

Writing your thesis in 15 minutes a day

Bolker, J 1998, *Writing your dissertation in 15 minutes a day: A guide to starting, revising and finishing your doctoral thesis*, Henry Holt and Company, New York.

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This handout summarises some of Bolker's successful strategies and ideas about writing a thesis. The comments in italics convey the emphasis in Bolker's book. The footnotes provide additional resources available to support Bolker's arguments.

- Use writing to think, make mistakes, question yourself, express your frustrations, get a sense of what you know and to celebrate!
- No single writing method suits everyone—so try out strategies to find *the process that works best for you*. As long as you get into the habit of writing! (p. xv)
- Write *in order to think* (p. xvi).
- Tell the story of your research.
- Start your day by writing for 15 minutes! *Write first!*¹
- *Do some work on your thesis every day, even if it's only for 15 minutes* (p. xviii).

Beginning

- Imagine your thesis sitting on your bookshelf. What will it contain? What are you curious about? What questions do you have? What are possible topics? Where will you do your writing? Who will be your company along the way?
- Write constantly! Make a daily dated journal about your thoughts, interests, worries, your initial ideas, talk about your data and try to summarise it or ask questions about it, write down flashes of insight. If you get stuck, try to write about why that happened. If so, try changing your routine or place of writing.
- Establish an effective working relationship with your supervisor(s). For example:
 - Discuss guidelines and expectations
 - Be realistic about your responsibilities
 - Be professional
 - Establish regular meeting times and stick to these.

Getting started writing

- The most useful piece of equipment for a writer is a bucket of glue. Spread some on your chair and sit down.^{2,3}
- How do you begin to write? 'First you make a mess, then you clean it up' (Perry). Some ideas for messy writing include:
 - Write down what comes to your mind—don't worry about logic, spelling, grammar or standards—just play
 - Make a sketch, mind map.
 - Focus on what meaning you are trying to express
 - Add comments to yourself as you go—e.g. insert a comment; use colours, [square brackets] or ## to show you have more to add
 - Keep the flow of ideas—don't hunt for words so list three or four alternative choices/words/ideas or write in your first language.

¹ Some professors recommend 2 hours a day!

² A variation on 'writing equipment' which may be of assistance is *InstantBoss* software.

³ Working behind the computer all day can be unhealthy. To avoid Repetitive Strain Injury (RSI) or Occupation Overuse Syndrome (OOS), take regular breaks e.g. every 30 minutes leave your computer for 5 minutes—walk, stretch, move. Write '[Pomodoro](#)' style (25 min writing + 5 min break, repeat).

- Establish realistic goals and when you have achieved them, reward yourself—go for a walk, listen to music, chat with a friend.
- **Write** even if you feel tired, or frustrated, or you think you have nothing to write!
- Start the day with 10–15 minutes of free writing. Here are some guidelines by Peter Elbow in *Writing without teachers*.⁴

Don't stop for anything. Go quickly without rushing. Never stop to look back, to cross something out, to wonder how to spell something, to wonder what word or thought to use, or to think about what you are doing. If you can't think of a word or a spelling just use a squiggle or else write, 'I can't think of it.' ... The easiest thing is just to put down whatever is in your mind. If you get stuck, it's fine to write "I can't think what to say, I can't think what to say" as many times as you want; ... The only requirement is that your *never* stop.
- On re-reading your words you might find something interesting, or something that you did not know before. Keep coming back to your own thoughts and feelings.
- The next step is to be more focused in your writing. Write as fast as you can about a question you set yourself, or about one idea, or about what concerns you.
- Set your daily writing goal. Bolker recommends writing 'many pages in a day' e.g. 3–6 pages. Just write. When you have finished and slow down and 'park on the downhill slope'. Sketch out in writing what your next step is likely to be, what ideas you want to develop, or follow, or explore when you pick up the writing again the next day. This step will help you get started more easily the next day, and it will save you an enormous amount of energy and angst.
- Let writing become an addiction, something you need to do ***every day***! Enjoy the pleasure of it! You can have a rest one day a week!
- Use this messy writing to create the ***zero draft*** (before the first draft). Keep writing. Date your work. Some hints:
 - Don't waste words—if you have an idea, *write it down*
 - '*Write first*'—make writing your highest priority. Write first thing in the morning!

