

Josie's advice

Dealing with the Writing up Blues

All students complain, few, however, do so as frequently as post graduate students. When it comes to writing up, however, there is good reason for complaint. Few people are naturally gifted writers and the task of marshalling the work of three years in to a coherent and cogent text is daunting. There are numerous elephant traps along the way; boredom, lost notes, other more interesting projects, plus more serious difficulties. A common fear is that your 'big idea' has been done' by someone else (who, by the way, has just published a 300-page book and has received rave reviews in the THES), or that your idea just does not work. Such fears are irrational. Nevertheless, if you are going to complete your thesis successfully, having a strategy to help you manage is important.

Have a Plan

Time spent drafting your thesis is an excellent investment and will not be wasted. Try to stick to your plan but do aim to be flexible. Not all research goes to order. Indeed, when you start writing, you may find that you might have to move things around, omit some material and follow up new leads (see below).

Set a Target

Supervisors are split on this one. Some say that you ought to write as you research, others advise their students to write up at the end. Either way, set a realistic target. I tried to write 500 words a day - polished, meaningful, spell checked words. I also planned to write a draft chapter a month and although I did not manage to do this, it was a useful guide.

Work at Set Times

Decide when you are going to work and stick to it. It does not matter when it is, but getting started when there are set times when you have promised to strap yourself to the PC is easier. I found that by starting work early, say 6.00 – 6.30am, really beneficial. a) it made my partner feel guilty and willing to do even more round the house. b) even if I went back to bed

after he went to work and did nothing else all day, I had done something.

Buy a PC

Work at home; even with daytime telly, interesting diversions such as ironing and cleaning the oven, I found working at home less wasteful of my time than being in the office. On a more serious note, I found I could work when I wanted, and not be restricted to when I could use the facilities in the office (but do erase all the games from your machine).

Slap it about..

Accept that writing a thesis is to invite criticism. Everyone (including the bus conductor) will have ideas and suggestions on your research and what you ought to be doing. Try to see these comments as helpful and well meaning, it also helps if you can disengage your sensitivity and be objective about your work. Try to invite comments on your draft chapters from friends and colleagues in your field. Each reading will help you to clarify your ideas and writing. More specifically, redrafting helps reduce the possibility of significant rewrites after your viva.

Read Someone Else's Thesis

The best confidence booster for anyone who is writing up is to have a look at a completed thesis, ideally in your field, better still, your supervisor's. And tell him or her what you thought of it when they are: a) being especially obnoxious b) when they are at their most vulnerable c) when you are in the Pub and broke, hoping that they might do the decent thing!

Extra Research

Be prepared to do additional research but not too much. Try not to get sidetracked by a very interesting, but totally irrelevant new set of ideas.

Shame Yourself

Tell everyone that you are writing a thesis. After they have realised how clever you are, they will irritate you to death asking how you are getting on. It acts as a wonderful spur. Not to complete will also cost you a massive loss of face.

Take a Break

Have a rest now and again. Try to take a weekend off every so often. Although you may feel massively guilty, it does help. Buy yourself a treat whenever you have completed a chapter, 10,000 words or whatever.

And Lastly ...

However disciplined you might be, there will be occasions when you find yourself, as I did, wandering around the shops seeking out unnecessary and useless objects. Occupations I often found myself engaged in included; writing letters to relatives I have not seen for years; making complicated cakes; bottling fruit; making chutney; cleaning carpets; reading no end of crap novels; watching the weepie on daytime telly; tidying cupboards; and visiting my mother. Despite the distractions and the problems, I managed to hand over the completed text to my supervisor. Go for it ...and good luck.