The Thesis Writing Process

Today:

1. What you should know about the writing process
2. Strategies for managing your process, inventing and organizing text

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The eternal struggle.

+ so that a reader can understand!
Writing Processes

A. Brainstorm. Read. Write. Edit. Turn in.
B. Read. Read. Read. Read. Read. Write at the last minute. Turn in.
D. Usually starts with brainstorming → reading and note-taking → drafting → feedback → more reading and research → new ideas and more drafting → feedback → revising → focused reading → revising → feedback → eventually, editing and proofreading. Turn in.
The Writing Process

what people think it looks like

what it really looks like
2 minutes to describe your writing process

1. What do you need, mentally and physically, to start writing?
2. Is it easier for you to write in the morning or the afternoon?
3. Describe your writing process: what stages do you go through?
   A. What is the hardest part?
   B. The easiest part?
Different texts at different times

- Process writing (focus on thinking & content)
- Product writing (focus on its form)

Different types of writing generate different types of text:
- raw text (for your eyes only)
- draft text (for feedback during the process)
- reader text (the end product)

All are necessary in the writing process
Writing = Thinking

“I write because I don’t know what I think until I read what I say.”

--Flannery O’Connor

..which means that writing processes are often recursive.
Benefits of writing regularly

- 6 year study of 32 people
- 16 regular writers (30 minutes/day, consistently)
- 16 binge writers

FIGURE 11.1 Effects of BDS
“The precondition for writing well is being able to write badly and to write when you are not in the mood.”

--Peter Elbow (1998)

“To be creative, one must be disciplined.”

--Fredrik Ullén (prof. in cognitive neuroscience & concert pianist)
Thesis writing strategies

1) Manage your process and time
Managing your process & time

• Develop toolbox of writing & thinking strategies
  ➔ Consider what your answers to the “writing process” questions indicated about your writing personality and the tools you’ll need and when
  ➔ Schedule your writing time

• Plan backwards from the deadline to generate process milestones ➔ weekly goals ➔ daily goals
Start a research journal, including:

• Concrete, checkable, measurable **DAILY GOALS**, e.g.:
  • Write 500 comprehensible words of my introduction, specifically about the gap my research fills in the scholarship. (estimated time: 55 minutes)
  • Fill-in synthesis matrix for the 14 articles I’ve read and determined relevant for my lit. review chapter. (estimated time: 2 hours)
• Challenges + questions during the working day
• Plan to follow-up on those questions \( \rightarrow \) when? With whom?
• Brief summary at end of working day to remember where you stopped + why
If writing for an extended amount of time is painful...
Pomodoro technique

1. Choose a (concrete, realistic) task
2. Eliminate as many external distractions as possible
3. Work with intense focus for 25 minutes
4. Quickly note distractions on scratch paper
5. After 25 minutes, note what you have done
6. You’ve earned a 5-minute pause 😊
7. Work for another 25 minutes
8. After 4 pomodori, take a longer break
Thesis writing strategies

1) Manage your process and time
2) Manage your supervision time
Managing supervision time: establish expectations up front

For example:

1. How familiar are you with my topic? Any recommended reading?
2. How many sessions do we have? Shall I contact you when I’m ready for each session or do we schedule them all up front?
3. I’d like to use a simple “feedback request” when I send my text, so I’ll include....
4. Are you able to read and comment on large chunks of text? Do you prefer a certain format?
5. About how long can I expect it will take you to provide feedback?
6. Will you be unavailable at any point during this term?
7. Ask process-based questions when relevant, i.e., “What do you do when you feel stuck with...?”
Managing supervision time: feedback request

Need to do more than send emails with “Here’s my text so far!” and an attachment! Instead, send a “feedback request” with every text you’d like comments on. This is a brief letter with the following information:

1. **Context and aim:** briefly explain the section of your thesis, its context, and what your aim with it is.

2. **The process:** Where you are in the process with your text, what you see as its weaknesses at the moment, what you’re most happy with.

3. **Priority list:** 1-3 areas you want your supervisor to focus on. Areas that you do not want feedback on at this point.
Managing supervision time: feedback request

Tip: Make your questions as specific as possible:

“I don’t know what to write in the rest of the discussion section.”

“I feel my most interesting results are X and Y because they were unexpected based on Z theory, but I’m not yet sure what my discussion points about results A and B could be. Do you have advice on what I should look into to best explain those results?”
Thesis writing strategies

1) Manage your process and time
2) Manage your supervision time
3) Start a thoughtful literature search, take reflective notes & synthesize literature
Literature search to move from topic to question(s)

“...beginner’s mistakes: start plowing through all the sources they can find on a topic, taking notes on everything they read.”

“...the best way to begin working on your specific topic is not to find all the data you can on your general topic, but to formulate questions that point you to just those data that you need to answer them.”

Topic to Question(s)

- Innovation in Service Organizations or
- Environmental management or
- Human Rights Law and gender identity

Narrowed

- Innovation processes in museums or
- Sustainable (waste/water/energy ... ) management or
- Private and Family Life of Transgender People

Broad topic

Questions!
Types of questions to ask that guide your literature search lead to a RQ?

