strategies 3

Think Ahead

Planning time is never wasted time. Block off regular weekly, even daily, times for writing your dissertation. Schedule your top priorities for completion each week, or each day. At the end of the week, review your progress and assess how you make improvements for the next week.

Postpone Minor Tasks

Resist the temptation to clear up small "to do" items, like email, first. Use your energy and cleared mind to accomplish difficult items.

Time Management Strategies 4

Write Down Results

"To Do" lists can be helpful, but consider writing "Did Do" lists to keep track of your accomplishments. This will help you stay motivated, and show you how much you've work on.

Pick Your Bird

Are you a wren or an owl? Do you like to start the day with a period of productivity, or are you productive late at night without distractions?

Time Management Strategies 5

Reserve Your Prime Time

Allocate your most alert times of the day for the most challenging tasks. Reserve this time for your writing, and don't let other tasks get in the way of your writing.

Figure out what works for you rather than getting stuck on what your work habits “should” look like

Practice Telling Time

Estimate before starting and then record how long it takes to complete a task. Note when you tend to underestimate or overestimate the amount of time activities will take. When you can predict how long it will take you to accomplish something, you can schedule it accurately.

Time Management Strategies 6

Use Little Bits of Time

Keep a list of small "To Do" items for gaps between appointments, meetings, classes or TA-ing, or while commuting.

Enjoy Your Free Time

To stay productive you must take breaks

Consider using the pomodoro method for scheduling breaks

Make sure to take longer breaks between activities to help you transition into the task

Be honest with yourself about how long you can work before losing focus

Sleepyhead Activities

Consider activities that can be completed when you're not functioning at your peak performance.

Sleepyhead Activities include:

- formatting references
- proofreading for spelling (not for comprehension)
- downloading and organizing pdf's
- inserting references into your citation manager
- basic keyword searches
- most corrections (not rewrites)

Adapted from Zombie Activities

<http://tododissertation.wordpress.com/2011/07/05/guest-post-zombie-dissertation>

Common Causes of Procrastination

Perfectionism

Anxiety

“Impostor Syndrome”

Feeling Overwhelmed

Ambivalence

Bad work-life balance

Dealing with Procrastination

Set realistic expectations

Don't take yourself too seriously

Break large tasks down into small achievable pieces

Reward yourself for meeting your goals

Say "NO" Guiltlessly

Identify time wasters and develop strategies for dealing with them

Make writing a habit rather than a chore

Your Advisor

Set up regular meetings with your advisor

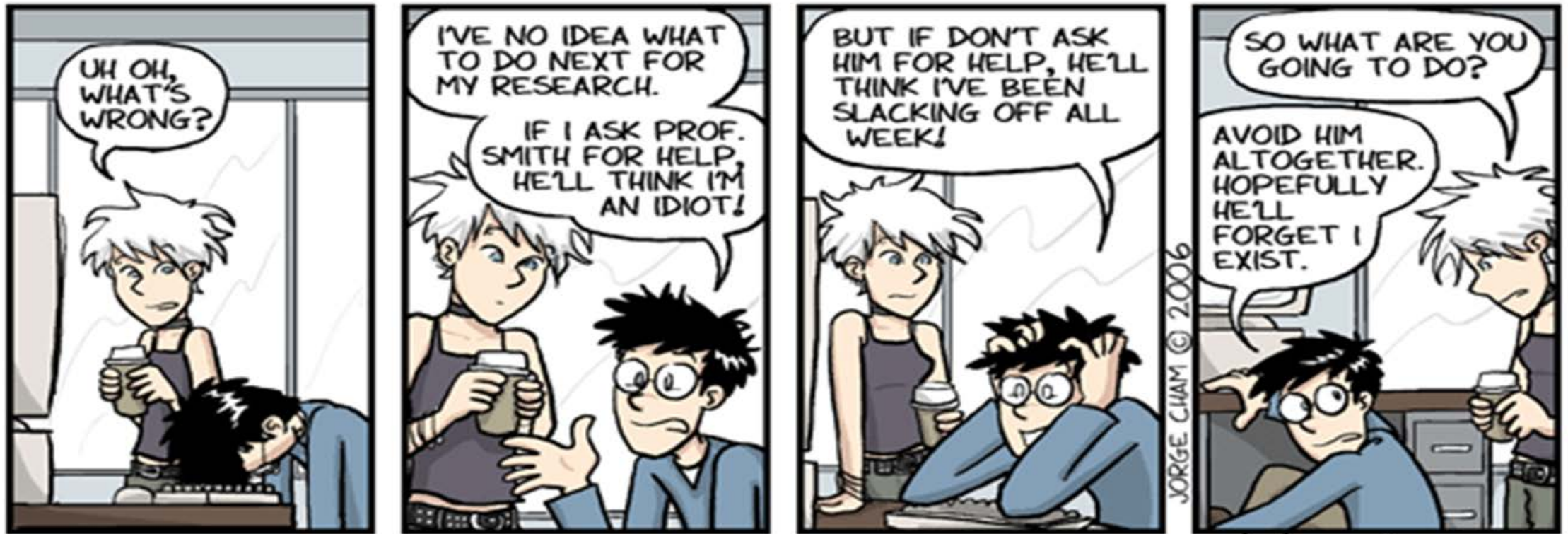
Come prepared with a work plan/questions: Be open, honest, and forthcoming about any difficulties you may be experiencing

Discuss your work habits with your supervisor and agree on deadlines mutually; check in often

Be professional: there is no need to hide if you've struggled to meet a deadline, have questions, etc.

