Here's the thing: most graduate students who fail to complete their master's or PhD, fail at the point where they sit down to write their thesis or dissertation.[2] It's not the course work, not the research, not their relations with their supervisor that defeats them; it's the writing. They sit down to begin writing and discover that no matter how hard they try, they just can't make any progress. At which point they either throw up their hands and quit outright, or—more commonly—they procrastinate until their time runs out. Then they say things like, "Oh, I never got around to finishing because that new job (or the new baby, or the divorce, or the fill-in-the-blank-with-whatever) came along and I just had to let the thesis go." Life always provides some explanation that will seem credible to oneself and others…but it's almost always the writing that stops them in their tracks.

Graduate programs usually do a decent job of teaching how to do research. Students take at least one and often several courses in research methods appropriate to their field. A supervisor is assigned and a committee assembled to help guide and mentor the research process. The student is supported through choosing a topic, designing the study, gathering data, and interpreting the findings. Which is all to the good. But then, once the student has all the data in hand and analyzed, that support often abruptly

vanishes. The supervisor usually says something like, "Very well, then. Just run along and write that up, and I'll see you when you're done." As if *writing* the thesis or dissertation were straightforward.

It is not. Far from it. It seems like writing *ought* to be straightforward because everyone in a master's program has already proven themselves a proficient writer: the student has already written dozens of qualifying undergraduate papers, and, in most programs, their fair share of graduate papers. So how is it possible that when one sits down to write a thesis, one suddenly can't do it?

Graduate Writing Different From Undergraduate Writing

The answer is subtle, complex, and widely misunderstood. Because it is assumed that writing is about literacy, it appears as if everyone in a graduate program (with some allowances for second language issues) should pretty much have that nailed down by the time they reach their thesis or dissertation. Literacy, however, is merely 'a necessary but not sufficient' factor. Successfully undertaking and completing a *sustained* piece of writing, such as a thesis, *requires an entirely new skill set*.

Since no one tells them that a fundamentally

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[1] I am grateful to colleagues, Drs. D. and M. Basil, Dr. J. Poulsen, G. Reynolds, Dr. A. Shamsul, and editors E. McLachlan and K. Shalley, for their feedback on earlier drafts.

[2] See Appendix: A Few Statistics.

different process is required—that their old strategies will not work in this new situation—they often wrongly assume that their difficulty writing reflects badly on their intellectual ability; that they don't have the wherewithal to complete a master's or PhD, even though they have *already* completed every other aspect of the program. What they really need is the (usually) missing course or workshop that teaches that different writing tasks call for *different* tools—and then teaches the specific skills and strategies needed to undertake a sustained writing project.

In other words, to undertake a sustained piece of writing, one first has to *unlearn* all those writing strategies that worked so well on term papers as an undergraduate.
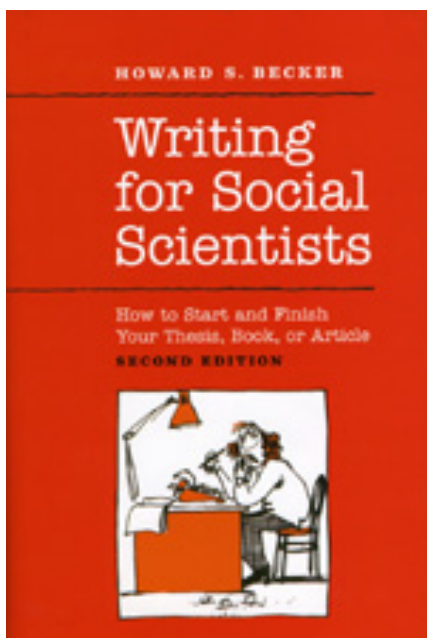
Howard Becker, the great ethnographer and champion of clear writing in the social sciences, identified the problem over thirty-five years ago in his classic (and should-still-be-required-reading) *Writing for Social Scientists: How to Start and Finish Your Thesis, Book or Article.*

Becker realized that thesis writing was fundamentally different from writing under-graduate term papers. These observations are summarized in Table 1 (page 3).

To be successful, graduate students have to stop thinking of a thesis as something they can work out in their head, as they had with undergraduate papers. Trying the same technique on a thesis inevitably makes one feel inadequate, because a thesis is too big to keep the whole thing in mind at once. Feeling this or that piece of their argument slipping out of consciousness, the graduate student may wonder, "What's wrong with me that I forgot that?" Well, nothing! No one could keep all that information in their brain at once.

Similarly, most students undertaking a thesis have completely unrealistic ideas about timelines. A term paper is often bashed out the night before it is due, with at most the week before given to thinking off and on about the topic. Because they have routinely produced a 2,000-word term paper in a weekend (and that one time did three papers in one week!), they—not unreasonably—assume that they should be able to make at least that much progress on their thesis each week. "Done by Christmas" seems not merely possible, but leisurely.

Unfortunately, the two types of writing are not comparable. A sustained piece of writing is more than the sum of its parts; that is, writing a 120-page thesis is not the same as writing twelve 10-page papers. The thesis always takes significantly longer, because as the number of pages increase arithmetically, the complexity of the task and the difficulties encountered expand exponentially.

As days or weeks go by with no progress, instead of understanding that this is a natural part of the process, students often panic. The

Table 1: Term Paper Writing Versus Sustained Writing

Undergraduate Term Paper	Thesis, Dissertation, or Book
<u>Short Length and Duration</u> • short enough to rehearse, draft, and manage in head • short enough to first draft in one or two nights <u>Low Stakes</u> • topics assigned by prof; student commitment to topic remains low • only one of several assignments for a course; course just one of several courses in their program • marker only audience; little likelihood of public embarrassment <u>Structure rewards students who are</u> • best first draft writers • capable of churning out multitude of papers with little depth • sufficiently detached from topic to cater to prof's idiosyncrasies	<u>Sustained</u> • too long and complicated to be kept in head • too long and complicated to be complete in single session; requires minimum of months <u>High Stakes</u> • grad chooses thesis topic that matters a great deal to them • entire degree program at stake; a one-shot deal • not just for advisor and committee, manuscript is made public for everyone to read <u>Structure rewards students who are</u> • best at <u>re</u>writing • capable of methodical planning and execution of single, deeply thoughtful project • passionate (obsessed) about topic

high stakes, professionally and emotionally, combined with this incomprehensible lack of progress, triggers the fight or flight response: which may help explain both the high dropout rate at the thesis *writing* stage, and the high rate of divorce among graduate students and recent graduates.[3]

Sustained Writing Is About Rewriting

If one manages to somehow survive all of the above—perhaps by treating each chapter as a separate term paper, so the old strategies sort-of-kind-of work—what ultimately ensnares the thesis/dissertation writer is that a sustained piece of writing *isn't about the writing—it's about the re-writing*.

Let's be honest: nobody rewrites their undergraduate papers. Not really. Oh sure, maybe some keeners got their parent or partner to copy edit the spelling and grammar; or perhaps one time went as far as moving the introduction to the conclusion, or swapped out one questionable example for a clearer one; but that's all just tinkering, not actual rewriting. Because undergraduate papers are low stakes/low commitment (only one assignment of many for the course, the course only one of many in the program; papers written for an audience of one—i.e., the instructor—on a topic likely imposed by the instructor and of only vague relevance to the student's actual interests/needs) there is little motivation to revise, and never enough time to do so. Course structures reward good first-draft writing with no obvious payoff for re-writing. The instructor may well cover the paper in red ink to show how it *could have been improved,* but few instructors actually provide an opportunity for resubmission

based on their feedback. Without any tangible return on the investment that rewriting the paper would entail, what possible motivation would a student have to actually look at, let alone take, the instructor's feedback?

Rewriting Is an Inevitable Part of Thesis Writing
- 1st draft = first thing you thought of
- 2nd draft = first thing your supervisor thought of
- 3rd draft = first thing committee members thought of
- 4th draft = first actually thoughtful draft
- 5th draft = first draft everyone thought might work
- 6th draft = first draft copy editor thought acceptable

And that's only if every step is perfect the first time!

Rewriting as Unavoidable
By contrast, the structures for a thesis or dissertation are the exact opposite. One has a supervisor whose job is not to grade the thesis but to point out the necessary changes on the first three or four drafts. Once the supervisor is more or less satisfied with a 'final' draft, the manuscript is passed to the three or four members of the thesis committee, and the revision process starts all over again. Each committee member is there to offer their specific expertise; i.e., to demand further revisions to whatever aspect that particular committee member is there to ensure is done properly. Even in the extremely unlikely case that one or two of these four individuals thought one's initial draft pure genius, there is no possibility whatsoever that all five are going to sign off on one's first draft as a done deal. With luck, one has read "How to Choose an Advisor"[4] and so avoided having

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[3] Bet no one mentioned the high divorce rate among graduate students and recent graduates when they recruited you to grad school! [It used to be significantly higher than

for the general population, although these days the general divorce rate has almost caught up.]
[4] Available free at EssentialEdits.ca.

two members on the committee whose advice or demands for revisions are mutually exclusive, but even in the best case scenario one has to anticipate that each committee member will want their own kick at the can.

Resistance to Rewriting

Many graduate students find it hard to adjust to the unfamiliar requirement of rewriting. After years of experience as proficient first-draft writers—which is how they got this far in the first place—many find it difficult to accept that someone would ask them to do a second draft, let alone *multiple* rewrites. Unless forewarned that this is the normal process, it is easy to misconstrue the repeated requests for further refinement as outright rejection. Long experience tells them that once having 'finished' the manuscript (meaning: the first draft), the next step is for the instructor to hand it back with effusive praise and a diploma. When instead it is returned covered in red ink, many students are either crushed or indignant.

Having pushed themselves to complete a first draft, many feel strongly that they have put in the requisite effort. Consequently, if this version is apparently not good enough, well then, they can come to only one of two conclusions: (a) that they don't have what it takes to be successful after all and should drop out now; or (b) that they have been saddled with a completely unreasonable supervisor who is persecuting them unfairly.

Both ideas are just completely wrong.[5]

Getting a thesis or dissertation back covered in red ink is *great!* That means one is actually getting the feedback from the supervisor and committee members that one is paying for. That's mentoring, that is! *Not* getting feedback is what should be terrifying, since that lack of direction makes it much harder to figure out what needs to be revised, or how to further refine the argument one is trying to make. Fulsome praise, such as "wonderful first draft" is, of course, to be welcomed, but the important bits are the comments that come after the "but…."