From zero draft to first draft

- A ***zero draft*** is something that you do not need to show to anyone! They are all the messy pages. From the zero draft you can imagine your argument, can see the key questions, know what questions you need to be addressing, know what you see in your findings. Decide on your thesis outline.
- A ***first draft*** is your attempt to produce a complete, but imperfect, version of what you want to say. Now you will ask the questions: *Is this right? Do I have evidence for this statement? Does this argument work?* Now you have a piece of work from which to extract a coherent outline. You have something to work from.
- To develop your final draft use the zero draft and try out some of these strategies:
 - Select words, phrases or sentences that are interesting, provocative, resonate
 - Ask yourself:
 - i. *What stands out for me most in what I've written?*
 - ii. *Is there an argument in this mess? What point do I want to make?*
 - iii. *Is what I've said here true?*
 - iv. *Do I still believe this?*
 - Try writing repeatedly in 5, 10 or 15 minutes of **freewriting**, an answer to the questions: *What am I **really** trying to say in this argument/chapter/section?*

⁴ Listen to [Peter Elbow on Writing](#) on YouTube

- Keep asking questions: *What's going on here? Why am I so confused? What did s/he mean by that? How am I going to get from here to there?* Open up possibilities. Keep asking questions that allow you to think differently: *What happens if I argue the opposite of what I've just written down? There's something about this piece I've written that's exciting, but disturbing—what is it? Why did I say this? What did I mean by this?*
- To make order out of chaos you might now:
 - Construct an outline and work from that
 - Talk what you are thinking onto a tape and then transcribe the tape (or use voice activated software⁵)
 - Reread your 'freewriting' and other notes, and mark them or make notes, rewrite what you have written and it may become clearer. Highlight themes, write comments in the margins, summarise what you have written, colour-code ideas.
 - Experiment with what works best for you
 - *What if it doesn't work?* Write about what is not working. You might then break the process down into steps.
 - If you have a thinking block, talk to your supervisor or a friend, write down what is troubling you
 - Ask yourself: *Have I left out anything that matters? Do I thoroughly believe what I've written? Are there some nagging questions? Is this the whole story? Have I suppressed any doubts or any contradictory evidence?*

Reviewing your process and progress

- Now you have your first draft, the key questions are: *Do I still believe the main argument I've constructed? How am I going to arrange my life and work so I'll finish this thesis?*
- Now is the time to think about deadlines, reconsider how to keep your work-life balance, how to relax and '*restore yourself for the exciting, but strenuous work ahead*' (p. 66)
- Do the checklist below and accordingly review your writing practices (p. 64–5).
- Make some changes. These might include:
 - Find a place where you can write
 - Establish more writing time
 - Put you and your thesis writing as first priority
 - Ask you supervisor to think about how you work together
 - If you are tired or unmotivated, talk to a professional⁶ urgently about this situation
 - Explain to people in your life that you are going to be unavailable for some weeks. Negotiate this with people you live with!
 - Become selectively antisocial! Do NOT answer the phone!
 - Keep a well organised office so you can access your material immediately⁷
 - Keep chaos at bay! Review your systems for backups, filing and sorting data.
 - Examine your work process—are you reading too much, get back to thinking your own thoughts!
 - Deadlines!!! A deadline is 'a line that does not move or run'. Learn how to use deadlines to empower yourself, rather than to scare yourself!
 - Aim to write the number of words for the minimum number of words⁸

⁵ Try out *Dragon Speaking Naturally*. Anyone with an 'edu' email address can buy *Dragon Speaking Naturally*. The details are at <http://australia.nuance.com/naturallyspeaking/education/>

⁶ Seek out a Counsellor, [Student Engagement Unit](#), UniSA.

⁷ Use *EndNote*, *RefWorks* Mendeley or *Zotero* as an effective organising device! Refer to Library guides of managing references <https://guides.library.unisa.edu.au/EndNote/Introduction>

⁸ At UniSA, the requirement for a PhD proposal is 4500 words (or 8000 words in some disciplines) and a thesis is 'normally a **maximum**' of 80, 000 words.