Your thesis advisor is your ally, not your adversary

Working with Your Advisor



Working with your Advisor 2

Remember:

As important as your writing is to you, your advisor has a life and career of their own

Therefore:

Make the most of your relationship by building a culture of mutual respect for each other's time

The Revision Process

Important Tips:

Read with an ear toward varied sentence structures

Use outlines to track the flow of your ideas

Try to make explicit connections between your chapters

Imagine yourself as critical reader, rather than writer:

- Does this make sense?
- Have I defined all of the key theories and ideas I've used?
- Are there any overt holes in my logic?
- Plan to do several full revisions; aim to make each one just slightly better than the last

The Revision Process - Finishing

At what point is enough actually enough?

Decide when to stop

Edit out ideas or don't include everything

Work closely with your thesis advisor and share an open dialogue about the revision process. Meetings with your advisor will help you to know when your revisions are ready

Stick to your deadlines and accept outcomes. The thesis/dissertation is one stage in your academic career

Other Advice

1. Focus on the outcome
2. Say “NO” Guiltlessly
3. Identify time wasters and develop strategies for dealing with them
4. Make writing a habit rather than a chore
5. Trust your gut
6. Perfect will never happen
7. Prioritize dissertation work over other degree requirements
8. Only turn on your computer when you are working
9. Only check email after at least 2 hours of work
10. Take advantage of your attention span: alternate 25 minutes of working and 5 minutes of breaking
11. Get away from the computer if you aren't working
12. Take care of your emotional and social needs
13. Seek support

12 Tips to Keep You Going

1. In your first draft, use I to keep in touch with your reactions, your beliefs, and your understandings. Find your voice as Author.
2. Write as flamboyantly as you like in your first draft to give voice to your passion.
3. If you are nervous about asserting your position, qualify as often as possible – use “probably,” “perhaps,” “in my opinion,” etc.
4. In the beginning, try to forget about your audience evaluating your writing as it may create unnecessary anxiety.

Rudestam, Kjell Erik and Rae R. Newton. *Surviving Your Dissertation*. 2nd ed. 218-221.

12 Tips Continued

5. In your first draft, use short simple sentences.
6. Find your own unique personal comfortable writing style.
7. Don't be afraid to use the writing of others as a model.
8. Introduce discipline into your writing task – commit to a daily number of hours or pages.

Rudestam, Kjell Erik and Rae R. Newton. *Surviving Your Dissertation*. 2nd ed. 218-221.

12 Steps Continued

After your first draft is finished, and you are ready to revise:

9. Remove all the flamboyant adverbs and adjectives you so joyously put in your first draft and focus on having substantial evidence for your claims.
10. Eliminate all your qualifying statements unless they are absolutely necessary.
11. You can now combine all your short choppy sentences and make them flow better.
12. Don't accept any of the foregoing or any other rules if they don't work for you.

Rudestam, Kjell Erik and Rae R. Newton. *Surviving Your Dissertation*. 2nd ed. 218-221.

...SMART-ER Goals

E-Emotional

How do you want to feel during the writing process?

How do you want to feel when you've achieved your goal?

R-Rewarded

What will you give yourself as a reward for completion?

Think small: a walk? an hour break? coffee with a friend?

Organizing your Sources

For example:

Develop a clear set of naming rules for your documents and sources

Allocate time to organization each day

Colour coordinate your files by chapter, theme, author, etc.

Use appropriate software

Resources

- Lunenburg, F. C., & Irby, B. J. (2008). Writing a successful thesis or dissertation: Tips and strategies for students in the social and behavioral sciences. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Bolker, J. (1998). Writing your dissertation in fifteen minutes a day: A guide to revising and finishing your doctoral thesis. New York: Henry Holt.
- Silyn-Roberts, H. (2002). Writing for science and engineering: Papers, presentations and reports. Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann.

Graduate Student Support

- One-on-one tutorial sessions to help students with writing and referencing during any stage of the process.
- Two 50-minute appointments per week.
- Online workshops on a variety of graduate writing-related topics.
- Useful guides and resources on the website.
- Be sure to make an appointment on our website a week or two before your desired date as spots fill up quickly.

4th floor, Student Learning Centre

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