I appreciate that having spent days, weeks, or possibly months, on a particular section, it is hard to hear that it should be rewritten this other way, or perhaps cut entirely. I feel your pain, because all writers feel the same way. Having given birth to this or that sentence, any suggestion that it be changed engenders the same reaction in me as if someone had suggested my child was defective and had to be put down.[6] It's especially hard to accept criticism when that child is a favoured one: a phrase or idea with which one was particularly pleased.

Kill your Darlings

If something doesn't fit,
isn't working,
or your supervisor hates it,
or someone on your committee hates it,
or your external hates it,
then throw it out
no matter how clever you think it,
or how much work you put into it.

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[5] Well, okay, sometimes one really can get an unreasonable or incompetent supervisor, but that's rare. Read "How to Choose a Supervisor" at EssentialEdits.ca to avoid such a catastrophe.

[6] It wasn't until I began working for government that I had this wrong-thinking beaten out of me. (Anything one writes for government is subject to two or three levels of managerial oversight and stakeholder review. These individuals would arbitrarily change the wording, either to satisfy some agenda of their own, or just to prove they had shown up for the meeting.) Having learned to survive the revision process, however, I was eventually forced to grudgingly concede at least the possibility that—perhaps—some few of the changes might be considered, in some contexts . . . as improvements.

Ahem. And, once I got over myself, I came to recognize that three heads are always better than one: these days I would never consider sending anything out for publication without first badgering two or three colleagues into similarly reviewing, editing, and improving my paper (see first footnote).

The first draft of anything *always* misses something important: fails to connect some of the dots for the reader; or redundantly beats the reader over the head to the point of being insulting; or forgets to account for gender or social class or ethnicity or whatever factor is not forefront in one's own list of hobby-horses; or just isn't clear because the idea remains in the author's head rather than down on the page. There is, therefore, always a second, and usually third or more drafts.

> The beautiful part of writing is that you don't have to get it right the first time, unlike, say, a brain surgeon.
> —Robert Cormier

Copy editing versus structural editing. Most people are unfamiliar with the different types of editing,[7] and so usually think of editing as *copy editing*. Most students are okay with having an editor go through their thesis or dissertation to catch typos, spelling, and grammatical errors—and are especially grateful for someone editing for APA (or Chicago, MLA, Harvard, or whichever style, applies) formatting errors. What they may not understand is the insistence of the supervisor, committee members, or external reviewer on asking for structural changes that go beyond mere copy editing to actual rewriting, because this is not something normally encountered in one's undergraduate experience.

Structural editing, however, means *recon-ceptualizing and recasting* an argument in an entirely new way. It's about rethinking one's entire approach, not just tampering with the wording. Whole sections of the initial draft may disappear and whole new sections added. Whatever box one wrote oneself into in the first draft, the second draft has to be

out-of-the-box thinking. Rewriting is not about making corrections and moving on…it's about going back to the drawing board and thinking deeply about how one might proceed differently. Given that one has already done the obvious draft and is now going deeper, rewriting takes as long, or likely much longer, than the original draft.

Resistance to structural editing. This is, of course, completely outside the undergrad's experience. The only time an undergraduate can conceivably be asked to completely re-conceptualize their work—that is, to take a completely new approach to a topic—is when the initial paper is so off target the instructor completely rejects the submission and tells the student to start over. Being asked to rewrite a section of thesis may retain those negative connotations for grad students who don't understand that *such revisions are a routine and necessary part of the process*, and so they misinterpret the need for revision as failure. These negative emotions, combined with the daunting prospect of starting over—which means facing more writer's block, more angst, more drudgery, more *thesis writing*—becomes overwhelming.

Rewriting requires more than just changing a few words: it's about re-conceptualizing, about giving up on one's current fixed idea, about starting over fresh with something completely new. Resisting feedback, trying to save what one has, trying to trick the committee that one has accepted their input while actually refusing to give up on the approach in the initial draft, just delays the inevitable.

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[7] Editors Canada, the professional association of Canadian Editors, distinguishes between seven types of editing. For simplicity sake, I only address two types. *Structural editing* is also frequently referred to as *substantive editing,* and occasionally as *developmental editing* (though that's actually something else).

Thus, even when explicitly directed to *re*write a section to incorporate some substantive change, many graduate students are (at least subconsciously) resistant. Giving in to the natural tendency to want to save as much of the original work as possible, they often end up investing more time and energy trying to make the old wording work with the new content than if they just started over fresh from the new outline.

This reluctance to rewrite the substance rather than merely revise wording is a serious and often fatal flaw. Resisting the need to start the section over from scratch draws out the process through one or more unnecessary iterations, because no matter how many times one tries *not* to make the requested change, one eventually has to get there, whether it's word by word through twelve iterations, or wholesale in one go. Better to rip off the Band-Aid at once and move on. Cut the problematic section, throw it away, and start again.

Worse, resisting a *rewrite* and instead handing in iteration after iteration of ineffectual *rewording* quickly leads to a deterioration in the student-supervisor relationship. As the supervisor loses patience with the student (who appears either unwilling or unable to make the changes demanded), the supervisor may start to resign him/herself to failing the student. Since explicitly failing a student is embarrassing for all concerned (including the supervisor), it is not uncommon to simply stall the student until they run out of time. The supervisor's natural reluctance to set aside time to read yet another iteration of the same thesis—knowing there is little reason to believe this instance will be any better than the previous three non-rewrites—may lead

them to simply stop responding. Meanwhile, the student's patience is similarly strained as the student becomes convinced that the supervisor or committee is impossible to satisfy, no matter how many times they rework the contentious section. Which is, of course, true: rewording the section is never going to satisfy them when what was requested and required was a substantive rewrite.[8]

Need for Substantive/Structural Revision
Successful completion of a thesis is not just a question of having to comply with the demands of the supervisor and committee for substantive changes. Strange as it may seem, the provision of a supervisor and committee is supposed to make the process *easier* for the student by providing advice and guidance, which includes modelling the need for repeated iterations of substantive revision. Most writers find it difficult to spot when there are gaping holes in their work or when it is good enough, so the university has thought-fully provided a group of editors (the supervisor and committee) to help out. Next time you undertake a major project, you'll likely be on your own. At least half the point of doing a thesis or dissertation is learning how to initiate the substantive revision process for oneself.

There are two basic reasons for undertaking structural/substantive changes: first, that something fundamental has changed along the way; second, that one needs to strive for those elusive insights that make one's work stand out.

Substantive revision as evolution. Rewriting is a necessary and normal part of any major project because research is by definition a

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[8] Should one ever find oneself in the position where the supervisor is taking longer and longer to respond to each iteration, and seems to be increasingly grumpy about the latest changes still not getting at the fundamental problem, the next iteration handed in had better be completely different and introduced by the student saying, "Sorry it took so long for me to 'get it', but I have now tossed out the original section and started over again from scratch. I have completely reconceptualised my entire approach here, based on your suggested direction."

process of discovery. If one could anticipate every detail of one's thesis ahead of time, that would imply that one knew all the answers, and that there wasn't any need for that research.

One's literature review has to change as one finds new or contradictory literature that shifts one's views. Hypotheses may change as new variables are identified, initial ideas are discredited, or new explanations suddenly present themselves. The methodology section changes as the initial plan doesn't work out (e.g., the research site withdraws permission; the sample size is too small; or someone breaks the centrifuge) and one has to come up with a workaround. And that's all before the data is collected and the results analyzed, where any unexpected finding may require going back to adjust earlier chapters. As the research proceeds, everything is subject to rethinking, and therefore rewriting.

The need for this level of structural editing is usually obvious to students, and often undertaken without having to be told by their supervisor. Other times, it comes as both a surprise and good news: being allowed to reconceptualise means that one's research is salvageable when things didn't go strictly according to plan. A little flexibility and a willingness to revise on the fly can get one out of almost any situation.

Structural Editing to Develop Insights. What is harder to recognize is that even when one has rewritten one's way through all of those inevitable changes and adjustments as the research evolves, that initial completed draft is still just the first step. That first draft represents one's initial thoughts, the first stab at the topic or issue. But the goal is always to go one step deeper to come up with real insights and significant discoveries.

Here is where rewriting becomes not just an unavoidable part of the process, but one of the best tools in one's toolkit. One needs to *use* (re)writing to *do* the thinking. Thinking is an emergent property of writing, rather than the other way around. The process of getting one's preliminary (i.e., obvious) ideas down on paper is what provides the springboard to the really profound insights: only when one has gotten the measure of the box, can one start to think outside of it.

Writing/rewriting allows one to bounce one's ideas off the page, to try out various lines of reasoning to see where they lead. Writing things down allows one to place one set of thoughts on hold, as one pursues other ideas or strategies. Trying out various possible combinations reveals connections not visible before. Structural editing allows one to try different ways to organize the material to make the argument clearer, to examine which ideas supersede or subsume others. One cannot see ideas in the air: one needs to write them down to judge which need to be expanded and which expunged; how pieces fit together or don't fit at all. Once down on paper, one can interrogate ideas to see how they fit with each other, with the data, and with what others have said in the literature.

To think one's way through the research one therefore needs to (re)write one's way through the thesis.[9] Give the initial draft your best shot, then step back and think again, delve deeper, brainstorm by writing multiple trial versions and revised drafts. Find your revelation, then go back to the start of the thesis and rewrite everything as if you were always destined to make that discovery.

Of course, all this experimentation must be balanced against reasonable expectations for the thesis or dissertation. Check-in frequently with your supervisor so they can provide

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[9] The corollary is that telling the thesis supervisor one is unwilling to rewrite is to announce one is unwilling to think.

input on when the draft is good enough, and when another might be in order. Stop when they say stop, collect your degree, and move on to the next sustained writing project armed with the new and invaluable technique of knowing how to redraft.

. . . But Not Compulsive Rewriting

Of course, the opposite problem also needs to be acknowledged: the compulsive rewriter who never makes enough progress to actually submit a first draft. Convinced what they have written is substandard, they are too embarrassed to show it to the supervisor, and flail away ineffectually until their time runs out.

Part of the problem is the misconception that what they hand into the supervisor should be their final draft. This is wrong-headed for three reasons. First, the supervisor is going to want to have some input, regardless of how smoothly written this initial submission. Second, the student is so close to their material that they are often hyperaware of the inherent flaws in their methods, data, analysis, or writing, etc. and therefore think their draft worse than it actually is. Third, and most significantly, they don't realize that *everybody's* initial submission sucks.

One cannot resonably compare before and after as if they were equivalent. Every apple pie starts out as raw apples.