Ask about the history:
- How does (topic) fit into a larger historical context?
- What is (topic’s) internal history?

Ask about its structure and composition:
- How does (topic) fit into the context of a larger structure or function as part of a larger system?
- How do (topic’s) parts fit together as a system?

Topic to Question(s)

Types of questions to ask that guide your literature search → lead to a RQ?

Ask how your topic is categorized?
   How can (topic) be grouped into kinds?
   How does (topic) compare to and contrast with others like it?

Turn positive questions into negative ones.
   What has not contributed to...?
   How does (topic) not differ from...?

Ask “what if?” and other speculative questions.
   How would things be different if (topic) didn’t happen/never existed?
Reading & Note-taking

Scan & sort
Skim & sort
Surface read & sort
Deep read
1. Scan: title, major headings, abstract.

   “Yes”, “Maybe” piles

2. Skim (“maybe” pile): eyes run over text, keywords, first sentence of every paragraph.

3. Surface read & sort

4. Deep read “yes” pile
Notes that rework the source ➔ better memory & better papers

TEXT CONTENT and REFLECTIONS

1) What type of text is this?
2) Problem-solution text? Question-answer text? Argument driven?
3) Note the main idea and how the author convinces you or not
4) What does the text help you understand about your topic?
5) What definitions does the text use?
6) Any helpful concepts or language?
7) What connections does this text make or not make?
8) Other reactions, questions, associations?
Notes to include: content + reflections

- Problem-solution?
- Main idea and evidence?
- Description of a process or method?
- Timeline of events/ experiment?
- Relation between hypothesis/aim and results?
- Keywords
- Examples (that were especially clarifying)
- Page numbers and reference info

- Questions
- Associations, reactions, ideas
- Any potential problems with method or results achieved?
- Other methods that could have been used?
- Concrete examples of abstract thoughts
Synthesis matrix for an overview of the literature

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main Idea A</th>
<th>Source #1</th>
<th>Source #2</th>
<th>Source #3</th>
<th>Source #4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main Idea B</th>
<th>Source #1</th>
<th>Source #2</th>
<th>Source #3</th>
<th>Source #4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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Example from:
https://writingcenter.fiu.edu/resources/synthesis-matrix-2.pdf
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic: Women in WWII</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Alteration of women’s roles because of WWII</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cornelsen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Women accredited the WASP program for opening new doors, challenging stereotypes, and proving that women were as capable as men (p. 113)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Women could compete with men as equals in the sky because of their exemplary performance (p. 116)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- WASP created opportunities for women that had never previously existed (p. 112)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Women’s success at flying aircrafts “marked a pivotal step towards breaking the existing gender barrier” (p. 112)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hardships and oppositions women faced</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cornelsen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- “From the outset male pilots resented women’s presence in a traditionally male military setting” (p. 1113-4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- “The WASP were routinely assigned inferior planes that were later found to have been improperly maintained” (p. 114)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Ask:

• Are there differences in the scope of these texts’ main ideas?
• Any degree of disagreements between them?
• Do they engage with each other? How?
• Do they cover different aspects of my subject? How many different aspects? Any left out?
• How detailed/deep is each analysis?
• Any ideas in one text that you could reasonably expect to see in another, but don’t?
• Do they use similar methods to reach similar conclusions? Similar methods but different conclusions? Different methods but similar conclusions?
Thesis writing strategies

1) Manage your process and time
2) Manage your supervision time
3) Start a thoughtful literature search, take reflective notes & synthesize literature
4) Free write
Free write

• To warm up your writing muscles
• To turn off your inner critic or editor
• To quickly generate raw text
• To break through writer’s block

1. Choose a time frame and starting sentence/theme
2. Write without stopping! (No backspace, no eraser)
3. Continue to write without thinking about what you’re writing, even if you don’t have anything to write about

If you free write on the computer, turn off the monitor!
How to free write: sentences

It’s a problem that... *(starting point)*
It’s a problem especially for....This could be used by....to.... *(whom does it concern?)*
The problem is caused by.... *(causes)*
I aim to.... *(your aim)*
To study the problem, I will.... *(method)*
To understand the problem, you have to understand how X works.... *(theory)*
Some keywords and concepts are...
I will only deal with...because... *(delimitations)*
For now, I’ll work as if this section will have the following structure... *(organization)*
What can you do with a “free write” text?

• Find a starting point for a new free write
  – underline good ideas and formulations
  – write the best bits on a new page and free write from there
  – repeat until you have developed a working draft

• Find keywords and make a preliminary structure
  – note keywords and write them on a separate page
  – structure the keywords in a logical order → paper structure?
  – write additional comments on each point

• Find gaps in what you know to guide further reading
  – note questions or uncertainties in your text
  – formulate as questions to ask to other literature
  – group and prioritize the questions according to kind
Exercise: Using your “free write” text

• Underline 3-5 good ideas and formulations, (or keywords).

• Write additional comments on each point:
  - I want to talk about / explain / analyze / ........ because ........
  - The relation between ................ and ................ is ................
  - First I’ll write about ................ because ................ and then I’ll write about ................ because ........................

