

Finishing Your Thesis

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"He should finish the thesis in three years. He says it's a life's work and I agree it could easily be, but the PhD is not a life work" (Phillips and Pugh (2000), 32, quoting a supervisor from an English university).

The Painful Birth

- These do not usually come to term, they mostly have to be kicked out, expelled – or at least given a helping hand or two
- Successful completion is the culmination of what has gone before: i.e., well-managed research processes and early attention to writing up
- Completion is not just a bureaucratic or academic process, it requires some attention to the psychology of writing and completion
- Your supervisors can help here a lot because they have had the experience of writing long academic pieces and of the completion processes involved



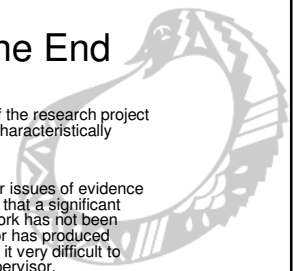
Beforehand: Writing the Thesis with the End in Mind

- "Write early! Write often!"
- Make use of the confirmation of candidature process to ensure you have a writing up plan
- Write **communicatively**:
 - For school/section presentations
 - For national conferences, postgraduate and general
 - For postgraduate and local journals
 - For international conferences
 - For international journals
- It's not too hard: if doubtful work with a group (or in some areas possibly with your supervisor)
- Point: to find the right academic tone, the right **level of discourse**, to solve the inevitable problems of generalisation and assumption of knowledge. NB articles can be included in theses



Approaching the End

- Problems in the completion of the research project and production of the thesis characteristically
 - appear at the end
 - but originate early on
- Face up to structural issues or issues of evidence as early as possible: knowing that a significant component of the research work has not been done, has been done badly, or has produced unexpected results, will make it very difficult to finish easily. Consult your supervisor.
- Fearing *wrongly* that you have a problem is equally incapacitating – consult your supervisor and readers to get back confidence in your research data or critical thought. In most cases it will turn out that there is plenty of material out of which the final draft can be formed.



The Psychology of Finishing

- Constraining the task
 - The thesis is a task, not a life work (part of a revised paradigm of PhD research?)
 - A thesis only has to be 'good enough' (Murray (2006), 237 – see her Ch 9 on how to estimate if your work has reached this point)
 - Resist the ever-extending project – 'it will change the course of Western Philosophy if only I have another six months . . .'
 - Examiners treat the thesis as a product, not as a process
 - A thesis reports the *outcome* of research, successful (or unsuccessful?)
 - Thesis must maximise the value of *what has been done*, not what could have been done or could be done
- Overcoming perfectionism
 - 'Seeking perfection . . . is an elusive goal that only gives you the illusion of control' (Miller (2009), 111)
 - Avoid unrealistic standards
 - Allow yourself to try things out ('beginners' drafts')
 - Set manageable tasks for a day, every day
- Supervisors can and should help you focus on the task



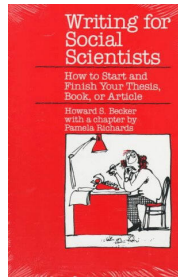
Imagining the End

- Some practical issues about psyching yourself up to finish:
 - Thinking about **specific examiners** reading the thesis may help (you are writing for an audience of two . . .). There are significant implications from this – academic level, for example, what kind of generalisations to make, what knowledge can be assumed
- Thinking throughout about **conclusions** may help
 - Conclusions to chapters
 - Conclusion to the thesis
- Writing the **last sentence** may help – I'll say a bit more about this as I have come to think it a much more important point than I once did
- Ruthlessness
 - Throwing away sections that are superfluous helps many candidates finish: better than covering up chasms
 - (Danger is of course realising that you have two two-thirds of a pair of theses . . .)
- So don't be afraid of changes . . . within reason!
- Finishing will make you feel better!



Work Habits as You Finish

- o Setting regular **goal-directed work habits** important for most people when writing up and finishing the thesis
- o **Avoid distractions**
- o **Setting and sticking to goals** for completed chapters or sections immensely important for your supervisor as well as for you
- o **Deadlines** for yourself – supervisors can give them, but you have to meet them
- o **Expect quality supervision** – you should expect regular and rapid return of commented drafts at all times, but particularly when working fast towards completion
- o And remember **the ecstasy of completion!!**



Finishing: The Introduction

- o Now you have the end of the thesis and are about to finish, finally its time to think about the beginning
- o Defensive components in the final draft – things you should include prominently in your introduction.
- o Tips:
 - Specify what is *not being done* in the thesis
 - Signpost what *is* being done in the thesis
 - Identify cut-off dates for the research
 - Imagine potential objections or alternative approaches and explain why they are not relevant
 - Check every controversial component
 - Clarity of central argument (conclusions – again!)
 - Summary of the argument of each chapter
- o Consider specific potential examiners again

Finishing: Expectations

- o PhD: "a thesis that the examiners have declared to be a significant contribution to knowledge and which demonstrates the candidate's capacity to carry out independent research." [Cf. MA regulations]
- o Thesis in English, of about 80K words (max. 100K), compliant with the recommendations in the **MRGS Handbook**, 7.3 – on the web
- o **An argument** or view about a research issue or problem – the thesis has to have a point, not necessarily a world-changing one
 - Made clear at the beginning
- o **A description** of the field, problem and method of approach which give a context for your point
- o **A defence** of that viewpoint taking into account what is already known and other views (i.e., the 'literature review' is not a bibliography, it is part of the argument)
 - Should lead to the same point made at beginning
- o A thesis "structured and presented to satisfy the examiners' expectations" of a thesis in your discipline (Flynn (2005), 120) –
- o Expectations of examiners --

Finishing: Polishing

PRESENTATION MATTERS!

Thinking about how you write and present the thesis should not be left to the end; examiners are affected by the quality of presentation: 'Sloppiness in the text indicates sloppy research' (cited Mullins and Kiley (2002), 383).



- o Tips:
 - **Write to impress** on examiners you are confident in what you have achieved. You've done the work, now make the point
 - Write with a sense of rhetorical prowess – **style for effect**
 - Follow the **Handbook** guidelines
 - Format: structure style and format must be appropriate to the discipline – should have been established early on
 - Ask for help with layout, use of space, fonts, etc.
 - Proofreading: aloud, backwards, with friends and enemies
 - Check quotations and references (beware EndNote!!)

Finishing: Practicalities

- o Some basic reminders
 - Copies!! Backups!! (Remember T.E. Lawrence)
 - Although the thesis must demonstrate mastery of a topic, limit the topic, not the level
 - 'Bread and butter' as well as jam
 - Length – an issue for many candidates (the Einstein story – but in the humanities there is a weight test, perhaps)
 - Check submission regulations, expectations of Monash carefully and regularly
 - Allow time for copying and binding (but less than in the past)
 - Abstract and 30 word summary – the real test of completion!
- o GOOD LUCK!!



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