Invidious comparisons. The inferiority complex that undermines some graduate students is engendered by comparing their first (or third or fourth) draft with someone else's published thesis or book. But this is comparing apples and apple pies: one's initial draft compared against someone else's fifth (or nineteenth) draft, the published work having had the benefit of extensive input from a supervisor, three to five committee members, an external reviewer, and likely the attentions of a good copy editor thrown in for good measure. Hyperaware of flaws in their own work, they are correspondingly naive about spotting similar or worse problems glossed over in these other studies; and fail to recognize that these others also started out with first drafts as bad, or perhaps very much worse, than their own.

Indeed, these invidious comparisons are often made between their own initial draft and the published work of their very favourite half-dozen authors, the giants in their field. Which is, of course, completely wrong-headed: how can one expect one's *very first* draft to match the best, most polished work in the field? Such comparisons reveal a self-expectation that isn't so much inferiority complex as hubris![10]

Understanding the supervisor's role. Again, the fundamental issue is a mistaken understanding leftover from one's under-graduate experience, when the instructor graded rather than advised. In contrast to this undergraduate experience, submitting a complete draft to the supervisor is a first step, not the final moment of truth. It should be the start of the process of revision and rewriting, not left until one has invested time and energy into editing and rewriting to make changes which may not even be targeted to the real problems. In the absence of the supervisor's and committee's input, one might actually be making the thesis worse, by revising the wrong bits.

Instead, the compulsive rewriter needs to

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[10] See "On Intellectual Thrashing", p.15.

recognize that whatever draft is presented to the supervisor is, for the supervisor, merely the initial draft. The supervisor expects it to have flaws, precisely because it has not yet had the benefit of the supervisor's direction. There would be no point in having a supervisor or a committee of experts if one were not expected to benefit significantly from their input. Therefore: one needs to show one's early drafts to the supervisor and committee so that one can indeed benefit from their expertise and long experience. A decent supervisor and/or committee can save the thesis writer literally months of labour by identifying relevant literature, deadends to be avoided, new angles to be adopted, and so on.

One needs, therefore, to establish a balance between writing and rewriting. One needs to understand that rewriting is inevitable, necessary, and ultimately desirable; but at the same time, not end up obsessively rewriting such that there is no forward motion. Again, this is why we have supervisors: to provide the feedback on when a particular section or chapter requires another iteration, and when it is sufficient to move forward.

Premature polishing. Obsessive polishing early on is a mistake even when done well, because it could be wasted effort: as one moves to the next chapter or phase of the project, one may discover that later insights require changes to earlier sections. For example, one's initial hypotheses may have to be revised as one reads the current research for the literature review. The literature review may have to be revised to add an additional line of research to account for a variable one had initially overlooked. As one goes out to collect data, unexpected responses may lead to new hypotheses; and so on. All of these changes are a normal and expected part of the research process, so there is little point in perfecting earlier sections until one has a complete first draft.

Those who are open to reconceptualizing— going back to the drawing board—are those most likely to succeed and to make significant contributions to their field. But one cannot get to the stage of re-conceptualizing one's approach until one has made enough progress to be sufficiently immersed in the material to get to that depth. Therefore: one must take several steps forward before it is reasonable to go one back.

Polishing as procrastination. Similarly, obsessive rewriting in the early stages can be a form of procrastination. Stuck waiting for the next insight, one can stall by revising the initial chapters in the belief one is "working on my thesis" without actually making any forward progress. One must polish one's proposal to a fairly high gloss, because the more that can be thought through at this stage, the easier the rest follows. But once into the actual thesis, rough drafts should be taken to the supervisor for feedback, and rewrites undertaken only as directed by the supervisor, committee or external examiner.

Write freely and as rapidly as possible and throw the whole thing on paper. Never correct or rewrite until the whole thing is down. Rewrite in process is usually found to be an excuse for not going on.

— *John Steinbeck* —

AZ QUOTES

One must *not* rewrite anything the supervisor is fine with. It frustrates supervisors if one makes substantive changes to some section that did not require it: it not only means more work for the supervisor (who now has to critique the newly revised material, *again*), but there is also a significant danger that the new material may be off message, headed in a wrong direction, or just plain wrong.

Therefore, one should arrange to meet with the supervisor on a regular schedule to discuss what progress has been made since the last meeting, and be guided by the supervisor on whether the current section/-chapter/draft is sufficient to move on to the next step, or whether it needs to be revisited.

Responding to feedback

The general rule for responding to editorial comments is *not to* for at least 48 hours. A polite, "thank you, I got your email" acknowledgement is usually a good idea, and one can go so far as to say, "I greatly appreciate your advice and ongoing support", but one should avoid commenting on any of the specifics until one has had time to fully digest the feedback. This is harder to do if one is actually meeting with the supervisor in person, but even then, one should just take notes and only ask enough questions to ensure one has understood the feedback well enough to accurately write it down. One can argue any point *next visit*, but this time, one should just record new feedback and/or discuss (argue) how one responded to the feedback from last time.

That "48-hour" rule is in place because almost everyone's initial response to supervisor (or committee, or journal referee) feedback is, "this person didn't understand a single thing I wrote." That's just human nature, and even an experienced academic and professional editor such as myself reacts this way, even though I know perfectly well the comments likely are not as far off the mark as they may at first appear (i.e., *feel*). Upon second reading, one might change that to, "However did they get *that* out of what I wrote?" closely followed by the recognition that if the reader misinterpreted that badly, perhaps one has not been as clear in the current drafts as one might have hoped. By third reading one might have calmed down enough to realize at least some of the comments might be correct, even if one is still not thrilled about how much work will be entailed to fix the problem. By fourth reading, some of the comments will suddenly make sense, and a few may fall into the, "Why didn't I think of that myself?" category. By fifth reading, one may be in a suitable frame of mind to actually start on the suggested revisions. After the revisions have been made, one is generally ready for the next visit with (or email to) the supervisor.

Resisting revision is counterproductive, but that does not mean one should take every suggestion uncritically. Supervisors and committee members have only a limited time available to review one's manuscript and are therefore going past the current sentence a lot faster than it took the thesis writer to compose it. Similarly, the thesis writer is usually (i.e., had better be!) more familiar with the relevant research for their *specific* topic than even the supervisor. So the supervisor and committee members are, very occasionally, going to get it wrong.

More likely, their identification of the problem is correct, but the suggested reason and/or solution may be wrong. This has consistently been my own experience when some government or publisher's committee seems to randomly pick on some aspect of my draft document. What was said or written in the 20 seconds that particular paragraph was the center of the committee's attention was probably wrong, but they have almost always been right that there was *something* wrong with that paragraph. Back in my own office, trying to decipher the feedback, I ask myself what was *really* bothering the commenter about that point, and usually after a little thought, I realize it wasn't X at all, but really Y that was bugging them. I then fix Y, and nine times out of ten, when they see the revised draft, the committee member says, "that's perfect, that's exactly what I was getting at." Because the author usually knows the specific literature better than the

reviewer—and because the author can devote a hundred times longer to that paragraph than the reviewer—the author can see why the reviewer's off-the-cuff suggestion is not going to work. But then it is incumbent upon the author to come up with a better, more suitable solution. The same holds true for the thesis or dissertation writer.

Thus, every comment requires a response, but that response should only come after one has had a chance to think deeply about both the objection and possible solutions. If one is resisting more than one comment out of ten, then it is about one's unwillingness to accept feedback. One must stop resisting and go deeper. The supervisor or committee member is onto something, and it is up to the thesis writer to figure it out.

One can legitimately question perhaps one out of ten substantive comments. (Okay, I admittedly pulled that number out of a hat, and one's supervisor/committee may believe the appropriate ratio is closer to one in a hundred, but you get the idea: choose your battles, and let the rest go.) Marshall your best evidence and arguments and make the case to the supervisor or relevant committee member. Sometimes the discussion leads to a mutually satisfactory alternative; sometimes not. Where no agreement is possible, the graduate student is *by definition* wrong—at least until after graduation. Occasionally, the supervisor may be recruited to assist in responding to an objection from a committee member, but usually it is simplest (and ultimately better for the thesis itself) if one finds a way to satisfy everyone's concerns. If that committee member had an issue with that point, other readers likely would also. The whole point of supervisors and committees is to help one identify weaknesses that might otherwise have slipped one's notice.

The "48-hour rule" also applies to feedback with which one agrees. Although tempting to say, "Wow, that's a great suggestion," one

should wait until one has had a chance to try it out, in case, upon closer inspection, it reveals itself to be unworkable. One does not want to prematurely commit oneself to a particular revision, because that makes it harder to recant later. A more tentative, "that sounds like it might work" may be in order.

Meeting standards. Do not worry overly that the supervisor's standards are too low: that is why there is a committee to review the manuscript. In the unlikely event that all of them have missed something significant, there are still journal referees between the thesis and publication. It's actually quite difficult to embarrass oneself in public. At the very least, one gets to share the blame pretty widely if some critic later points out a flaw. And even then, that's how science is supposed to work: each scholar begins their work by critiquing some weakness in what has gone before, which they then propose to fix in their study.

Similarly, do not conclude that one's supervisor or committee or the external reviewer have unrealistically high standards. The committee structure works well to ensure that no one reviewer is out of line with the faculty's expectations. Consequently, the demand for changes is useful feedback, not persecution. They are there to ensure one produces work that one will remain proud of, but are as anxious as the student to be done with the project (so they can add the student's graduation to their own CV and annual report as work successfully completed). It is human nature to initially resist the effort of further drafts, and to want to shoot the messenger. One just has to trust that the advice is sound, and to go to the effort of trying it their way. Only when one has finished the final draft is one likely to be able to look back at the first draft and say, "Wow! The final draft is really so much better than where I started! Thank you so much for not letting me stop there!"

It's About the Process, Not the Product

Most graduate students start from the incorrect assumption that getting a master's or PhD is about producing a great thesis or dissertation. Not so much. Nobody except your committee is ever going to read your thesis; and even dissertations are likely only read by other PhD candidates who have to include it in their literature reviews because they happened to choose a similar topic. If one's research is outstanding, and one is very persistent, (because it's hard to stay motivated after one has graduated) one might get a publishable article out of a thesis or dissertation, and a few people might actually read that.[11]

Even then, that article is only one among hundreds of thousands. Nice that one made a contribution to the field, but that is not why the university hands one a diploma. The degree is for the whole program, not just the thesis or dissertation. In theory at least, one's thesis or dissertation is merely the first of many research projects to come. The degree certifies that one is ready to go, not that one is done. The degree is therefore about the knowledge and skills one has acquired, not about the single example that happened to get used as the assessment.