• Spend a few minutes preparing to tell a classmate about these ideas.
Thesis writing strategies

1) Manage your process and time
2) Manage your supervision time
3) Start a thoughtful literature search, take reflective notes & synthesize literature
4) Free write
5) Draw mind maps
Mind map

- to see the whole picture
- to see the relationship between the parts
- to find gaps in information
Can be adapted for many purposes:

- map out the structure of a text you’re reading
- map out themes across several texts
- map out your reflections on one or more texts
- map out the content of a text you have to write
Thesis writing strategies

1) Manage your process and time
2) Manage your supervision time
3) Start a thoughtful literature search, take reflective notes & synthesize literature
4) Free write
5) Draw mind maps
6) Use metatext as a starting point
Use metatext

Metatext: text about text

Can start as process text for the writer: helps you understand the kind of content you need to write.

Can become product text for readers: helps them follow your text and understand it in the way you want it to be understood.

Examples:
• Focus statement
• Signpost text = directions
• Theory template
Focus Statement Template

I am studying [TOPIC] because I want to find out who/what/when/where/whether/why/how [QUESTION] in order to better understand (something the field doesn’t fully understand yet) and to make suggestions for how to change/fix/improve [SIGNIFICANCE].

[METHODS] To do this, I will conduct (a case study/an observational study/historical research/field-experiment). I will (collect/construct/gather qualitative/quantitative data/empirical material through interviews/observation/content analysis/questionnaires).

[METHODS & THEORY] I will analyze the data from (this theoretical perspective) or with (this framework/these concepts). This perspective is helpful because .

[RESULTS SPECULATION] The results of this research will build on and have implications for. Further research might focus on.
In this chapter, I will begin by discussing the background to my topic. With that background in place, I will turn to an evaluation of the relevant literature on this topic. The next step will be a re-interpretation of my problem in light of this literature. I will conclude by considering the implication of my topic for the broader field.

Example from Explorations of Style
In this chapter, I will begin by discussing the background to [my topic]. With that background in place, I will turn to an evaluation of the relevant literature on [my topic]. The next step will be a re-interpretation of [my topic] in light of this literature. I will conclude by considering the implications of [my topic] for [my field].
Version 3 (for the reader)

The first step in discussing [something] must be a consideration of [some sort of background issue]. To get a better feel for [this issue], we will need to look at [a particular aspect of the literature from two fields]. The synthesis of results from [literature in field X] and [literature in field Y] will provide a new way to understand the [current topic]. It is only when we see [this topic] in this new way that we can grasp its implications for the broader project of understanding [some issue facing the field as a whole].

Example modified from Explorations of Style
In this book we draw on the work of Foucault to make our argument that psychopathology has become instrumental in schools and that schools play an instrumental role in expanding the new psychopathologies of children and young people. Foucault’s emphasis on truth, power and the constitution of the subject (Foucault 1983, 1997a, 2000) is especially useful to our analysis as it allows us to think through the ways in which psychopathology at school is produced and has productive effects. To this end Foucault’s (1982) conceptualisation of power as productive is generative for grasping how schools can indeed be instrumental in a field that, on first glance, appears to be the province of medical and health sciences (especially psychiatry, clinical psychology and psychopharmacology). It is here also that Foucault’s attention to dominant and subjugated knowledges is of value for informing how to understand how dominant knowledges of school disorders such as ADHD, direct attention from those practices that enable psychopathology to sit comfortably in contemporary schooling and educational environments.
In this (paper/chapter/article/thesis/book) I draw on (theorist’s work) to argue that (1-2 sentences summarizing your argument). (Name of theorist’s) emphasis on (specific concepts that will be used) is especially useful to this analysis as it allows us to think through (major purpose through which the theory is put). To this end (name of theorist’s) conceptualization of (name of major aspect of theory) is generative for grasping how (major application of theory in relation to your argument). It is here also that (theorist’s) attention to (another aspect of theory) is of value for informing (another piece of argument for which the theory is essential).


When writing (about) theory, ask yourself:

1. What does your reader need to know to understand your problem and your claim?
2. Theories can be interpreted in a variety of ways. How do you interpret yours? Why? Are some aspects of the theory more important than others to your research? Which and why?
3. Why this theory at all? Did it help you to conceive of and design your project? Does it help to simplify complex empirical material or to enrich something simple?
4. Who else has used this approach in similar ways to you? How will you build on this work? Or how will your way differ from the way its typically used?
5. What are the potential down-sides to using this theory and approach – what doesn’t it do? What have you done about these potential problems?
Thesis writing strategies

1) Manage your process and time
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4) Free write
5) Draw mind maps
6) Use metatext as a starting point
7) Tell a friend!
Tell a friend

...and get feedback

1. What stuck out to me the most was...
2. I’d like to know more about...
3. I didn’t quite understand...
“Don't write so that you can be understood, write so that you can't be misunderstood.”

-- William Howard Taft
Reflect on your writing process description from earlier

• What will change, delete, or add?

• Name one concrete thing that you can do next time you sit down to write!
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Academic writing
Presenting
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