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Thinking about Your Thesis?

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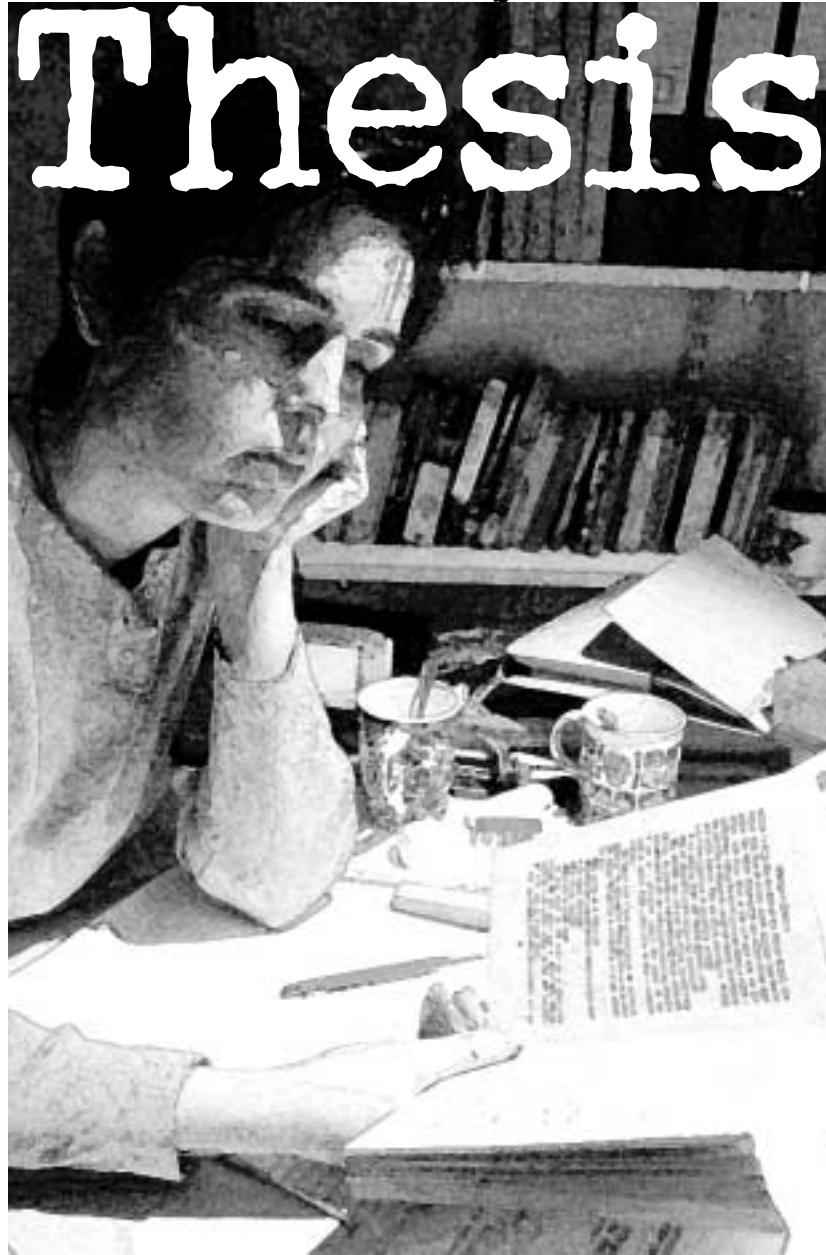


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Thinking about your Thesis



Here's advice on how to get started

When Erika Simpson finished her PhD dissertation in political science at the University of Toronto in 1995, she knew her experience could help other graduate students in the throes of thesis writing, not to mention “many friends who

are ABDs (All-But-Dissertation students).” Soon after, as a newly minted professor teaching international relations in the political science department of the University of Western Ontario, she realized that the lessons she learned would be helpful to the graduate students

she was now supervising.

Based on her experience, as well as suggestions from the graduate workshops for MA and PhD political science students at Western and comments from several colleagues, she wrote a document of useful advice for would-be thesis writers. It now serves as a

hand-out for all grad students in Western's political science department (even though it's not "official departmental policy"). Many of her observations are also applicable to graduate students in other departments, especially in the social sciences.

This is a shortened version of Dr. Simpson's document. The original version, including references, can be found at <http://publish.uwo.ca/~simpson/publish/> on the Web.