Future employers, for example, are not likely to care about one's specific thesis topic, but rather one's ability to take on and success-fully complete a major project. Once one has successfully completed a thesis, no writing project can ever intimidate the graduate again. (This is one reason PhD programs often prefer applicants who have completed a thesis-route master's program over graduates of one based solely on course work: having

completed a thesis demonstrates one has the skills, attitudes and fortitude necessary to complete a dissertation.) Completing a thesis demonstrates that one can think deeply about an issue, and more importantly, can *rethink* the issue when the first solution does not work out; that one can tolerate feedback and incorporate that direction into successfully thinking outside the original box; and has the time management skills and persistence necessary to survive the long-haul of dissertation-writing.

Perhaps more important yet is the graduate's ability to manage the angst associated with any sustained piece of writing (about which more in a moment). Having dealt with the torment of struggling through a thesis, the graduate can likely tolerate any project with which the employer may wish to saddle them.

The thesis itself, then, is not the main point of the exercise, but rather the skills that one learns in completing (i.e., managing) the process. Understanding this is crucial because students who get too focused on the product miss the significance of mastering these skills, and so are more likely to become defeated or terminally frustrated.

Defeated, because students focused on the product may incorrectly assume that if their initial hypothesis did not pan out, their thesis has failed. That the results are not as expected, however, in no way invalidates *the process* or the student's learning. What's important to the thesis committee is that the student has demonstrated that s/he can do the research and sustain the writing process. The research may not get published if the results are not conclusive, or fail to reach statistical significance, or somebody else got there first, or whatever, but the thesis can still pass with flying colours, provided that the student

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[11] I was surprised and immensely proud to be told by the librarian that mine was the most borrowed thesis in the university library—until she laughingly explained that, no, no one was *reading* my thesis, they were just using it as their formatting template, because I had apparently gotten the formatting correct.

managed the process properly. The thesis proposal is a contract: once the advisor and the committee have signed off on the student's proposal, as long as the student does what s/he said, and understands the process, it's a pass.

Frustrated, because measuring progress only in terms of the final product obscures that the final product only appears *after one has mastered an entirely new set of skills*. Not understanding that they are still in the early or middle stages of that learning process, they feel as if they have made no progress, even though they may well be learning a great deal. By focusing on the product, they miss that the real goal here is to learn how to revisit, rethink, and revise their content; how to manage their time to maintain a sensible work/life balance; and above all, how to maintain their motivation in the face of unrelenting awfulness (see next section).

In some institutions, the writing experience is formalized as an actual semester or year-long course or workshop. This has the advantage that the formal course structure makes explicit that there are new skills to be learned, and that there is a timeframe required in which to learn them. It makes sense to students in these programs that they are not yet finished writing up their thesis, because they are not yet finished the course.

Students in programs without this explicit instruction often end up asking themselves, "Why aren't I done yet?" after only a few weeks or months. Again, based on their undergraduate experience, they expect to be able to pump out product at thirty pages a week; but that level of output is only possible within the context of already having mastered the art of the first-draft undergraduate paper, and not in terms of learning the completely new and demanding skills required for sustained writing tasks. Unrealistic expectations for immediate, high levels of productivity are reinforced by family, friends, and colleagues who constantly ask, "Are you done yet?" (again, often based on their own undergraduate experience of first-draft writing.) Even many thesis supervisors seem not to appreciate that a thesis requires new and different writing skills, and so place unrealistic demands on their students. Indeed, I have heard supervisors reject that they have any responsibility for teaching writing or time management skills because—they say—graduate students are supposed to have those skills already. But how, exactly, if these skills are not explicitly taught? Why even have a thesis requirement if students are thought to already possess theses-writing skills? Demanding high levels of productivity without teaching and supporting the student in developing these sustained-writing techniques is just cruel.

The student preoccupied with thesis-as-end-product not only becomes quickly frustrated with the lack of any obvious progress, but is to that extent distracted from the need to learn new skills. Shifting focus from product to process would help speed learning (and completion) as more time and energy would then be directed to the task of learning the requisite skills, rather than spinning one's wheels without them.

More to the Writing Process Than Mere Writing

As Howard Becker noted in *Writing for Social Scientists,* most graduate students:

> seldom see anyone actually writing, seldom see working drafts and writing that isn't ready for publication. It is a mystery to them: I want to remove the mystery and let them see that the work they read is made by people who have the same difficulties they do. (p. xi)

Take, for example, the recollection (insert next page) by Dr. Lisa Wade, associate

professor at Occidental College in Los Angeles.

"On Intellectual Thrashing"
by Lisa Wade, PhD

One of the most important moments of my graduate education occurred during a talk by Dorothy Roberts for the sociology department at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. At the time I had been teaching her book, *Killing the Black Body*. I thought this book was genius, absolutely loved it, so I was really excited to be seeing her in person.

I sat in anticipation; she was introduced and then, before she launched into the substance of her talk, she apologized for likely weaknesses in her thinking as, she explained, she had only been thinking about it for "about a year."

I was stunned.

I couldn't believe that Dorothy Roberts would have to think about anything for a year. In my mind, her brilliance appeared full form, in a span of mere moments, perfectly articulated.

Her comment made me realize, for the first time, that the fantastic books and expertly-crafted journal articles written by scholars were the result of hard work, not just genius. And I realized that part of the task of writing these things is to hide all of the hard work that goes into writing them. They read as if it were obvious that the conclusions of the paper are true when, in fact, the conclusions on paper are probably just one of many sets of possible conclusions with which the author experimented. Roberts' humble admission made me realize that all of the wild intellectual goose chases, mental thrashing, deleted passages, and revised arguments were part of my job, not evidence that I was perpetually failing.

And I was and am tremendously grateful to Dr. Roberts for that insight.

Most people who fail to complete their master's thesis or PhD dissertation do so not because they lack ability or because they cannot express themselves—they don't get *into* the program unless they already have these abilities—but because they can't manage the rest of the writing process. Nobody has explained to them that writing isn't easy for anyone, that everyone struggles and hates writing as much as they do, and that the process is inherently awful.

R. K. Elliot (see insert below) said it best: *writing is wretchedness*. Everybody loves having written; but nobody enjoys the actual writing part—especially knowing that whatever they write now is just going to have to be *re*written at some point down the road.

A long and difficult enquiry has the character of a venture which comprehensively engages the self of the enquirer. Anxiety is frequently the prevailing mood, and confusion, dead ends, disappointments, lack of inspiration, and lack of energy combine to generate wretchedness. On the other hand, insights occur unexpectedly, ways open up where there had seemed to be no way, things which had seemed disparate fall together, and so on. Disagreeable experiences probably occupy more of the total time of the enquiry than agreeable experiences, and on reflection, it is often hard to believe that their intensity was less.

—R. K. Elliot
"Education and Justification", *Proceedings of the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain* Vol. XI.

As an academic, critic, and editor, I have met literally hundreds of professional authors, and in thirty-five years I have only ever met three who seemed to find it easy to write: who just sat down and wrote first draft and were done without becoming emotional wrecks in the process. The rest of us all hate those three people with a deep and abiding jealousy because there is something profoundly unnatural about their ability to do that.

So, the first and most fundamental step in coping with the inevitable angst associated with any sustained piece of writing is to *recognize that angst is an inevitable part of any sustained piece of writing*. I had that Elliot quote posted over my desk the entire time I was working on my dissertation to remind myself that even though a particular sentence/paragraph/page/section/chapter was simply not coming together, and felt like it never would, that was, well…normal.

> Give someone a book, and they'll read for a day. Teach someone how to write a book, and they'll experience a lifetime of paralyzing self-doubt.
>
> —Lauren DeStefano

The second step is to learn some strategies for addressing the sources of writing angst, and for maintaining one's motivation in the face of wretchedness.

The Secret of All Successful Writers

If one interviews successful authors, they all say the same thing: there is only one possible way to manage the writing process and to be productive. The slightest variation from the routine/formula described, and they come up dry: blocked creatively, their work left undone or rejected as substandard.

Unfortunately, they then all go on to describe completely different, highly idiosyncratic approaches. This one says she can only write with a brandy in hand, the next that abstinence is the key. This one requires large blocks of uninterrupted time to make any progress; this other maintains that the key is to write at every opportunity, finding five minutes here, stealing ten there. This one can only write in the mornings before lunch, the next only at night. Many insist on the discipline of writing every day, regardless of life's distractions; but others are equally vehement about the importance of work/life balance and trusting inspiration to show up in the muse's own sweet time. This one requires a detailed outline and copious, detailed notes; the next says spontaneity and free association are the key. This one can only begin to write when the house is cleaned and the dishes washed; this one only when surrounded by a messy house that affirms that writing comes first. Each insists that their routine is absolutely critical and that any writer must adopt exactly that habit if they are serious about writing—except those who argue routine makes one stale and rely on trying something completely different each time.

The only slight commonality between them is that they all agree that any method taught to them in schools was rubbish.

Howard Becker used to open his graduate writing workshops by asking everyone to describe how they prepared to write. Every year, the first person would hesitatingly describe some particular ritual they had to go through—sharpening every pencil in the office, or preparing a particular sandwich, or turning around three times before sitting in their writing chair—and then the next (somewhat encouraged by the absurdity of the first's description) would describe some equally arbitrary pattern; and so on, until the last student gushed out their still more absurd approach, relieved to discover they were not alone in having a completely insane routine.

Becker hypothesized that all of these rituals were attempts to gain control over the uncontrollable nature of creativity. Having once had a productive day while eating a ham

sandwich, one tries desperately to repeat the miracle by starting the next writing session with another ham sandwich. And if it didn't work that second time, it must be because this second sandwich had mayo instead of mustard, so the time after that makes another ham and mustard; and so on, until one evolves a completely fixed, but largely random ritual. None of that is conscious of course, and if the magic works at all, it's about the psychology, not the mustard.

Some techniques, like outlines, may actually help, but *how* one uses an outline is likely to look very different from one writer to the next. Handwritten in a notebook? Using some specialized thesis-writing software? In Outline View in Microsoft Word? (Most people don't even know Word has an Outline function, or how it works, but check it out.) Or left implicit in one's head, based on having read enough other research articles that one just *knows* the template? Detailed down to paragraph level, or just a broad sweep of the order of chapters? My dissertation outline was twenty-eight single-spaced, double-sided, typed pages; my wife wrote hers in longhand on one side of a serviette.

