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# Thinking about Your Thesis?

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## **Thinking about Your Thesis?**

*Essential questions, techniques, and tips the  
MA or PhD candidate could ask of a thesis in preparation—and  
the supervisor or examiner could also consider.*

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## **Thinking about Your Thesis?**

**Erika Simpson**

Writing a MA thesis or PhD dissertation is a difficult and time-consuming endeavour. Some students produce chapters based on sound research frameworks and methodology with seemingly little effort or hands-on guidance. Most would-be scholars, however, struggle valiantly. This guideline to thinking about the MA or PhD thesis is meant to act as a map or compass—not a directive.<sup>1</sup>

### **A Set of Questions**

The MA or PhD candidate might ponder the following set of questions before undertaking a thesis. Alternatively, the newly-minted professor or inexperienced thesis supervisor might pose these sorts of questions to the graduate student. While the MA or PhD candidate should not be expected to answer them all, just thinking about them beforehand, and discussing them with a supervisor, should help the student to write a better thesis. Variants of these questions may also arise during the oral defence.

#### *Selecting a Research Topic:*

Try to choose a topic early. Scan the latest journals and books related to your interests. Conduct some database searches on the Internet using key words that interest you. What are other researchers and academics doing in your field of interest? Has someone already written extensively on your favourite topic? Who are the main authors in your specialized area? Overview at least three other theses in your department's collection or the university library. Compared to other students, how much theory do you

want to incorporate into your thesis? How relevant do you want your thesis topic to be?  
What topic might potential employers be interested in seeing on your *résumé*?

*Framing Your Research Question:*

Compose your thesis question. What is it you are specifically interested in finding out about? What is the problem you intend to examine? How can this topic be framed in the form of a question? For example, let us say you are interested in improving UN peacekeeping efforts and you would like to work for the United Nations. Your specific question might be: “How has the UN financed its peacekeeping operations?” Alternatively, you might be interested in the problem of nuclear proliferation. Your specific question might be: “Why did South Africa decide to rid itself of nuclear weapons?” Discuss your possible thesis question with others.

Present your supervisor with a brief written statement of the problem. Define concepts where necessary. Express the problem in the form of a question. Can your research question be further narrowed down? Describe the significance of the problem with reference to one or more of the following criteria: Is it timely? Does it relate to a practical problem? Does it relate to an influential, wide or critical population? Does it fill a research gap? Does it permit generalization 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?

*The Theoretical Framework:*

Can your problem be related to a theoretical framework? Can the problem be related to previous theoretical research? What set of theoretical questions are you asking? What debate in the literature are you addressing? Can your research fill a theoretical gap?

Does it answer one or many aspects of a theoretical debate? Will you present the theory (including the methodology and important concepts) in a separate chapter or in parts? Will you make theoretical propositions in the introduction? Could you discuss theoretical implications in the conclusion? To what extent do you want to write a theoretical and/or policy-relevant thesis?

*Formulating Researchable Propositions:*

You may decide not to use a “positivist” framework to organize your thesis, preferring an alternative research methodology (*e.g.* “interpretive,” “critical,” “comparative,” “historical” approach, *etc.*). But by at least attempting to answer the following “positivist” (*i.e.* “causal,” “empirical,” “scientific”) questions, you should make significant progress in terms of designing your research project. Moreover, you may encounter a thesis examiner who wants to know, “What are your ‘independent’ and ‘dependent’ variables?”

First, could you transform your theoretical propositions into researchable propositions? 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 do not need to use a positivist explanation, you should at least think about your possible independent, intervening, and dependent “variables.”<sup>2</sup> What you want to explain is the dependent variable (B). Why does B occur? The independent variables (A) contribute to B. What do you suspect are the most important or significant independent variables? Can you argue that Given A, you expect B will occur? Are there

any exceptions? Can you narrow your list of independent (and intervening) variables to include only those that you suspect are most important and significant? Remember that a MA or PhD thesis is not supposed to be a *magnum opus*. Focus your analysis upon the variables that you suspect are most important.