When embarking on a thesis, it's essential to choose a topic early and give yourself plenty of time to do your preliminary research. You'll need to scan the latest journals and books related to your interests and search the Internet to determine whether anyone has already written extensively on your topic, and who the main authors are in your area. Also make sure you review at least three other theses in your department's collection or the university library. Ask yourself how much theory you want to incorporate into your thesis, how widely relevant you want it to be, and what potential employers might want to see on your resumé.

In framing a research question, you need to pin down exactly what it is you want to find out, and what problem you will examine. For example, if you are interested in improving United Nations peacekeeping efforts and you would like to work for the UN, your question might be: How has the UN financed its peacekeeping operations?

Once you've done your early research and framed a relevant question, prepare a brief written statement for your supervisor, defining concepts where necessary. Think about whether your research question can be further narrowed down.

Outline the topic's significance: Is it timely? Does it relate to a practical problem? Does it fill a research gap? Does it relate to broader theoretical principles or general theory? Does it sharpen the definition of an important concept or relationship? Does it have implications for a wide range of practical problems?

You'll also need to establish whether your question is related to a theoretical problem, previous theoretical research, or a debate in the literature. Discuss whether you will present the theory (including the methodology and important con-

cepts) in a separate chapter or in parts, whether you will make theoretical propositions in the introduction or discuss theoretical implications in the conclusion, and indicate whether you are writing a theoretical and/or policy-relevant thesis.

You may prefer an alternative research methodology (for example, an interpretive, critical, comparative, or historical approach). But by at least attempting to answer the following questions, you should make significant progress in designing your research project. Moreover, you may encounter a thesis examiner who wants to know what your independent and dependent

Once your topic is chosen and approved, you need to step up your research efforts, and continue them year-round, not only in the crucial months before the final deadline.

variables are. Try to assert your propositions in the form of one-sentence hypotheses. Now ask the hypotheses in the form of questions. Do any of your propositions overlap and can any questions be eliminated? Do they make common sense or are they far-out and controversial?

Although you don't need to use a positivist explanation, you should think about your possible independent, intervening, and dependent variables. If you want to explain the dependent variable B, then ask why does B occur? The independent variables

A contribute to B. What do you suspect are the most significant independent variables? Can you argue that given A, you expect B will occur? Are there exceptions? Can you narrow your list of independent (and intervening) variables to include only those most significant? What evidence could you turn up to prove or disprove your propositions? What might lead you to reject your propositions? What levels of analysis will you study?

If you decide to use the case-study approach, ask yourself whether your case selection was biased, and recognize that many theses end up with fewer case studies than initially planned. If the bulk of your evidence comes from logical reasoning (for example, game theory or rational choice theory), determine what counter-arguments seem to oppose or contradict your reasoning. Or, if your method is more historical or interpretive, ask how much detailed chronological explanation you need.

What scale will you use to measure significant factors or variables (such as quantitative, semi-quantitative, qualitative)? Will you undertake the kind of research necessary to measure your variables (for example, mathematical, survey, public opinion, in-depth interviews, content analysis)? Are any important concepts in need of measurement (intensity, frequency, amount, number)? How will you assess the measure of change, significance or importance?

Year-round research
Once your topic is chosen and approved, you need to step up your research efforts, and continue them year-round, not only in the crucial months before the final deadline.

Don't be discouraged if, at the beginning, you are overwhelmed by too much information. Your most highly relevant research may take place in the weeks and months leading up to the penultimate draft. Remember that you are looking for patterns and trends, and that you must think about how you will structure your analysis. Think about all the alternative approaches you could take, and be prepared to defend your chosen method.

You are moving toward being able to make theoretical and policy-relevant conclusions, and you need to be confident of your conclusions and

your research methodology. Ideally they will be logical, and a new contribution to knowledge. Be prepared to advance a central argument or thesis based on your research, and explain how the evidence generally confirms or refutes your initial suppositions. How would you now qualify your research propositions? Should you reword them to be more accurate?

When it comes to the actual writing, you can save time by working on the main body of the thesis first and leaving the introduction and conclusion until the end. Remember that you can repeat some introductory points in your conclusion.

When you do finally write the introduction and conclusion, consider any mistakes you've made, and what you would do differently now. Assess your method of gathering information, and ask yourself how would you improve your research process. With your supervisor, discuss how your conclusions could be fed back into theory. What are the theoretical implications of your research?

During the first year or semester, read as much as possible. Don't be shy about talking to your supervisor. Brainstorm. Write down ideas on file cards. Throw most of them away. Follow your hunches.

In the conclusion, you may mention what you intend to research in the future, knowing what you know now. In light of your work, indicate areas that are ripe for further research. While writing the conclusion, students often tend to refine their arguments and write excellent summaries. Perhaps you could move some of this material to the introduction, where it might be more useful to the reader.

When at the final draft stage, every section, paragraph, and sentence should advance your overall argument. Excise any sections that are there only because you did the research, not because they are necessary to your thesis.

Headings should explain and reflect the table of contents. In the abstract, state your argument clearly. Tests and evidence should be explained fully. Note the sources of all your charts and graphs. Acknowledge and address legitimate counter-arguments. Summarize the debate of which your thesis is a part, and specify what previous literature it confirms or revises.

Your thesis will be read by scholars in your field; it may also be read by non-specialists. It should be well organized and clearly presented so that readers may easily grasp the significant points. Other graduate students and friends can give useful advice before you submit your thesis. Don't assume that any confusion is due to their stupidity or ignorance, and instead consider how you might constructively use each criticism or suggestion.

The term "final draft" should mean "the best I can do". Read your drafts carefully. Pages and footnotes or endnotes should be consistently numbered. Your advisors will have suggestions, and you should feel free to debate them. But you have the final responsibility for content, presentation and errors.


Common thesis problems
During the first year or semester, read as much as possible. Don't be shy about talking to your supervisor. Brainstorm. Write down ideas on file cards. Throw most of them away. Follow your hunches.

It's crucial to learn how to search for information using the Internet. Update your bibliography as you conduct your research, in the proper format on your computer. You can waste valuable time later looking up references you mislaid.

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Write a draft once you have done 50 percent of your research. Then fit your remaining research information into your draft. Many people continue to do research because they are afraid of writing. Remember: You do not have to read everything.

Decide which style to use – Modern Language Association or American Psychological Association, making sure that your chosen style is acceptable by the official thesis guideline issued by your department. Be consistent, and footnote your sources and bibliography correctly from the beginning.

Err on the side of over-footnoting. Study journal articles in your field to assess when and what they footnote. Be careful not to paraphrase someone's analysis and pass it off as your own. If you have not provided evidence in the main body of your writing to back up an assertion, you can list in a footnote or endnote the materials that would buttress your argument. Statements of fact should be properly documented. Quotations and interviews need to be properly noted. Frequently ask yourself if you can footnote a comment rather than retain it in the main text, to eliminate confusion and save time.

When explaining a concept or theory, such as post-modernism or realism, do not use critics' works. Cite original authors, not someone else's interpretation of an original idea, and footnote the original source.

Tackling the first draft

As you write the first draft, refrain from editing and proofreading. Considerable time can be wasted editing on the computer. If you dislike writing first drafts, take the attitude, "I'm just going to bang out a few pages", and strive for at least three pages a day. Remember to give the reader signposts to indicate where you are going. For instance, restate your interpretation of the findings and provide conclusions that summarize preceding paragraphs. Use many headings and sub-headings.

By the time you write the last chapter, the first chapter will need to be revised. This is not a disaster, and is actually expected. In fact, you will probably do many serious revisions of your entire thesis. Don't be discouraged – you can get a lot more done than you think you can in a short time.

Among graduate students, procrastination is common and expected, for a variety of reasons.

Your computer's spellcheck will not pick up all your errors so carefully read your draft before handing it to your professor. It is usually better to be late than to submit a poorly written or unedited draft. You will be judged in part based on the clarity of your writing and the quality of your presentation.

Print your work frequently. Keep copies of your disks and your drafts in different locations just in case of fire, tornadoes and earthquakes. For peace of mind, save your work every day. Solve any computer or printer problems now, not when deadlines loom.

Among graduate students, procrastination is common and expected, for a variety of reasons. To combat the problem, schedule rewards (such as exercise) after completing X hours of work. Study at the library with others. Prioritize long-term and short-term goals. Ask for more feedback from your advisor. Set short-term deadlines. Work when you will be least bothered, and don't socialize during study times. Reward yourself with lunch, coffee, a chat with a friend. Ask yourself whether you are overbooking your time because you are afraid to work on your top priority – your thesis! Just say NO!

Another common problem is writer's block. The way out of this one is to write anything. Write why you hate your research project. Your inner critic is fond of phrases such as: This is stupid! You don't know anything and you should do more research! You better go back and correct that sentence! Tell your inner critic to get lost. Then write as if you were explaining your ideas to a friend or a relative, someone who is not a critic but a fan.

E-mail progress reports to your supervisor if you cannot drop by frequently. Vow to keep in touch, especially if you are having problems. **UA•AU**

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