So, sorry, but the secret formula for writing turns to be that there is no secret formula; or at least, no universal one. Everybody has to work out what works for them. How-To books likely won't help much because the author is only going to tell you what works for the author who wrote that How-To book. (Except for *this* guide, of course, telling you that one has to experiment with and adapt different techniques until you find the one that works for you.) When supervisors, committee members, colleagues, and writing experts suggest this or that solution to one's writing problems, by all means experiment with the suggested technique long enough to give it a fair try, but always keep in mind that one's mileage will likely vary.

Know, though, that in the end *something* will work. Learning what that something is *for you* is at least half the point of undertaking a thesis or dissertation in the first place.

Thesis and Dissertation Coping Strategies

What follows, then, are a few suggestions of things that *might* help with writer's block; dealing with procrastination and time management; keeping motivated; and keeping debilitating angst at bay. Feel free to skip any sections which may not apply to you. (Yet.)

Dealing with Blank Page Syndrome
An early (and sometimes constant) source of angst is having to *start*. Whether it is the thesis as a whole, a new chapter, or a new section, starting from scratch can be a bit overwhelming. One finds oneself staring at the screen . . . and the screen staring back.

That can go on for quite a while. As nothing happens, panic sets in, which makes it even harder to get things happening. Panic therefore spirals upwards into full-blown flight or fight response, which drives some people away from their workstations, others to punch their computers, and everyone to suffer.

Here, then, are a few suggestions that have worked for me and sometimes for my students:

Fill the page with notes. This works best with interview quotes or qualitative field notes, but whenever one has any kind of data, one can overcome Blank Page Syndrome simply by dumping the relevant raw material for the current section onto the page. Use the cut and paste commands to move the data around until they are in some logical order. Drop in a few sentences between the pasted material to introduce the quote, or to connect the data, or to explain why the first note leads to the second, and so on. Suddenly, one is no longer staring at a blank page, but merely working with today's content. Filling the page this way is mostly a visual trick (because one had all that data sitting available anyway), but the illusion of progress works almost every time, and once one has started, keeping going is relatively easy.

Go back a page or section. This one might be just me, but every time I sit down to work on a sustained piece of writing, I go back to re-read what I wrote the day before. I inevitably find something to tamper with, so that gets me going for the day, rather than starting from a blank page. The momentum created by remembering and perhaps re-working the argument I was trying to make yesterday (usually) carries me over onto what would have been today's blank page and well beyond.

Of course, the danger of this particular tactic is that routinely 're-reading' the work from the day before can degenerate into full-fledged, obsessive, premature polishing that stalls all forward motion. Quit using this approach if that one step back does not lead immediately to several steps forward.

Dealing with Writer's Block

There are hundreds of books and websites devoted to addressing writer's block— evidence that becoming blocked is very nearly universal—so I will just mention one well-known resource, then move on to a few key points for thesis writers specifically.

Start with writing calisthenics. This one is closely related to addressing blank page syndrome by backing up a few steps and editing yesterday's work first, to get a running start on today. Over thirty years ago, Natalie Goldberg made the argument that just as athletes need to stretch before going for gold, writers should start with warm-up exercises before trying to write their novel (or thesis). *Writing Down the Bones* is about overcoming writer's block by beating down one's hyper-vigilant inner editor and getting the juices flowing. The publisher's description on Amazon gives the premise as "discovering that many of the 'rules' for good writing and good sex are the same: keep your hand moving, lose control and don't think."

The prescribed exercises should be limited to twenty minutes (set the timer on your phone) and are not directly related to one's thesis. Their purpose is to get the writer seated at the keyboard, the creative juices flowing, and the writer in a positive mood for the day's work. In other words, to overcome writer's block.

The approach remains standard today, and is widely used in writer's workshops, writing courses, and by many successful writers. *Writing Down the Bones* is a good place to start if one is having difficulty starting writing.

Explain to someone else what you are blocked on. Talking to someone else is almost embarrassingly helpful, because it always ends in a "do'h!" moment. When working on my thesis and dissertation, I would inevitably become blocked on some esoteric piece of argumentation, and weeping with frustration, would confess to my brother that I had finally written myself into a corner or otherwise reached the limits of my ability. He would always ask, "What are you working on?" and I would explain what I was

trying to say, but could not find the words. He would then say, "Well, why can't you just write down what you said to me just now?"

Why not indeed? Well, duh!

Talking one's ideas through with a supportive other often makes writer's block magically disappear. Sometimes it's because one has been overthinking the problem, or holding oneself to impossible standards. Sometimes it's because the supportive other can ask the question that takes one in a new direction, or points out the oversight or logical flaw that's been holding one up. Sometimes it's that trying to explain the idea simply to someone else helps one to understand it more clearly oneself. Whatever the case in any particular instance, saying it out loud is often all that is needed.

Try thinking way, way outside the box. When one's writing is completely blocked, try writing the central theme of that section as a poem. Or try painting or sculpting the answer, especially if you have never done anything remotely artistic before. Sounds bizarre, but it often works because one is working through the same ideas and issues, but trying to express them in some form other than thesis writing. This worked for Stephen Hawking. One reason he is the most famous scientist of our age is that his inability to physically write things down forced him to do science through mental imagery, and that imagery led him to think of things in entirely new and insightful ways. So, try to say it in a poem, or sing it, or chant it in yoga pose. Draw a chart or the comic book version or do something else visual. Make a video. One graduate student in my faculty did an interpretive dance presentation. Using non-literary expressions forces one to reformulate one's thinking and so break out of whatever phrasing or structure one has been trapped in, rather than spinning one's wheels, digging deeper and deeper into the same rut.

Of course, such activities do not replace thesis writing; they are just possible warm ups to get one past a block. Eventually, it all comes back to writing.

Stop on the clock, not on the block. Turns out knowing when to stop for the day is as important as figuring out how to get started.

For years, I made the mistake of putting in fourteen-hour days, trying to be productive. I'd typically begin the morning with three or four hours of soul-destroying writer's block as I tried to get started, eventually made an excruciatingly painful beginning as I ate lunch at the keyboard, and picked up a bit of momentum about hour nine. Once on a roll, I would keep going as long as I could, barely stopping for supper, until eventually becoming blocked again on this or that next paragraph, and having run out of steam, stop for the night. And then I'd get up the next day, and go through it all again—to produce a grand total of maybe three usable pages a day.

Then there were days I'd be called away from my desk just at the moment when I felt I was finally making some progress. I was always deeply resentful of such interruptions, barely able to contain myself until I could get back to the keyboard, desperate to type up the idea or phrase I'd had in mind when cut short.

Eventually, I had been interrupted often enough that it finally dawned on me that those were the rare times I didn't have writer's block the next day, because I knew exactly how I wanted to start. I realized that by stopping only when I hit a block I had been sabotaging myself. I had set myself up for failure because I started each day dreading the blank page or difficult passage facing me, rather than starting with an idea or phrase yearning to be put down on paper. Once I learned to stop on the clock, not the block, my writer's block evaporated.

Eliminating the three or four hours of initial writer's block not only increased productivity and reduced the length of my working day to something more reasonable, it also significantly reduced the degree of dissertation-induced wretchedness.

If any of that sounds familiar, then the principle might work for you too. At the very least, stopping on the clock makes one a better partner, parent, and community member, because other people tend to resent one's obsession with thesis-writing interfering with normal daily routines, such as dinner time and bedtime.

Psychoanalyze oneself. It may be helpful to understand that one's block likely originates in grade school, with the traumatic experience of having one's written assignments returned covered in red ink. As alluded to earlier, many well-intentioned instructors mistakenly believe that pointing out each and every error helps students improve; but what most students learn—whether explicitly stated or subconsciously inferred—is that they are not good writers.

Twenty years later, attempting to put one's thesis into words, one feels the ghost of that Grade 6 teacher looking over one's shoulder, whispering, "Don't write *that* for heaven's sake! That's just very, very wrong!" One needs to consciously banish said teacher (memory/outdated message) from the room. Explain to the voice of doubt that this is only a first draft and that any errors that pop up will be fixed in subsequent drafts. (One's actual Grade 6 teacher would in fact be overjoyed by the suggestion of there being multiple drafts, and would fully endorse a very rough, rough draft.) The current draft is expected to be rough: one's supervisor, committee, and faculty-recommended copy editor will ensure future drafts meet required standards. Understanding what ghost is stopping the flow is sometimes sufficient to start the flow up again.

Addressing Procrastination

Closely related to writer's block is the issue of procrastination. This can take many forms, from putting off starting on this or that section because one still has months before the deadline; to finding other "urgent" chores to do rather than sitting down at the computer for today; to working diligently on polishing bits of the thesis already completed to avoid having to think about starting the next section, whose looming presence is completely intimidating. Like writer's block, procrastination threatens to stop the thesis or dissertation in its tracks as time passes. . . and the student doesn't.

First rule of writing: Sit
Second rule of writing: Stay
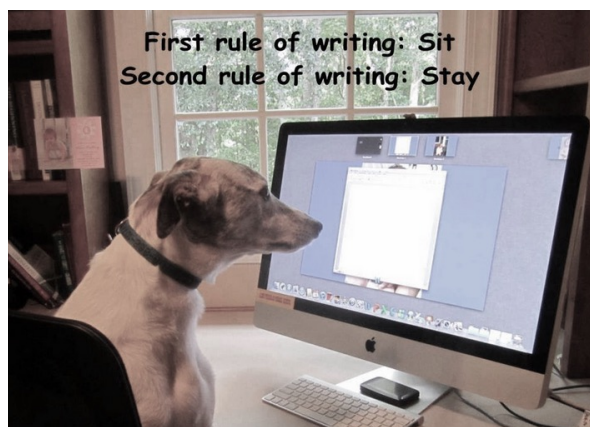
Stop reading this article and take 12 minutes to watch Richard Condie's animated National Film Board short, *Getting Started,* available free on NFB website:

https://www.nfb.ca/film/ getting_started/

Although excruciatingly funny, it's good to be reminded that many of us have issues with procrastination. [But under no circumstances click on any other Condie cartoons while you're there, because—although Condie is a national treasure—*now is not the time!* I only allocated 12 minutes for this. You're procrastinating! Get back to work!]

There are two key points I would like you to take from *Getting Started.*

First, you are not alone in struggling with procrastination. It requires a great deal of discipline, not just to plunk your bum down in front of the computer, but to stay focused and productive. (I have, for example, spent far too much time playing around with font size and layout for this article when I was supposed to have been rewording trouble-some sections.) Of course, you already know that a master's/PhD degree requires self-discipline, but it's nice to know that almost every writer struggles with writing as much as you do—not just with finding the right words and ideas, but with forcing oneself to sit down at the keyboard and focus. Writing is a solitary task, and without a taskmaster standing over one's shoulder (as is generally the case in the workplace) it's hard to stay motivated and on task. But they all *eventually* managed it, so you can too.