- Ask yourself questions on a checklist (pp. 70–71).
 - ___ *Am I moving forward? Do I sometimes feel as if I'm going around in circles? Do I know when? Why?*
 - ___ *Is my pace accelerating? decelerating? If it's steady, does it feel the right pace?*
 - ___ *What speeds me up? What slows me down?*
 - ___ *Is my pace one that I can maintain over time?*
 - ___ *Is it a pace that will allow me to finish on time?*
 - ___ *Am I undoing as much writing as I am producing? If so, why?*
 - ___ *Do I know roughly how much I can write in a certain period of time?*
 - ___ *Have I thought about, discussed with my supervisor, how large my project must be, how small it can be and still be acceptable, and how long I have? Have I calibrated the process?*
 - ___ *Have I made a tentative timetable?*
- If you are not moving forward, are you a perfectionist? i.e. you write a few paragraphs and then a few days later change them, again and again?? Instead, *try to force yourself to keep moving forward.*
- Set goals that you can meet. Be generous at the beginning! Set up deadlines that involve rewards. Say '***I know I can***'.
- Experiment with deadlines. Break up deadlines into smaller steps so you can do one at a time. Set deadlines, like 'by this Friday ...'
- If you miss a deadline, just get back to it—get back to work.
- Create work strategies that work for you.
- R&R: rest and rewards—take time to rest (get help for what you can e.g. housework) and reward yourself—celebrate your achievements step by step; build in times in your week when you relax (e.g. walk, run, go to the gym, meet your friends, listen to music). Restore yourself on a regular basis.
- Keep yourself healthy—eat healthily (avoid junk food!), exercise, and get enough sleep.

Dealing with interruptions

- Interruptions will occur but think about ways to manage them
- ***Keep a hard copy of every version of your thesis***
- Do not get involved in extra activities when you are writing!
- If external factors interrupt you, plan how you can deal with the situation, let your supervisor know, try not to panic, give yourself leeway and get help. Talk with friends.
- You will get other interruptions—try to be ruthless and don't be distracted from your writing! Become ruthless and say '***NO***' without feeling guilty!
- What about if you give yourself interruptions, have mental tricks or 'self-sabotage'^{9,10}
 - *Ambivalence*—part of you gets stuck and nothing happens! Part of you wants to do it and part of you does not! Recognise the problem and force yourself to get going again. *Move forward.*
 - *Mental static*—this is all of the unrelated thoughts, feelings and distractions that pass through your mind while you are writing! Try to push yourself back to the thoughts about writing OR write down those other ideas on another piece of paper (e.g. write down your shopping list, or the name of the person that you need to phone). *Do any tasks as soon as you have finished your set number of pages for the day.*

⁹ Kearns, H & Gardiner, M [ThinkWell](#) have some excellent resources – e.g. *Defeating self-sabotage: getting your thesis finished.*

¹⁰ Check the Vitae, UK reference on [Avoiding self-sabotaging behaviours](#) as a research candidate

- Another form of static is *thinking about* rather than *thinking IN* your thesis. If this occurs, write down what is bothering you and then get back to the thesis.
- *Writing scared*—of course at times you will feel scared about your research and your thesis. You may become discouraged because people do not understand what you are doing or why, or the thesis takes such a long time ('you need an enormous amount of hopefulness and a large capacity for persistence and focus'). Work out what is scaring you and get help! Write even if you are scared.
- **Exercises** for when you get stuck—(do not run away from it!) instead:
 - Keep writing ... write down why you are stuck and identify what you don't know.
 - Write for a shorter time and know you can achieve that.
 - Write in another form e.g. write a poem, a song or an email to your supervisor who wants to know what you are thinking about your research
 - Think about something you really like to do, and only do it AFTER you have done some writing.
 - Be realistic and don't try to write too much in one day.
 - Reread what you have written, highlight themes in colour, rewrite main themes.
 - Return to freewriting every day! Try writing 5 pages a day, even if it is junk!
 - Try writing about why you are stuck, look for clues, ask questions.
 - Write in an unexpected place (e.g. the café), at an unexpected time (e.g. 6.00 am), when you are very tired, write in a different coloured font.
 - Say, 'If I write 5 pages today, then I will ...'
 - Top tips!
 - i. Create and care for your writing addiction—remember that you enjoy writing so much that you will feel terrible if you do not write today!
 - ii. Always park on the downhill slope—what you write on Monday will start what you will write on Tuesday!
 - iii. **Write first**
 - iv. Don't get upset at what you did not get written—rather remember that you want to write your thesis and you can write today!
 - v. Remember the ultimate reward is to show off your thesis and have the title of Dr! Enjoy the feeling of those beautifully crafted pages! Be proud!

