

Thesis Writing—Productivity Strategies

The task of writing a thesis can be daunting, but there are strategies to help make this task simpler.

Create a Roadmap

- Drawing a conceptual map and creating an outline of your thesis will help to organize your thoughts and force you to consider what needs to be included in the final draft.
- Every thesis will have at least five chapters: introduction, literature review, methods, discussion/analysis, and conclusion.

Use the Roadmap to Define Small, Simple Tasks

- If you break your thesis down into manageable pieces, it will be much easier to complete. For example, writing half a page a day will result in a 150 page document in a year. In contrast to the goal of writing 150 pages, the goal of writing a half page is a less daunting task.
- Roadmap/outline can be used to break down the writing into smaller, focused tasks (e.g., One section every two days).

Start with the Easy Parts

- Certain sections of a thesis are easier to write than others. For example, the methods/methodology section is usually the simplest to write because it is the most well-defined. Once an outline for this section is created, it can provide structure for outlining the preceding and subsequent sections. The abstract and introduction are often the most difficult sections to write. The abstract should be written last because it is a summary of the finished document. Similarly, writing the introduction after the discussion section can be easier because there is a better sense of what will be introduced.

Use a Model Document

- Ask your supervisor for a sample thesis to use as a model. Having a model will prevent you from having to “re-invent the wheel” in terms of formatting and layout.
- If your supervisor cannot provide an exemplar document, check the UNBC thesis collection for similar examples from your field.

Get Organized

- Use an annotated bibliography to organize relevant information and sources.
- Use concept mapping to help with the composition and outlining process.

Seek Feedback

- Feedback, especially at the outline stage, can increase productivity by preventing costly mistakes.
- Make it easy for your supervisor to provide feedback. Provide a detailed outline that closely mirrors the content with each draft. This outline can help your supervisor in reviewing the document, and if there are major structural issues, your supervisor has the opportunity to identify them much quicker than if they had to read the entire document.
- If possible, get draft chapters to your advisor early and often. Talking over issues you are having throughout the writing process will help to avoid major revisions.
- Create an action-based checklist as a reminder for you and your supervisor. It can be frustrating for a supervisor to go through the effort of providing detailed feedback and have that feedback ignored. Similarly, students can become frustrated if they do not understand or misunderstand the feedback.

Develop Desktop Publishing Skills

- A thesis is effectively a book, and desktop publishing skills are necessary for formatting. Learn to use the Outline, Table of Contents, Headers and Footers, Page Break, Section Break, Styles, Paragraph, and Margins.

Protect Your Progress

- Be sure to make backup copies of the thesis document. Computer components fail, which can result in the loss of the thesis file. Cloud storage (offsite backup) and USB storage drives (personal backup) make cheap, convenient backups.
- Rename the document with the date after making changes and keep several previous versions. Renaming the document prevents you from accidentally opening an old version and copying over the current version.
- Be sure to keep paper hardcopies of drafts and revisions around your office. A stack of paper is less likely to be stolen than a computer or hard drive, and a paper copy cannot become terminally infected by a computer virus.

Fight Writer's Block

- The term *writer's block* refers to a writer being unable to write. There are two main sources of writer's block: isolation and anxiety.
- Isolation occurs when a writer does not have meaningful interactions related to his or her work. Even though a writer may converse with people every day and have an active social life, the interactions related to his or her work may be very limited. Writing a thesis is fundamentally an act of communication. Forming an argument, reporting results, and engaging in discussions related to the thesis topic are a form of practice for writing.
- Anxiety, especially perfectionism, can seriously interfere with the writing process and slow progress on the thesis. Often anxiety manifests as procrastination or a sense of disorganization related to the writing task. Dealing with general anxiety can be challenging, and a visit to a counselor is a good start to this process. Perfectionism can be addressed more directly through freewriting sessions. Often the act of writing, even creating disjointed or disorganized writing, can result in the writer generating rough-but-useable content.