Staring out the window, clock ticking in the background, Condie's protagonist has a hard time settling down to work for the day. https://www.nfb.ca/film/getting_started/

Ultimately, the only thing that changes 'eventually' into 'this minute' are deadlines. So we will take a slight digression to talk about deadlines.

Dealing with Deadlines
If you are like me, then your productivity is a function of distance from the deadline: the further from the deadline, the less productive. It's not, you understand, that I'm not working on the project; just that I can't seem to make

any significant progress. In my case, at least, my procrastination is caused by my internal editor insisting on perfection, which causes me to freeze up until the deadline is so close that my terror of failing to complete the task overpowers my fear of writing badly. This is undoubtedly a very destructive habit I picked up as an undergraduate, when it was still possible to knock out a paper the night before it was due. Pacing oneself on a sustained writing project is an entirely different matter.

Motivational Slogans. The problem then becomes that as the deadline approaches, procrastination is replaced by equally paralyzing deadline panic: the realization that one has left it too late, and there is now no possibility of finishing properly in the time remaining.

One thing that helped me overcome both procrastination and deadline panic was posting motivational slogans above my work station. Most prominent was the due date for the next deliverable(s) and a countdown calendar:

Chapter 3 — Due Dec 19th
1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10,11,12,
13,14,15,16,~~17,18,19,20,21~~
days left

That's to combat procrastination, obviously, but note that when calculating the countdown calendar, one has to account for days when one will be unavailable for thesis work: e.g., days when one has gainful employment; teaching assistant or research assistant duties; family commitments, such as a cousin's wedding or the significant other's birthday; and so on. The question has to be, "How many thesis workdays are actually available until the deadline?" Remember to build in some sick days too.

Second most prominent were the slogans to neutralize my overly critical internal editor as deadline panic set in:

> *Something
> is better than
> Nothing*

> You can always fix it later

Remember that the supervisor or committee members are always going to want to suggest changes to whatever one hands in. If they suggest fixing the things one already knows need fixing, that becomes the equivalent of getting an extension on the deadline. So: no worries! As long as one is handing *something* in, one is unlikely to fail.

Indeed, it frequently happens that they are perfectly happy with what one thought a very rough draft, because they are looking for 'done', not 'perfect'. If one waits until one is perfectly satisfied with one's draft before handing it in, the premature polishing risks the committee asking for that section to be removed or changed anyway, which not only renders the effort redundant, but leaves one open to committee changes over bits one did not want them to mess with.

[Of course, that is the pep talk for perfectionists; please disregard if you are a satisficer. Your supervisor or committee will let you know if you're setting the standard *too* low—but don't let that happen more than once.]

And then I had some slogans to make me let go of my obsessive need to include absolutely every idea and tiny detail that had occurred to me, whether it fit or not:

> Better to make a few
> major points
> than fail everything

> You just need enough
> to keep going

> You can always add to it
> later

[If writing a thesis, post:]

> Save some ideas
> for the dissertation

[If writing a dissertation, post:]

> Save some ideas
> for future journal articles

My sample slogans obviously reveal my particular issues; you need to figure out what your writing process issues are, come up with the appropriate responses, and post those.

It may feel silly to post such affirmations over one's computer, but it actually works. Every time one looks up (and we instinctively look up whenever deep in thought or trying to remember something) one's eyes slide across the posters, and the thought enters one's subconscious, even if one has habituated to the posters' presence and no longer registers them consciously. Such subliminal programming is indeed effective in motivating one, provided one has selected the right (that is, the convincing) slogans for one's particular required attitudinal and behavioural changes. I noticed, for example, that various peers who initially scoffed when they first spotted slogans posted over my carrel, had themselves posted their own sayings over their carrels by the end of the semester. Similarly, about half of my own graduate students said they found this practice useful. A couple even made the procrastination slogans into their screen saver, so every time they paused too long, the computer started to

nag them to get back to work. Whatever works for you!

Understanding Actual Deadlines

Even if one is not like me, but is instead equally productive over the whole of the time available, there is still the common problem of misunderstanding the nature of graduate school deadlines.

As an undergraduate, deadlines were relatively straightforward: one was given the date on which assignments were to be submitted, and that was that. That is because (with exceedingly rare exceptions) rewriting was not part of the dynamic.

For graduate students, thesis and dissertation deadlines are not remotely what is written in the university calendar. It astonishes me how often, in spite of multiple warnings, graduate students get this wrong. If the university calendar says one has to have the thesis defense complete by April 31st, showing up at the supervisor's office on February 19th saying one is ready to hand in one's thesis means one has *already missed the deadline*. Those published dates are not for the student; they are for the supervisor and committee. Although it may be theoretically possible to set up a defense on ten weeks' notice, that would require the supervisor and each member of the committee to drop whatever else they were scheduled to do (including the other dozen graduate students who showed up Feb. 19th) to focus exclusively on your needs. That is just never going to happen.

Deadlines in the mirror are closer than they appear
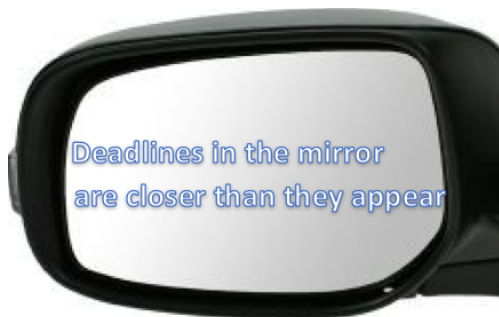
The confusion occurs because the graduate student, working in isolation, works back from the calendar deadline by calculating what would be a reasonable response time for an undergraduate paper. Ten weeks sounds like a long time for a supervisor to read a thesis, pass it along to the committee to read, and for the supervisor to arrange for an external to attend the defense. But that is never how it actually works.

The supervisor cannot drop everything to read a thesis the second it shows up. The best the supervisor can do is add it to the "to read" stack already in the in-basket. If it is "thesis panic" season, there are probably other theses or dissertations already in that in-basket, plus 200 undergraduate papers, a "revise and resubmit" article with a tight deadline, a couple of conference proposals due, and 300 pages of documentation to read before next Thursday's budget committee meeting. Good luck competing with all of that! It takes a couple of days to read and comment on a thesis, but it can take weeks to find two free days in the typical professor's schedule in which to do it.

But even if the supervisor gives one's thesis a high priority and gets to it within two or three weeks, it is highly probable that revisions will be required before the supervisor will even consider passing it on to the committee. Months can go by to get on top of the supervisor's recommended changes before the thesis is ready for the committee—who have similarly full in-baskets and equally demanding suggestions for revisions. It is not uncommon for this cycle of revisions to require several iterations over several semesters to satisfy everyone.

Once the committee is satisfied, the thesis still has to go to the external at least a month ahead of the defense (that's usually an actual rule); which means one has to start searching for someone to volunteer to be the external months ahead of that, since not everyone is

interested or available to sign up for the defense of someone they have never even met. Finding a date everyone can attend is also often complex or impossible.

These issues are even more dramatic at the PhD level, since dissertations are longer and more complex, the committees larger, and the stakes higher.

Consequently, it is crucial that one keep in close contact with one's supervisor so that s/he can pre-schedule one's thesis into their calendar. If one has agreed to December 19th as the deadline to turn in Chapter 3, then the supervisor has scheduled the 20th to read and respond to Chapter 3. Missing that deadline might mean waiting weeks for another chapter-sized opening in the supervisor's schedule—and that delay is on the student, not the advisor. (And when planning one's own work schedule, do not count on the supervisor being able to always meet the deadline for returning one's chapter or thesis. Life happens: people get sick, planes get delayed, emergencies come up. Build in enough leeway to cover any such contingencies.)

Similarly, it does not hurt to keep on top of what one's committee members are up to. Before mentally scheduling them, find out if they are in fact available and not on holidays, on sabbatical, away at a conference, or committed to other graduate projects that month.

Successfully completing a thesis or dissertation is as much about time management—organizing the framework within which the time for writing and rewriting is embedded—as it is about the writing process itself.

[Oh, and do not forget to schedule a copy editor in there somewhere before trying to submit the finalized thesis or dissertation to the School of Graduate Studies. Every graduate school has an administrator or staff member whose job it is to measure margins and check a random sample of pages for typos, spelling and grammar errors, citation formatting errors, and so on. Copy editing by a professional can help, but as with supervisors and committee members, copy editors also get busy around thesis/dissertation deadline time, so if one wants their help, it has to be scheduled well in advance. Even having had a professional copy editor, however, allow an extra week or two before the actual submission deadline in case something got missed and the grad office rejects one's initial submission. Missing the deadline for graduation, and either paying for an extra semester or failing out entirely, because of an incorrectly formatted citation would be very sad.[12]]

One final note: Never, ever, under any circumstances, tell anyone that you are just about done your thesis or dissertation. It doesn't matter what deadline you think you have, and so assume you will be done by *then*, you probably won't be. It always takes longer than one thinks—longer than one could imagine—and it is endlessly embarrassing to keep having to tell people, "No, I am not quite done yet." Better to wait until one *is* done before announcing the end. [My second year ABD (all-but-dissertation), I got a button that read, "No, I haven't finished my @#$%&! dissertation!" to forestall the constant embarrassment of being asked. I had to wear that button far longer than I care to admit, and at least forty other

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[12] I speak from near-experience: there was an error on the signature pages of my dissertation that required my tracking everyone down to re-sign the corrected pages, including my external who had gone off on extended travels and could not be found. I got the corrected manuscript into Grad Studies eleven minutes before the

office closed on the last Friday of my final eligibility to graduate. Eleven minutes later, I'd still be Mr. Runté today. I should have scheduled more time between the defense and the deadline to allow for such unforeseen contingencies.

graduate students asked me where they could buy one for themselves….]

Procrastination Part Two
The second take away from *Getting Started* is that sometimes it's better to just give up and go to Norbert's.[13] This may seem counterintuitive in a discussion on how to address procrastination, but as our hero in *Getting Started* demonstrates, invoking pure brute-force willpower can push one to a meltdown, which is neither productive nor healthy. One needs to take reasonable breaks: a nutrition break every two to three hours (like any regular workplace coffee break), eight hours sleep a night, and at least one night a week completely off. It is important that one take the occasional break not only to decompress, but to step back from the thesis to get some perspective. Grinding away on the same sentence or idea for hours does not give one the chance to recognize that the reason the writing isn't coming is that it's the wrong sentence or idea. A nutrition break or a night off helps one start fresh, and perhaps break out of whatever pattern has one stalled.

