



Section 7: Finishing Up

When you have met all other program requirements, and your research is more or less completed, the task of writing the thesis arrives. This can be a stressful time for some students (and supervisors), particularly if mutual expectations have not been clarified prior to this stage. Sometimes, this may lead to tension or conflict in the supervisory relationship.

What follows are a number of recommendations that may ease the passage through the final phases of the research degree.

Writing the first draft of a thesis can itself be problematic. Typical "writer's block" may be compounded by a fear of failure or error, a reluctance to make public the fruits of labour, a lack of experience in writing, what appears to be excessive or sometimes conflicting demands or feedback of supervisory committee members, or a host of other reasons. Much has been written on thesis writing, and this is not the place to try to be comprehensive, but a few thoughts may be helpful:

- Sometimes, the most difficult part of writing a thesis is starting the first paragraph. **One way of overcoming anxiety or block associated with writing is just to start writing that first paragraph or the initial thesis outline.** And yes, it most likely will be deleted or completely re-written later, but it will allow you to get started now. It is important to consult with your supervisor frequently during this stage.

Key Points

- Start with writing the first paragraph. Remember that starting to write is often the hardest part.
- Start early, and leave a lot of time for editing.
- Know what the thesis expectations are of your supervisor or program.
- Seek support and advice when stuck. Consider contacting the [Graduate Centre for Academic Communication \(GCAC\)](#)

- The thesis is an important, but not final, stage in scholarly development. It may be required for the degree, but it is not (or should not be) the culmination of an academic career. **Do not regard the thesis as an expectation to present the ultimate answer to your research questions.** Rather, your thesis is an important step for you in making a meaningful contribution to your discipline and society. Ultimately, your thesis is the final step in obtaining a master's or doctoral degree, and an important stepping stone that will allow you to further opportunities to pursue your professional, academic and scholarly interests. Your supervisor and supervisory committee will help you in defining the scope and boundaries of your thesis work.
- **Writing a thesis is much easier if started early.** Particularly in the sciences, much of the work can and, when possible, should be written up and published as scholarly articles during your program. Because such published papers are usually briefer and more constrained, and frequently multi-authored, they may be less intimidating to produce and provide valuable learning experiences. Indeed, more and more theses are becoming compilations of published material with added introductory and concluding chapters, which serve to integrate the information in the thesis. In disciplines where prior publication is not the norm, it is still good practice to write, for example, a literature review as part of the thesis proposal that can then form the basis of an introductory chapter. **You should talk to your supervisor early about expected thesis format and support and resources that are available to preparing publications or other parts of your thesis.**
- Almost every student will experience times when writing may look like an insurmountable mountain. **If you are experiencing serious or prolonged difficulties with writing your thesis, do not wait (and spin your wheels). Discuss your difficulties with your supervisor or supervisory committee; tell them when and where you are having difficulties.**

Best Practice

Try to give your supervisor and/or members of your supervisory committee advanced notification when they can expect to receive a draft of your written work. This courtesy will help them schedule time to provide thorough feedback on your work.

- There are numerous resources available on and off campus to help with writing. The [Graduate Centre for Academic Communication \(GCAC\) programs](#) operated by SGS can be particularly helpful, offering workshops and courses on academic writing, and doctoral thesis writing groups or "writing boot camps." All of these will help you with developing your academic writing skills and time management. Or you can organize your own writing boot camp with some of your peers.
- If you have questions about structuring and formatting your thesis, you should discuss expectations with your supervisor. You also can consider consulting previous theses, which are available through the university library.

Getting Feedback

One of the most frequently asked questions concerns expectations for reasonable turnaround times of drafts submitted to your supervisor and supervisory committee.

Expecting a thorough reading and commentary for a lengthy chapter in less than a week would probably be unreasonable. Equally unreasonable would be for you not to hear back for more than two or three weeks, although you should be aware that there may be other demands on and commitments for your supervisor which may slow down the turnaround time. However, the fact that your supervisor is away on research leave should not normally preclude timely reading of drafts or signing off on the final version in these days of electronic communication.

If extended absences may produce a problem, an alternate acting supervisor should be identified. If drafts have been read, and comments acted upon, reading of the final version of your thesis should normally also be possible within three to four weeks of submission. If the supervisor anticipates significant delays in returning feedback, he or she should let the student know and provide an estimate of when the feedback can be expected.

As a student, it also is good practice to give your supervisor and/or members of your supervisory committee advanced notification when they can expect to receive a draft of your written work. In addition, it is good practice to discuss with your supervisor and committee members early in the program what the expected turn-around time is for written submissions. You should discuss with your supervisor or, if necessary, the graduate coordinator, any potential problems with overly long delays.