You, your readers and your support group

- At the beginning you write for yourself, but once you have a draft you need to write with the other readers in mind.
- At the beginning writing for yourself is a lonely process as you discover what you think.
- Then think about your readers: *Will they be convinced by what you have written?*
- Find some early readers—people you can trust, with whom you feel comfortable.
- Be realistic about what you want from your readers—the requirements will change at different stages of writing about your research. At the beginning you might want someone to look at the whole chapter without saying anything!
- A good reader will encourage, listen to your arguments, point out inconsistencies, ask questions, offer criticisms to help you move ahead. Towards the end you want people to be highly critical and point out any flaws and inconsistencies, e.g. *How will this argument hold with people who believe in this other theory?*
- At the beginning be gentle with yourself, but then become able to tolerate criticism. But remember that you own your words.
- Form a thesis support group—you can be given encouragement by people who are doing the same as you, you have company and not so much isolation. Others can encourage and empathise, criticise and push ... *with the expectation that you will do the*

same for them! You will have regular meetings, deadlines to achieve, tell people how you are doing, and account for what you have (and haven't) done since the last meeting!

- Your group could be people from the same department at different stages. Decide what you want from a group. For example, good company, a cheer leading squad, your first trustworthy readers, people you can be miserable with, role models, people to bound ideas off, people who will help you set meaningful deadlines, people who expect you to meet the deadline you have set, and more.
- Do not expect your group to only listen to you—they think their work is more important than yours, expect you to read everything they have written, argue that what you have criticised is wonderful!
- Set parameters for a group: If you are from the same discipline you will understand each other's work, if not, you will be able to support each other in the thesis writing process and having an 'external' reader is a good idea; do not compete with one another; choose your group based on trust between one another; stick with a small group.
- Try the advantages of a leaderless group—a group of about 7–12 people where everyone reads and responds to everyone else's writing. Meet weekly and everyone writes something for each week.
- Consider these suggestions in setting up a thesis support group (p. 112):
 - ___ *Have I reached a point in my writing where I feel ready to talk with other students about my work?(Not necessarily comfortable, just ready)*
 - ___ *Do I know what I expect from such a group? Are my expectations realistic?*
 - ___ *Am I looking for a group composed of students who are all in my department, or one that includes people from various departments?*
 - ___ *How frequently do I want to meet with such a group?*
 - ___ *How big do I want the group to be?*
 - ___ *Should the group be leaderless or led?*
 - ___ *Where and how can I find people for such a group?*

Revising: the second draft and beyond

- This is a well-kept secret: *The more you revise, the clearer, more fluid, and more natural your writing will be. It is not inspiration but **hard work** that produces simple, elegant writing.*
- When you revise, think of yourself as a reader: *Does this make sense to me?* If you do not like it, *you can change it.* Revising is craft.
- *When revising, keep open to change and new ideas and new ways of expressing them.* This way you will not only produce richer work, you will keep interested in your project.
- Welcome unexpected ideas, increase your elaboration, delete the inaccurate ideas, note connections and contradictions.
- Revising includes connecting paragraphs and chapters, tracking repetitions and avoiding these, being consistent in style, voice, vocabulary and approach.
- Revising often takes about as long as you took to write the original thesis draft! Allow time for this process.
- Use a checklist of useful revision strategies (pp. 120–122).
 - ___ *Work on one chapter at a time until you're well along in the process; only then struggle with the shape of the whole, since that will shift many times in the course of your writing.*
 - ___ *Consider leaving the revisions of both the introduction and conclusion until last.*
 - ___ *When you're unsure of your argument or the shape of a chapter, try making an outline of what you have. Problems show up much more clearly in outline forms, as well as in the process of making the outline.*