Furthermore, dwelling too long in the wretchedness of not writing can lead to defeatism and the determination to quit rather than to get done. One can only succeed in a thesis or dissertation if one is passionate about one's research, because it is that passion that drives us to write, rather than to stall. Constantly berating oneself for lack of progress, constantly driving oneself harder and harder without mercy, kills that passion and incites rebellion—just as it would if it were one's boss rather than oneself making these unrelenting demands. So. Occasionally one has to let oneself go out to enjoy a night off.

Or, to put it another way: one needs to pace oneself. Too much procrastination leads to

failure; but pushing too hard is equally dangerous. One needs to find an appropriate work/life balance.

Maintaining Work/Life Balance.
A common error is the belief that if one can write three pages in three hours, one should be able to write nine pages in nine hours. Full-time, single students often work dysfunctionally long hours in the hope of getting done faster (to become full-time employed people instead). This almost never works, and the failure to be productive adds to the inevitable frustrations and defeatism of writing a thesis. Part-time graduate students (which includes anyone with a family) often try to find blocks of time, so similarly expect to be able to pump out twenty pages in a weekend or the carefully hoarded day off. This is rarely successful.

The problem is that there are two time scales at work in thesis-writing, but "page per hour" thinking only takes into account actually getting something down on paper. Figuring out how to word something and putting that on the page is the obvious bum-on-seat productivity that is fairly easy to measure by the page/hour. But that sort of writing only takes place within the larger time scale of reflecting on one's topic, of reaching for insights, of thinking deeply. That is much harder to pin down. Some insights pop into one's head effortlessly and unbidden; others must be courted over months; some elude one entirely and occur instead to the graduate student two library carrels down the hall.

The longer time scale of gathering insights and delving deeper is often misunderstood because it was never a serious part of one's undergraduate studies. One's undergraduate paper deadlines came fast and furious, so most delving for insights was limited to the time spent in the shower or riding the bus. The process was there, but so severely

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[13] The reference to Norbert is from *Getting Started*.

foreshortened that it was unnoticed compared to bum-in-seat time at the keyboard.

Thus, when calculating progress, it's important to plan for the time it takes to write each page, but also for the larger timeframe within which that writing process takes place.

A personal example: as previously mentioned I was working fourteen-hour days on my dissertation but producing only three or four usable pages a day. Painfully slow, and wretched the whole time, I turned to my author friends for advice. The award-winning novelist, Candas Jane Dorsey, offered to have me shadow her for a day to see a typical day in the life of a professional writer. What struck me like a thunderbolt was how little of the day she actually spent at the keyboard.

We had a leisurely brunch; I followed while she ran some errands; we returned to her home where she welcomed a parade of visitors; we had tea; we talked; we had supper; and then she hosted one of her famous salons for the city's artists, poets, and activists. Deep in conversation with some of the city's liveliest intellects, I almost failed to notice when Candas slipped away upstairs for ninety minutes, to return with four pages of finished novel-writing.

"Wow," she commented, "that was really draining. That's the hardest I've worked, the most productive I've been all week."[14]

Given that I had just spent two years working on my dissertation fourteen-hours a day, seven days a week, it is possible that I may have lost it a tiny bit and shouted, "That's it?! You work for a total of ninety minutes a day?!"

"Well, I got four pages done. I think they're all useable, more or less as is. How many pages did you get done yesterday?"

I had to confess, only three.

"Well, there you are then," she said. "And that ninety minutes was just *typing* time. I was working the whole day."

I may have looked skeptical, since much of the day had seemed to me to be about brunch and hanging out.

"All the time we were at brunch was work," Candas explained patiently. "While you were eating, I was listening to the other diners, taking mental notes. Not on the content of course, though sometimes that's useful too, but on the rhythm of their speech, their body language as they interacted, the way one was dressed to make me think she was a government worker. I have a government worker in my book, and I need to know what the cues in the way she presented herself to made me think 'government worker', so I can work those elements into my character. You can't have output without input. Sitting alone in my room staring at the keyboard doesn't get books written. Going out and harvesting the environment for ideas and insights, that's writing too."

Well, duh! That's the key to it all: *One can't have output without input.* Sitting at the keyboard day in and day out, I had been doing it all wrong.

For the thesis or dissertation writer, input naturally means books and journal articles, but that is not enough. Obsessive reading can be just another form of procrastination. One has to be prepared to *digest* all of that reading, and that requires talking to people. One needs to talk through what one has just read with one's supervisor or peers, talk through one's own ideas with sympathetic listeners, and listen in turn to what they have been reading, thinking, and working on.

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[14] All dialogue, recalled some twenty-five years later, is necessarily only approximate.

> The simple way to avoid the stomach-churning agony of having to finish your thesis: read another book—repeat as necessary.
>
> —Matt Groening

In other words, one has to do brunch. How else to capture that wayward insight than by talking to the student in the neighbouring library carrel who caught it? Just as they need you to identify that article you read that fills the gap in their thinking, or to explain to them the blind spot that is holding them up.

It's called "intellectual stimulation", and it's why master's and PhD programs have residence requirements. To deal with writers' block, blank page syndrome, procrastination, isolation, and the general angst and wretchedness, one needs a support group.

Dealing with Angst: Support Groups

Supervisors. One's supervisor is often a useful place to start when seeking a supportive other. I certainly found my advisor wonderful when blocked: he would casually reach up into his bookcase and pull out the one book that had exactly the answers I needed to proceed, or sagely say the one thing I needed to hear. I often found I could do the same for my students, if they actually came and asked. Monthly meetings work well here, but circumstances vary and this cannot always be arranged.

Committee Members. One's committee members may sometimes be similarly drawn upon, particularly if one is blocked on some aspect of the writing (literature review, methodology, analysis) that falls within that committee member's particular area of expertise; or they have been delegated to provide moral support in the absence of the supervisor. Check with the supervisor first, however, as protocol varies between faculties, and it is not uncommon for direct contact with committee members outside of scheduled committee meetings to be discouraged. (Such policies are designed to limit the committee member's time commitment to students for whom they are not the designated supervisor—and to protect the student from conflicting messages and negative interference from overzealous committee members.)

Significant Others. Although significant others appear to be an obvious source of moral support, this may not always be a good idea. Thesis writing, like any chronic illness, can be as hard on the caregiver as the person suffering the condition; just putting up with you is already a lot to ask. One needs to find the appropriate balance between obsessively talking about one's dissertation and sheltering one's partner from the worst of one's own wretchedness. It is difficult to generalize here, as personalities and relationships vary so greatly: some significant others may want to be involved in every aspect of one's research, and wounded if kept at arm's length; others may prefer that not every conversation be about one's thesis, and feel they should be able to get the occasional word in edgewise—perhaps even about their own needs.

There is also the consideration that sooner or later there will be real crisis in one's life, so it is crucial that one does not use up the significant other's entire supply of empathy on one's thesis problems. The bottom line is that the thesis journey has to take a lower priority than one's relationship with one's partner, because the significant other will be there long after grad school is over. Or, you know, *not there*, if one gets this wrong.

Further, unless s/he is also undertaking (or has previously written) a thesis, s/he is unlikely to understand the scale of either the task or the accompanying wretchedness. Not realizing that one's obsessive behaviour, depression, and lack of obvious progress are a completely routine part of the process, they might think themselves supportive by advising one to quit. "I'll still love you if you flunk out" is only supportive, however, if one is actually flunking out, and may come across as somewhat undermining if it starts in one's second month….

Even if one's significant other appreciates that writing a thesis is an inherently dreadful experience and painfully slow going (one could give them this article to read, for example), they may not always be the best source of feedback. Like mothers of grade school children, they might feel being supportive means being overly positive ("That's wonderful dear!") even when they know it really is not. Conversely, they might be holding early drafts to too high a standard, comparing it to the published articles they are used to: "You're not handing that in like that, are you?" The fundamental problem with either approach is that, by definition, the significant other's opinion matters a great deal emotionally, but has no standing in the actual assessment process.

Graduate Student Peers. Fellow students are usually the most helpful supports, because they often have a similar background in one's discipline, and because they are going through the same process of writing their thesis and get the whole wretchedness thing. Commiserating with each other can be productive, provided everyone is equally committed to lending an ear, and the resulting group culture feels supportive rather than whiny.

As suggested in the previous section, hanging with one's graduate student peers is a key factor, not just in maintaining a healthy work/life balance, but in harvesting the environment for ideas and insights. All one's peers are reading different (but equally obscure) academic journals, talking to different supervisors and committee members, and conducting different research projects, any of which might well provide the missing piece of the puzzle for one's own thesis. The reverse is equally true, and it is a real morale boost when you can provide some obscure tidbit from your own reading to resolve the issue that was blocking a peer. Time and again, my students have told me they learned more from talking to their peers than from any course, workshop, or professor.

It makes sense, then, to organize a regular get-together with a group of one's graduate student peers, whether that's coffee every Friday afternoon or the occasional movie night. Get together, make friends, find support.[15]

Writing Coach. For the emotional and motivational issues around substantive writing (as opposed to research content or actual wording, for which there may be ethical constraints) a writing coach or writing workshops may also be helpful in overcoming writer's block, blank page syndrome, procrastination, and isolation.

Conclusion

A sustained piece of writing is not longer simply because one is putting more words on paper; it is longer because one is digging deeper, making a more complex, compre-hensive, thorough argument to come up with original insights and an original contribution to one's field.

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[15] Note that one may have to cast one's net for supportive peers outside one's own department if one finds oneself in a toxic environment due to sexism, racism, class bias, etc., or an overly competitive program.

Going so much deeper and being original is obviously challenging. One has to *un*learn the first-draft writing and time management strategies that worked so well for undergraduate writing to learn an entirely new set of skills.

A key technique for going deeper—for getting those fresh, original ideas that everyone seems to expect but can never quite explain how to find—is to use an iterative process of substantive/ structural (re)writing as a way of generating alternative syntheses, interpretations, and insights. Research techniques and statistical analysis are all very well, but without the ability to write up the story the collected data tells, it is all for naught. Substantive writing, and especially substantive rewriting, is the skill set that generalizes out to all aspects of one's life and career, whatever discipline or job one ends up in.