What criteria might you use to evaluate the “testability” of your research propositions? In other words, what kinds of evidence could you turn up to prove and disprove your propositions? What kinds of evidence might lead you to reject your propositions? What kind of evidence would you need? What sort of evidence do you expect to get? Are you looking for evidence stemming from individual-level, state-level or systemic-level interactions? What levels of analysis will you study during the research process?

How will you present your evidence? For example, if you decide to use the case-study approach, why did you select your particular case studies? Was your case-selection biased? Recognize that many theses end-up with fewer case studies than was initially planned. Are all your cases well chosen? Alternatively, if the bulk of your evidence is derived from logical reasoning (*e.g.* “game theory,” “rational choice theory,” *etc.*), what “counter-arguments” seem to oppose or contradict your reasoning? On the other hand, if you are inclined to be more historical or interpretive, how much detailed chronological explanation do you need to provide?

What scale will you use to “measure” significant factors or variables? (*e.g.* quantitative, semi-quantitative, qualitative?) Are you prepared to undertake the kind of research necessary in order to measure your variables? (*e.g.* mathematical, survey, public opinion, in-depth interviews, content analysis?) Are any important concepts in need of

measurement? (e.g. intensity, frequency, amount, number?) How will you assess the measure of change, significance or importance?

*Conducting Research:*

The research process should happen all year around, not in the crucial months before the final deadline for submission. Do not be discouraged if, at the beginning, you are overwhelmed by too much information. Much of your most highly-relevant research may take place in the final weeks and months leading up to the penultimate draft.

What patterns, trends, or series are you looking for during research? How are you going to structure your analysis of the evidence? Why? What alternatives have you considered? Why is your method preferable? What are its advantages and disadvantages?

What kinds of theoretical- and policy-relevant conclusions can you draw? How confident are you of these conclusions given your research methodology? For instance, do you think 2-3 case-studies can lead to general conclusions? Is your comparative case-study method useful? Are your logical conclusions merely commonsensical, not a new contribution to knowledge?

At this stage, you should be prepared to advance a central argument or thesis based on your research. Does the evidence generally confirm or disconfirm your initial suppositions? How would you now qualify your research propositions? Should you reword them to be more accurate? And now that the bulk of your research is completed, what do your findings teach us? Do they teach us something important? Have they solved at least part of an important puzzle?

*Introduction and Conclusion:*

Save time and refrain from writing the Introduction and Conclusion until the main body of the thesis is written. Remember that some of the points you make in your Introduction can be repeated in your Conclusion.

When writing the Introduction and the Conclusion, you could consider the mistakes you made, their consequences, and seriousness. What would you do differently now that you have conducted the research? Assess your method of gathering information. How valid was it and how would you now improve your research process? With your supervisor, discuss how your conclusions could be fed back into theory. What theoretical implications does your research indicate? You could also mention how your findings could have an impact upon policy. What policy-relevant lessons can be learned from your research?

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 now ripe for further research. While writing the Conclusion, students also tend to refine their arguments and write excellent summaries. Could you promote some of this material to the front, where it might do the reader more good?

*Final Draft:*

Can you excise sections that are there only, it seems, because you did the research, not because they are necessary to the logic of your argument? Every section, paragraph, and sentence should be there only if it advances your overall argument.

Headings need not be mere labels (*e.g.* “Background” or “Conclusion”) but can be more descriptive and precise (*e.g.* “Is NATO Expansion Bound to Fail?”). Do your



headings explain and reflect the Table of Contents? In the abstract, have you stated your argument clearly so that there is no confusion about what is and is not argued? Tests and evidence should be explained fully. Have you noted the sources of all your charts and graphs? Have you acknowledged and addressed legitimate counter-arguments? Have you summarized the debate of which your thesis is a part, and specified what previous literature it confirms or revises?

Your thesis will be read by scholars familiar with your field of inquiry and it may also be read by non-specialists. Does it explain sufficient historical, technical, and theoretical background? Is it well-organized and clearly presented so that readers may easily grasp the significant points?

Remember other graduate students and friends can give useful advice before you submit your thesis for formal consideration. In reacting to their comments, it is mistaken to assume that their confusion is due to stupidity or ignorance. What are the reasons behind their confusion? How might you contend with each criticism or suggestion?

