Thesis and Research Papers: Staying Motivated and Focused

Joe Lipsett
TA Day
April 9, 2008
Focus and Motivation

- The two things to successfully complete a thesis/research paper
  - Focus - Writing too much/too little? Spend all your time researching?
  - Motivation – Procrastination, avoidance

- Session divided in 2 sections:
  1. Writing
  2. Organization
Research

- In order to be useful it must be thoroughly active (not passive accumulation)
- Ask questions, engage with the material
- Create a working bibliography:
  1. Draft a preliminary list of sources
  2. Organize by type (journal, book, online).
  3. Identify each with a source number, then skim through and comment on each work (excellent bibliography, subjective, no good, etc).
  4. This list is a record of all the sources examined, and makes creating a bibliography easier. Carry at all times.
- While Reading: Use index cards to keep track of sources.
  1. Topic in top left corner
  2. Source number in the left
  3. Notes in the center, followed by page number.
Example

Bibliography

Books

Journals

Presenting How To’s
Try to include visuals so that participants don’t get bored and fall asleep p. 111
Research 2

-Read Selectively:
  - Don’t read everything
  - Don’t read at the same speed

-Finishing a Source:
  - Restate the main points
  - Write any ideas it prompts about your work

-Check out other theses from your department. What do you like/dislike?
Organize your Research

Create a filing system:
- Separate items by file folder:
  - References
  - By topic
  - By chapter
Plan for ‘Calendar’ time

Use calendars to ensure you meet deadlines and keep yourself organized

- Use a long time (6 month) calendar
- Use a weekly calendar
- Draft To-Do Lists

*Tip* Check off accomplished tasks for positive reinforcement
*Tips* Rewards

Staying focused and motivated requires rewards

- Exercise
- Time off
  - Friends
  - Relaxation / leisure
Start Writing

- Maxim: WRITE!
- Write from the very beginning – don’t leave sections to be made up as you go
  - Write as you research
- Make a mess, then clean it up
Messy Writing

- Ignore spelling & sentence structure
- Running dialogue while writing
  (Comments/questions in parentheses in a different colour)
- No hunting for words: Describe or write synonyms

Step 1: Freewriting:
  - 10 minutes non-stop on anything

Step 2: Not-Quite-Freewriting:
  - 10 minutes non-stop on a topic/question
*Tips* Writing

- Set realistic goals / deadlines for yourself
  - Overworking yourself will decrease your output in following days
  - Feel bad if you don’t meet them
- Own your writing time
  - Stick with it (establish a routine)
- Know you won’t have time to write, prep for 15-20mins – it’ll keep your topic in mind
Zero Draft vs First Draft

- The moment at which your ‘mess’ takes shape
- Do not scrutinize or analyze yet

- Coherent outline / arguments take shape
- Begin scrutinizing / analyzing
How to get to first draft

Examine zero draft:

- Pick out words/phrases/sentences and try writing on them
- Ask:
  - What stands out
  - Is there an argument here?
  - What is the point I’m trying to make?
  - Do I still believe this?
- Freewrite: What am I really trying to say in this argument/chapter/section?
First Draft Con’t

Read through what you have:

- Read material that stands out as interesting
- Look for dominant themes (mark by colour, number, letter)
- Look for organizational marker
- Check interesting/useful parts; flag potential problems or items that seem wrong

These elements = outline / direction
First Draft Types

- Orderly and careful: Outline
- Intuitive and tolerant: Freewriting
- In-between: Mixture of both
- Options:
  - Speak, then transcribe
  - Use quotes / passages as roadmap
The Writing Process

During first draft, re-evaluate your process:

- How do you feel about the process you’re using?
- Is your process doing what you need it to do?
- Are you writing regularly?
- Is the place you’ve chosen to write working for you?
- Are you reading too much? Too little?
- How are you and your advisor getting along?
The Writing Progress

You should also evaluate your progress:

- Are you moving forward or going in circles?
- Is your pace accelerating? decelerating?
- What speeds you up / slows you down?
- Can you maintain your current pace? Will it allow you to finish on time?

- Scrutinize your methods and progress: What’s working and what isn’t?
Problem Signs

- You’re only writing late at night once or twice a week
- You have to justify your writing to someone else
- You only write after everyone has gone to sleep
- Everyday is a ‘sleepy’ day
- Working on your thesis is never fun
- You suffer from “Penelope’ syndrome”

*Tip* Don’t suffer – do something about what isn’t working
*Tips* Support

Thesis doesn’t = alone.

- Advisor
- Thesis Committee
- Other Masters/PhD students
- Friends / family / girlfriend-boyfriend
References

Primary Source:

Secondary Sources: