



Establishing Good Writing Habits

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Pythagoras, not Socrates



Your job description

- How will it change your habits if each morning you say to the person in the mirror not

'I am a PhD or MA student'

- but

'I am a writer'?

Understand what you are trying to write

- Everybody able to live according to his own purposive choice should set before him some object to aim at ... *since clearly it is a mark of much folly not to have one's life regulated with regard to some goal*
- A thesis is a very particular kind of document.
 - It is not a book (though it might be one when it grows up).
- Ask your supervisor for a good thesis to read so that you can see what you are aiming to produce.

Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics* 1214b6-8

Plurality before unity



- You won't write it cover to cover.
- Let's think about the writing tasks that contribute to the eventual completion of your thesis

1. Accounts of seminal works on your topic

- **Let us leave Gorgias out of it, since he is not here. But Meno, by the gods, what do you yourself say that virtue is?**

– Plato, *Meno* 71d

- Read with your supervisor.
- Précis succinctly and accurately in your own terms.

1. **What is this author's research question?**
2. **What relation to other work on the topic?**
3. **What significance does his conclusion hold for my research question?**

From little things ...

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 2. **What relation to other work on the topic?**
 3. **What significance does his conclusion hold for my research question?**
1. **This writing task helps clarify your goal. Your thesis poses a research question. What is it?**
 2. **This writing task contributes to your literature review.**
 3. **This writing task advances your progress toward a conclusion of your own.**

2. The literature review



- **Shows your command of the relevant literature.**
- **But more importantly allows you to demonstrate the significance of your research question.**
 - An evolving document
 - Guided by a growing awareness of what it makes sense to ask about this topic

2. An essay that pursues an original idea



- **Don't write a chapter – develop an original idea.**
 - A writing task you are familiar with.
 - Discussion will reveal additional complications.
 - Solving these may structure your thesis.

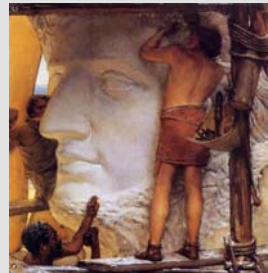
3. The outline of chapters

Posidonius preferred to compare philosophy to a living being – physics to the flesh and blood, logic to the bones, and ethics to the soul.

– *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta* II.49

- **A writing task that is constantly being updated.**
 - What question is investigated or what problem is being solved in each chapter?
 - How does this contribute to the conclusion for which your thesis is an extended argument?

4. Generating and revising chapter drafts



- **Negotiate with your supervisor the delicate balance between obsessive polishing and the need to move on.**
 - As thesis structure evolves, a piece too customised may cease to fit!

5. The final, polished version



- **Establishing consistency in citation, style, etc.**
 - Takes sustained, uninterrupted time. Budget for it.
- **Letting go.**
 - Your union card; not your life's work.

Developing good work habits

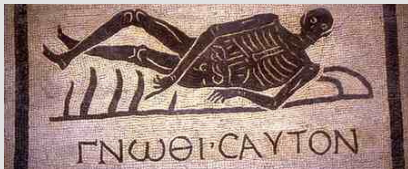
Virtues we acquire by first having actually practised them, just as we do the arts. We learn an art by doing the things that we shall have to do when we have learnt it: for instance, men become builders by building houses, harpers by playing on the harp.

Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics 1103a30-4

- **Self-awareness**
 - ✓ Of the various kinds of writing tasks involved.
 - Of your own high and low points for writing.
 - Of your progress toward the completed thesis.

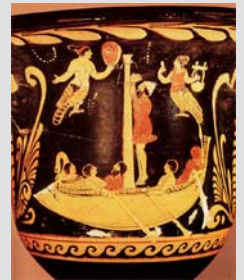
When do I work best?

- **Keep a work diary for a month. Record your most productive times. Does any pattern emerge?**
- **Different tasks for different times.**



Temptation

- **If the topic area wasn't interesting, you wouldn't be writing on it.**
 - Learn to recognise "interesting, but not relevant enough to this thesis."
 - Share what you are reading about and writing on with your supervisor.



Be aware of your own progress



- **A series of milestones toward completion.**
- **Keep track of where you are.**
 - How far yet to travel.
 - How far you have come.

No PhD student is an island



- **Your School's post-grad work-in-progress seminar.**
- **Other students supervised by your supervisor.**
- **Graduate Researchers in Print.**

- **Submit thesis**
- **Party**
- **Begin pulling out articles while the examiners are doing their thing**



Summary

- **No magic formula for discipline.**
- **Self-awareness**
 - What different writing tasks contribute to a thesis
 - What the purpose of each is.
 - When you work best.
 - Set milestones and track your progress.