Of course, it is not a good idea to hand your friends or supervisor a manuscript with careless typing and spelling, single-spaced type, or faint print. The word “final draft” should mean “the best I can do.” Have you carefully read your drafts? Are the pages and footnotes or endnotes consistently numbered? Your advisors will have suggestions, and you should feel free to debate those suggestions and reasons. But you have the final responsibility for content, presentation, and errors.

## **Common Thesis Problems**

There are many well-known (and some rather unusual) techniques that can be used to conquer common thesis difficulties. Procrastination, in particular, can be a problem among MA and PhD candidates. The tips in this section are meant to help overcome standard barriers to thesis completion.

### *Problems Framing the Research Question:*

During the first year or semester, try to read as much as possible. Browse through the library stacks. Scan related journal articles. Look at other MA or PhD theses for ideas about feasible topics. Narrow down your question as much as possible. Refrain from writing your *magnum opus*. There will be lots of time to do that later. Do not be shy to take your supervisor's time. Throw around ideas. Chat. Write down your interesting ideas on filecards. Throw most of them away. Follow your hunches.

### *Common Research Problems:*

You do not have to read everything. Over-researching is a common problem. If you do not know how to search for information using the Internet, make sure you ask someone to teach you. Most graduate students are using the World Wide Web to quickly and efficiently conduct research.<sup>3</sup> 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. Try to write a draft once you have done fifty percent of your research. Then fit your research information into your draft. Many people continue to do research because they are afraid of writing. You may need to bribe yourself to sit in front of your (blank) computer screen. Or force yourself to face a blank piece of paper.

*Problems with Writer's Block:*

Confronted with writer's block, start writing anything. Write why you hate your research project, write a letter to a friend explaining your thesis, write your mother an explanation of your research question. "I hate this thesis because..." "This is a stupid topic because..." Tell your inner critic to get lost. 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!" Instead try to write as if you were explaining your ideas to a friend or a relative, someone who is not a critic but a fan. Also ask for your supervisor's email or postal address and write progress reports if you do not have time to drop-by frequently, or you are shy. Vow to keep in touch with your supervisor, especially if you are having problems.

*Common Writing Mistakes:*

When explaining a concept or theory, such as "post-modernism" or "realism," do not use the critics' works to explain the concept. Take the time to examine and cite original authors. Moreover, do not cite someone else's interpretation of an original idea. For example, do not use undergraduate texts as a source of conceptual definitions. Examine and footnote the original source.

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." 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. Remind your erstwhile

reader of what has already been explained. And recognize that 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. Indeed, you will probably have to do many serious revisions of your entire thesis. Do not be discouraged. You can get a lot more done than you think you can in a short time.

*Computer Errors:*

Your computer's spellcheck will not pick up all your spelling errors. Be sure to read over your draft before handing it to your professor. It is usually better to be late than to submit a poorly-written draft. You will be judged in part based on your writing ability. If you cannot write clearly, it is assumed you are not thinking clearly. Print-up 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 everyday. If you are experiencing computer or printer problems, solve them now, not when deadlines loom.

*Style Frustrations:*

Purchase and study a style manual. Decide whether to use the Modern Language Association (MLA) or American Psychological Association (APA) style. Check that your chosen style is acceptable according to the official thesis guideline issued by your department or university. Be consistent and footnote your sources and bibliography correctly from the beginning. Do not make up your own distinctive style. For example, do not write pgs. instead of pp. Do not place the publisher before its location. Do not mix the MLA and APA documentation styles.

Err on the side of over-footnoting, rather than under-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. You cannot just change a few words here and there in a paragraph. 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, "Can I footnote this comment rather than retain it in the main text so as to eliminate confusion, save space, and retain the essay's coherence?"

*Problems with Procrastination:*

Among graduate students, serious procrastination is common and expected. Why do you procrastinate?

- Other Activities are More Interesting. Most other activities promise a shorter-term pay-off (e.g. movies, socializing, sports).
- Loneliness. Studying is lonely. Being in the library is isolating. "Everybody else seems to be having a good time!"
- Too Much Work. You are behind. It is hard to decide where to begin and easier not to.
- Guilt. Other things need pressing attention. Laundry, broken-hearted friend, the dog needs a walk...
- Fear of Failure. You do not understand the topic and your supervisor is confusing. Other graduate students seem so informed and in control.
- Fear of Success. If you do well, everybody's expectations will rise. You will eventually fall on your face and embarrass yourself because deep-down, you know you are a failure.<sup>4</sup>

By analyzing the reasons you procrastinate, you may be able to set-up the conditions to end procrastination. For example, you can schedule rewards (*e.g.* exercise) after completing X hours of work. You can study at the library with others. You can prioritize long-term and short-term goals. You can ask for more feed-back from your advisor. You can build up your confidence by setting short-term deadlines.

*Techniques to Conquer Serious Procrastination:*

- Just Do It! Prioritize.

Get an egg-timer and apportion your time. Work when you will be least bothered. Do not get sidetracked and socialize during study times. Reward yourself with short-term rewards (*e.g.* lunch, coffee, cigarette, chat). Keep asking yourself, “Does this activity help me achieve my top priorities?”

- Punish or Reward Yourself!

If procrastination is a serious problem, rewards may not be sufficiently compelling, and you may have to resort to punishment. As it is difficult to punish yourself, you may need to get someone else to do it for you. Write cheques to your least favourite organization. Give them to your supervisor or a friend. If you do not complete a page, paragraph or chapter by the deadline, s/he starts mailing cheques...\$200 later, you may start writing!

- Just Say No!

When asked to make other commitments, say “I’ll think about it” instead. If pressed, do a little something but not a lot. Continually ask yourself whether you are overbooking your time because you are afraid to work on your top priority (your thesis!)

- Banish worry thoughts! Get to the task!

Do a little bit at least. Divide the task into smaller chunks. Substitute the mental message, “I should...” with “I’d like to...” Write down all the worst things that could happen on pieces of paper. Put them aside. Read them a few months later. You will see that the worst things did not happen. Life is a series of problems but the worst scenario seldom materializes. And if it does, you will manage because you have inner reserves.

- Strive to Stay Balanced!

Smile! Get regular exercise. Eat properly. Do not burn the candle at both ends!

Put silly sticky notes and visual reminders everywhere: “Do not worry, be happy,” “This too will pass,” and “In the giant cosmos of things, this is totally unimportant”. Memorize this poem by Goethe, one of the world’s most beloved and prolific authors: “*What you can do or dream you can, begin it! Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it. Only engage and the mind grows heated. Begin it and the work will be completed!*”

## **I WOULD PREFER IF YOU CUT THE FOLLOWING...**

### **Coping with Family, Friends, and Partners**

Despite their best intentions, friends, relatives, and life partners can hinder the steady progress of the “All-But-Dissertation” (ABD) student. These ten rules, written tongue-in-cheek, could be tactfully distributed by the ABD as part of a coping strategy or politely proffered by the concerned supervisor as a prelude to a serious discussion of the difficult problems that bedevil many graduate students:

*Your ABD (All-But-Dissertation) Plant: 10 Rules For Care and Feeding*

1. Think of your ABD as a tender seedling that needs plenty of water and careful tending before it grows into a sturdy MA sapling or PhD tree.

2. Expect your ABD will be susceptible to frequent bouts of procrastination, depression, and “lackadaisicalness.” Sometimes an ABD plant will wilt, despite the best growing conditions. However, often an ABD will shoot upwards, exhibiting a surprising growth spurt in understanding. (The reasons for such rapid bursts of growth remain inexplicable).

3. Talk to your ABD plant. But do not focus upon the ABD’s dissertation, its rate of progress, and when, exactly, it will finish growing. Instead talk to the ABD about pleasantries such as Mozart, puppies, gardening, and flowers.

4. Remember that if you were never an ABD, you have no idea of what it is really like. Even if everyone in your garden plot was an ABD, and you grew up surrounded by ABDs, you will not completely understand the growth process. Whereas you may suspect you would complete a thesis more speedily and efficiently, telling your ABD this will not help it grow more quickly.

