

# 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, 32, quoting a supervisor from an English university).*

# The Painful Birth

- Theses 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



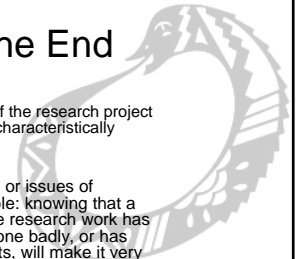
# Beforehand: Writing the Thesis with the End in Mind

- **"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. N.b. articles can be included in theses



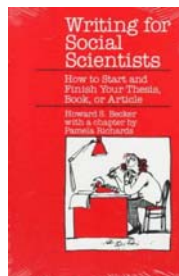
# Approaching the End

- 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 this is so 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.



# Work Habits as You Finish

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



# Finishing the Thesis: It's Only a Task

- Supervisors can and should help you focus on the task
- **Constrain the task**
  - The thesis is a task, not a life work (part of a revised paradigm of PhD research?)
  - 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
- **Delimit the task**
  - What you *don't* need to do
  - When and why you need no further research, reading, information, new work
  - Eliminating alternate theses – and other structural problems



## NB: Expectations of the Thesis

- 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."
- Thesis in English, of about 80K words (max. 100K), compliant with the recommendations in the MRGS web handbook, 7.3
- 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
- A **description** of the field, problem and method of approach which give a context for your point
- 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

## 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
  - My own experiences as candidate and supervisor
  - (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!



## Polishing the Thesis

Thinking about how you write should not be left to the end: writing, argument and an appropriate level of discourse are related. Tips:



- Make the best of what you have done
- **Write to impress** on examiners that you are confident that you have made an advance in knowledge
- Write with a sense of rhetorical prowess – **style for effect**, not for image
- You've done the work, now make the point
- Follow the Handbook guidelines
- Check quotations and references

## Writing the Introduction

- Now you have an end to the thesis, what about the beginning?
- Defensive components in the final draft – things you should include prominently in your introduction. 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
- Consider specific potential examiners again

## Practicalities

- Copies!! (Remember T.E. Lawrence . . .)
- Some basic reminders
  - Thesis must demonstrate mastery of a field – limit the field, not the level
  - 'Bread and butter' as well as jam
  - Length – an issue for many candidates
  - Format: structure style and format must be appropriate to the discipline – should have been established much earlier of course
  - Check submission regulations, expectations of Monash carefully and regularly
- Abstract – the real test of completion!
- Proofreading: aloud, backwards, with friends and enemies
- Time for copying and binding (but less important than in the past)
- GOOD LUCK!! 😊



## References

- Becker, Howard S. (1986). *Writing for Social Scientists: How to Start and Finish Your Thesis, Book, or Article*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Mullins, Gerry and Margaret Kiley (2002). "'It's a PhD, not a Nobel Prize': How Experienced Examiners Assess Research Theses". *Studies in Higher Education* 27.4 (2002): 369–85.
- Phillips, E.M. and D.S. Pugh (2000). *How to get a PhD*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Milton Keynes: Open UP.