- ___ *Use the outline on a smaller scale: try reducing each paragraph of a chapter to one sentence. When you can't do it, you'll discover what paragraphs are fuzzy or incomplete. By writing one sentence to cover each paragraph you'll be able, by looking at the sentences you've created, to scrutinise the flow of your argument.*
 - ___ *Leave editing at the individual word level for last, unless the word that concerns you is one that's crucial to your argument.*
 - ___ *Leave smoothing the transition from paragraph to paragraph for a later stage, because paragraphs will come and go, and move around as you work your argument. There's no point in making an elegant transition you won't be able to use.*
 - ___ *Remember the saddest rule of editing: 'less is more'. Delete any word that isn't necessary (particularly adjectives), and you'll strengthen your point.*
 - ___ *Use your ears. Read your writing aloud to catch awkward turns of phrase and redundancies. How does it sound? This is a good method for finding the sentences that tie themselves in knots.*
 - ___ *Have someone else read your work and look for phrases that you've consciously overused or arguments you've repeated. It's hard to notice such things when you've written them.*
 - ___ *Use your eyes. It matters to your reader how your page looks: a page that's all one paragraph is daunting to read; one that consists of very short paragraphs looks superficial.*
 - ___ *Use your breath. If you can't read a sentence aloud without turning blue, it needs more punctuation or should be cut into more than one sentence.*
 - ___ *Watch out for your writing quirks, such as overusing particular words or punctuation (e.g. dashes). And vary your sentences—we are prone to overusing sentences of a particular shape or length, and this makes it boring for the reader.*
 - ___ *Keep a thesaurus, dictionary and style manual at hand when you are revising. Check out which style manual is standard in your own field.¹¹ The thesaurus is both useful and fun—and indispensable for varying your word choice.¹²*
 - ___ *Remember that you can cut words, because there are more where those came from.*
 - ___ *Don't use complex language or jargon when simple words will make your point equally well. Go for elegant simplicity.*
 - ___ *When you think you've done with editing, read the chapter again. And again. It is amazing how many times you can reread and still catch errors or something that is inappropriate that you'd be embarrassed to discover in your finished work.*
 - ___ *Remember that Ernest Hemingway rewrote the last sentences of 'A Farewell to Arms' thirty-nine times.*
 - ___ *And realise that you'll never get your thesis perfect, that at some time you'll have to stop fiddling with it and send it off to the world.*
- Rethink and rewrite again and again and again!
 - As you reread, write lots of notes for yourself!
 - You might do you revising in a different place, or a different colour, or with pen!

¹¹ The standard style manual used in Australia is produced by the Commonwealth of Australia. This style manual is comprehensive and has short explanations and a variety of examples.

Commonwealth of Australia 2002, *Style manual for authors, editors, and printers*, 6th edn., rev. Snooks & Co., John Wiley and Sons Australia, Ltd., Brisbane.

¹² Note: the Thesaurus on *MS Word* tends to provide everyday words rather than academic words. So use a hard copy e.g. *Macquarie Thesaurus*. Alternatively use an online thesaurus. Check out the *free dictionary* online which has links to a thesaurus and discipline specific dictionaries.

<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/dictionary.htm>

- Zero draft is the putting all ideas on paper. In contrast, revising is making important choices about: your stance, speaking voice, words, sounds, kinds of argument, what to include or exclude, from argument to where commas go!
- Revision requires stamina. You could easily give up, but persist and maybe you will get more interested as you go. Set goals, *'I will do 10 pages by lunch time'*. Just keep working at it anyway!
- Keep the audience in mind!
- *Writing and revision are gradual processes of by which you make yourself clearer both to your audience and to yourself.*
- Keep working to the meaning you want to convey. Your thesis will never be perfect, because that is a *fantasy*! What matters is the way you work your way **towards** the text, towards the most accurate story you can achieve, one that is clear and fluent to your chosen audience.

The best thesis is the done thesis!

- Once you have finished your thesis you will be happy but also sad.
- Remember you have run a marathon and you are almost there. Don't give up now when you have 95% completed! Keep a good pace and get on with it!
- In the last month or so you *will* overwork and be incredibly focused! Keep up a steady pace, even accelerate & jump the last hurdles—psychological, intellectual & organisational.
- Now you will do a lot of 'nuisance' tasks—editing, formatting, checking references. Rather than leave learning your software to the last minute, learn it earlier.
- Find some friends who will be happy to proofread.
- Find out what you need to do to publish the thesis from a student you has just completed the process! Invite the person for a coffee or a drink, and ask all your questions!
- When you are '**Doctor**' rejoice—you have deserved it! Graduate, party and then have a holiday! Enjoy the achievement of your accomplishment.

Life after the thesis

- You will experience many changes in identity, status, your life, work and your thesis.
- Keep going! You are now an authority and an independent researcher. People will consult you. You may be invited to review for a professional journal, become a supervisor, present at conferences.
- Think about publishing from your thesis because your topic and work is great, you want others to know your ideas, you've turned into a writer. You might write a book based on your thesis ... And guess what you probably will want to continue your daily habit of writing! Writing will have become your practice!