Much of this article has focused on the non-literacy aspects of sustained writing, and the tone has probably been discouraging at times. Words like "wretchedness", "terrifying", and "awful" may not be reassuring—but what should be reassuring is understanding that *everybody* finds thesis writing equally wretched, terrifying, and awful.

Pretending that sustained writing/rewriting should come naturally to graduate students, or that writing a thesis isn't necessarily traumatic, is like failing to mention to expectant mothers that there may be "some discomfort" associated with pregnancy and birth. However wonderful and worth-while it is to hold one's newborn or completed thesis, one has to anticipate that the birthing process may entail a certain amount of pain, angst, and having to be told to breathe.

Glossing over these difficulties risks further undermining the student's self-confidence when s/he inevitably encounters writer's block for the first time, or the need for yet another revised draft. It's hard enough to cope with these issues without the added burden of believing they represent personal weakness rather than universal experience. Knowing that everyone who ever completed a thesis, dissertation, or book struggled just as much as you are now (or are about to, if you're just starting in the program), helps put things back into perspective, and provides some assurance that you too will ultimately be successful.

The truth is, most graduate students find the process stressful and draining, and I am a great believer that "forewarned is fore-armed". Knowing what challenges lie ahead, and how to prepare for and so mitigate them, can greatly improve both the experience of writing and the likelihood of success.

Finally, I would like to argue that nothing in this article should make one afraid of undertaking a thesis or dissertation. Yes, there will be challenges to overcome and some of the experience may be painful, but the same can be said of dating, childbirth or earning a living. Such is life. The benefits of these activities generally far outweight the costs. Having successfully completed a thesis or dissertation teaches one a set of writing and coping skills that cannot be achieved any other way, and those skills are fully transferable to most other major projects. What writing or organizational task could possibly intimidate you after this? Whatever the employment opportunities in one's discipline, whatever field one subsequently enters, the skills acquired through completing a sustained writing task make one more competent and therefore competitive. Nor should the boost to one's self-confidence and self-image be discounted. (Though try not to be too insufferable, okay?) You *can* do this! You just have to pay attention to the strategies and skills necessary for success.

Recommended Resources

Becker, Howard. *Writing for Social Scientists: How to Start and Finish Your Thesis, Book, or Article.* 2nd ed. Chicago University Press, 2009. 208pp. ISBN: 9780226041322 Highly *recommended.*

Cham, Jorge. "Piled Higher and Deeper" www.http://phdcomics.com. Wincingly funny comic; more accurate than not. Most episodes apply equally to master's level. (Six million regular followers.)

Condie, Richard. *Getting Started.* National Film Board, Canada, 1979. 12 minutes. Animated short. https://www.nfb.ca/film/getting_started/

Goldberg, Natalie. *Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within.* 30th Anniversary ed. Shambhala, 2016. 224 pp. Widely used by fiction writers, often helps graduate students to overcome writer's block as well.

Runté, Robert (2017) *Choosing A Thesis, Dissertation or Research Topic.* Free download from EssentialEdits.ca.

Runté, Robert (2017) *Maintaining Backups of Key Files When Writing.* Free download from EssentialEdits.ca. Some additional considerations on backing up files to keep thesis data and drafts secure.

Sternberg, David. *How to Complete and Survive a Doctoral Dissertation.* St. Martin's Griffin, 1981. 240pp. ISBN-13: 978-0312396060 Content applies equally to thesis work. Advice about dealing with depression, supervisors and committees, spouses/partners, etc., and that the key to success is a good filing system. Sternberg was a psychologist, not a professor or editor, so the approach is based on decades of successfully counselling dissertation survivors. (I should have believed him when he talked about the crucial importance of filing, but I didn't, so had to learn the hard way.)
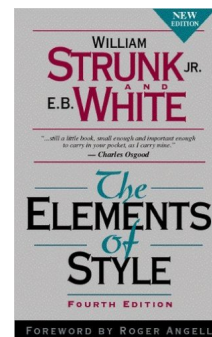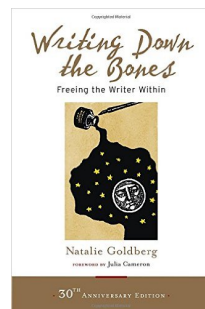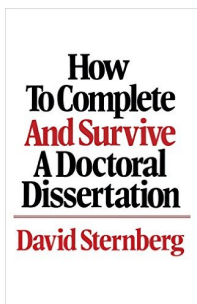
Morley, John. *Academic Phrasebank.* http://www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk/Developed for ESL students, website lists commonly used academic phrases by main section of research paper or thesis where they would be used.

Runté, Robert (1999, 2005, 2017) *Choosing A Thesis or Dissertation Supervisor.* Criteria to consider. Free download from EssentialEdits.ca.

Strunk, William, and E.B. White. *The Elements of Style,* 4th ed. Pearson, 1999. 105 pp. "Strunk & White" was the universal style guide for clear writing for four generations, so its recommendations have become deeply ingrained in our culture. Necessary reading before starting any nonfiction project. [Copyright has expired on the original Strunk-only edition, so watch out for overpriced fakes on Amazon. Get it free online or buy the fourth edition (pictured above).]

Appendix
A Few Statistics

Only 55.8% of Canadian students who registered in a PhD program in 2001 in the humanities, and 65.1% of those in social sciences, completed their PhD within the nine-year limit (Tamburri, 2013). At one Canadian University, the completion rate in the humanities was as low as 34%. The figures are similar for master's students with only 54% in the humanities graduating within ten years. (CAGS, 2003).

It is difficult to know what the completion rate will be for students entering a program this year, because students have eight to ten years to complete their graduate degree. One can only know for certain the completion rates a decade after those figures could have usefully informed one's decision about whether to start the program.

My guess, however, would be that completion rates are climbing somewhat because more and more master's programs, and even some PhD programs, now provide alternative routes to graduation other than completing a thesis or dissertation. In my own faculty, for example, most master's students now take three extra courses, plus a 'capstone course', rather than undertake a thesis. Only a minority—presumably those expecting to go onto a PhD—write a thesis. Similarly, some PhD programs (especially in Europe) offer the alternative of having three articles published in recognized, refereed, scholarly journals as a more authentic assessment alternative than a dissertation. Consequently, graduate students in these programs can avoid undertaking the sustained piece of writing that a thesis or dissertation represents, and therefore continue using the short-term writing strategies acquired in their undergraduate years: three articles is the writing-task equivalent of three (albeit high quality) term papers. This alone may be enough to drastically increase completion rates, though I leave it to the reader to decide what implications, if any, this holds for one's ability to complete sustained writing projects in the future.

The central thesis of this article has been that most people who fail to complete the master's or PhD fail or drop out because they cannot manage the new task of undertaking a sustained piece of writing. This is difficult to document, however, because it is a largely unrecognized problem. Of the many studies of master's and doctoral attrition, I have yet to find one in which "the writing task was overwhelming" was one of the options offered survey respondents. People *assume* the writing part is not the problem—even the students with that problem! For example, 'running out of money' after eight years (i.e., six years spent on writing the dissertation!) seems a reasonable explanation for those who do not stop to ask, "Why is it taking students six years to *write* a dissertation?"

Similarly, in the spate of recent reports on problems with, and recommendations for, graduate studies in Canada, there were no recommendations addressed to teaching graduate students sustained writing strategies. The closest is the 2012 study by Tamburri which includes the single sentence:

> It is especially important that graduate students be trained in communications skills that include writing for different audiences, and 'writing short' as well as 'writing long.'

I am not entirely sure what is intended by 'writing long', but even presuming that refers to teaching strategies for sustained writing, that one sentence does not provide the emphasis on setting up thesis-writing courses or student coaching in writing strategies that I see as crucial to mitigating this hidden bottleneck to thesis and dissertation completion.

One statistic that *does* suggest that it is the thesis/dissertation writing that stops students from graduating is the finding that students often dropout *near the end* of their programs.

> The surprising aspect of these results is that the times it took for students to leave a university were, in some cases, nearly the same as the times to completion. At certain universities students left without a degree after 8 semesters of studies at the master's level, and after 18 semesters at the doctoral level. Previous work by Nerad and Miller (1996) has indicated that there are two patterns of leavers. One group decides, often for good reasons, to leave relatively early;

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the other group who appears to run out of steam or money leaves without a degree after as many as 8 or more years of studying (CAGS, 2003).

As Elgar (2003) notes:

> Attrition of students during the early years of PhD programs should not be considered problematic, as some students, quite appropriately, leave once it is apparent that their work is unlikely to meet acceptable standards in their disciplines. However, the painfully slow attrition of all-but-dissertation (ABD) students that occurs years after all other program requirements are successfully completed is expensive to universities and exhorts a significant toll on students and their career prospects. Unfortunately, statistics on when dropout tends to occur is lacking for Canadian universities.

That doctoral students stalling out at the dissertation stage is so common that there is even an official term for it—ABD—strongly suggests that there is something about *writing* a dissertation that accounts for at least some (I argue at least half) of the roughly 50% attrition in PhD programs; and by the same logic, in the master's programs as well.

References for Appendix

Canadian Association of Graduate Studies. (2003) *The Completion of Graduate Studies in Canadian Universities: Report and Recommendations.*

Elgar, F. (2003) *PhD Completion in Canadian Universities.* Graduate Students Association Canada.

Tamburri R. (2013) "The PhD is in need of revision", *University Affairs*, Feb 6, 2013. http://www.universityaffairs.ca/features/feature-article/the-phd-is-in-need-of-revision/#latest_data

About the Author

Dr. Robert Runté is a sociologist, educator, critic, editor, and writer. He worked as Test Development Specialist for the Student Evaluation Branch of Alberta Education before joining the Faculty of Education at the University of Lethbridge, where he taught and researched for over twenty years. In 2009 he became Senior Editor with Five Rivers Publishing and in 2016 added Senior Editor with Essential Edits. He has so far edited over 30 novels and books, has authored 15 book chapters, 6 encyclopedia entries, 13 academic journal articles, over 70 conference presentations, 40 community presentations, 30 published book reviews, 12 open source guides (like this one!), 43 workshops and 150 zines. He has three Aurora Awards for his speculative fiction criticism. Two of the theses he supervised became published books, and a third won the Gold Medal of the Governor General of Canada. He has taught graduate courses in research methods and research writing, of which this guide is adapted.
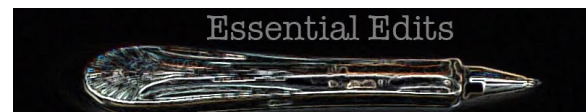
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