5. Some ABDs grow to fruition more quickly than others. Many are stymied by poor soil conditions (*e.g.* lack of money), overcrowding (*e.g.* more family members), looming shade (*e.g.* loneliness) and overbearing heat (*e.g.* demanding friends and lovers). Sometimes ABDs overcome one problem simply to encounter another. Often what seems an insurmountable barrier to the ABD really isn’t—if the ABD decides to grow over it.

6. The best growing environment for the ABD is simply to be left alone. Solitude. Time to focus on the primary task. The ABD impacted by too many earthly concerns cannot use finite amounts of energy properly and may not grow—may even fall over and decompose.



7. If you are a gardener in the ABD's plot of life, refrain from prodding, cutting-up or transplanting the ABD. Do not abruptly move your ABD to a different location or transplant the ABD into a larger, more expensive plot. If the ABD requires different growing conditions, the ABD will make them known—in any case, ABDs need very little to grow.

8. Recognize that most ABDs will attempt to grow in many directions at the same time. Often an ABD digresses into growing leaflets, expanding root systems, or meanders in different directions. Frequently inquire of your ABD whether this activity is necessary for proper growth: "Do you really need to do this now?" If the ABD is ambivalent, assist your ABD to resist these energy-wasters.

9. Have faith that one day, your ABD may bear fruit. It is as if the ABD has an invisible biological time-clock. An ABD driven by this time-clock will strive to meet deadlines, even those that are self-imposed. Stern admonitions, pointed reminders, and poignant tears, however, will not help the ABD to reach this final growth spurt more quickly. Indeed, too much prodding or chiding, and the ABD may grow away from you.

10. Be aware that the ABD that grows overly slowly may have to make way for other rapidly growing ABDs. For such an ABD, earthly existence will appear disappointing; good ideas fail to germinate; the fruit of long labour begins to rot. On the other hand, with careful attention and feeding, and a root structure firmly embedded in a deep understanding of the field, your MA sapling or your PhD tree will flower abundantly, bear fruitful ideas, spread hundreds of seedlings, and scatter many pages of leaves.

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<sup>1</sup>This article contains personal advice and recommendations based on my experience and the experience of others engaged in writing theses or supervising graduate students. The views expressed are not necessarily the views of any department or university. The author would like to thank the following professors for useful suggestions, as well as advice on earlier drafts of this paper: Thomas Homer-Dixon, Michael Keating, David Langille, H. Peter Langille, Sid Noel, Cranford Pratt, Paul Pross, Elizabeth Riddell-Dixon, Graham Simpson, and Janice Stein. Useful tips were also put forward by professors and graduate students in the Department of Political Science at the University of Western Ontario during the 1995-99 Political Science MA Workshops. Thank you to these workshop attendees for their tips. If you have other suggestions, please email me at [Simpson@julian.uwo.ca](mailto:Simpson@julian.uwo.ca)

<sup>2</sup> On the difference between independent, intervening, and dependent variables, see for example, Earl Babbie [The Practice of Social Research](#) 3rd ed., (Wadsworth Publishing Company: Belmont, California), 1983 and Kjell Erik Rudestam & Rae R. Newton [Surviving the Dissertation: A Comprehensive Guide to Content and Process](#) (Sage Publications: Newbury Park, California), 1992, ch. 2, pp. 11-16.

<sup>3</sup> For example, “Northernlights” at <http://www.northernlight.com/docs/aboutintro.htm> is an outstanding new search engine for scholars and researchers. It searches over 2000 scholarly journals and magazines in its Special Collection, as well as the World Wide Web. One-sentence abstracts of scholarly articles are sorted into customized folders. There is a nominal fee for the service, about \$1 per an article, or 10 cents each for subscribers, and a money-back guarantee.

<sup>4</sup> These reasons for procrastination are summarized from Joan Fleet, Fiona Goodchild, Richard Zajchowski [Learning for Success: Skills and Strategies for Canadian Students](#) (Toronto: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich), 1990, ch. 3, pp. 25-34.