

TIP SHEET FOR FINISHING YOUR THESIS

*“Nobody trips over mountains.
It is the small pebble that causes you to stumble.
Pass all the pebbles in your path
and you will find you have crossed the mountain.”
Author Unknown.*

Have you ever climbed one of those mountains where the summit remains elusive until you turn a corner and suddenly it's within sight? Finishing a thesis can be similar to this experience. Let's explore this analogy a little further.

At the start of the journey you are fresh. You also don't have a clue about what's ahead. There can be a naive notion that you'll be the first candidate to find that direct path to the top. You'll complete in record time and probably be nominated for a Nobel Prize in your field.

Years later, having spent precious time exploring dead-ends, you begin to wonder why you ever thought that embarking on this climb was a good idea. You're tired of trying to please supervisors who have contradictory views; you're tired of the thesis dominating every waking thought; you're tired of feeling that every waking minute needs to be devoted to the thesis.

At the time when you feel lowest in energy, enthusiasm and resolution, you have to find the impetus to reach the top and hand in the thesis. The terrain looks the same. Who's to say that the end is so close anyway?

Completing a postgraduate thesis is a test of tenacity. The process is one of training you to become a good researcher. Diversions and dead-ends are part of the process and you will become increasingly aware that the thesis you submit will reflect only a portion of the knowledge you've acquired along the way. There comes a time, however, when further exploration is unwarranted and, apart from a final check for relevant articles just prior to submission, you need to focus on pulling together the thesis.

Pulling the thesis together (or climbing to the top)

Set a deadline for submission

Let your supervisor know that you intend to complete by a particular date. It will need to be revised, most probably, but having a date may help you to avoid the temptation of indulging in yet more investigation.

Time management

As you already know, the keys to productive work are organisation and time management. Buy a diary and keep a record every day of what you have done. Daily records tend to work better than daily timetables because students are rarely able to stick to a timetable. A record shows what you've achieved (or not when successive days are blank).

Write, write, write

Get writing! Expect your first drafts to be totally inadequate. However, it's much easier to edit a piece of writing than to stare at a blank screen. When you can't find the right words, put in some dashes or stars or question marks instead...and move on. The 19th century French writer, Stendahl, said: "As late as 1806 I was waiting for genius to set upon me so that I might write. If I had spoken....some sensible man [*sic*] would have told me to write every day for an hour or so. Genius or no genius. Their advice would have made me use profitably ten years of my life that I wasted stupidly waiting for genius to descend."

Lists of lists of lists...

Keep a list of things to do that don't require too much brain power. This list should remain within arms' length (or computer key reach) so that you can add to it when you are concentrating on something else. Sometimes when you're writing, you'll remember something which needs to be clarified or checked. Add it to the list. Don't break your concentration at that point to follow a different path unless it is directly related to your writing. When you aren't sufficiently alert to write, look at this list and tackle one of these items.



THE UNIVERSITY OF
NEWCASTLE
AUSTRALIA

STUDENT SUPPORT

www.newcastle.edu.au

Writing (again!)

When writing up, do the easiest bits first. Often the method sections are good places to start, followed by the results sections. The literature review and discussion sections can be left to last. Begin wherever you feel most confident. You don't even have to stick with one section until it has been completed. Sometimes you may want to write a section of the literature review because you've thought of a particular slant you want to take. On other days you may be more comfortable with describing methodology. Students often speak of the "drive!" they wrote until, one day, there's a sense of being able to see how these pieces of writing actually hang together. That's the day when you glimpse the summit.

Roadblocks

On the journey up to the top of the mountain, it's important to recognise when you need a 'handhold' (or 'foothold') and when you need a 'rest stop' (or 'viewing platform'). Handholds become necessary when you feel like you're staring at a boulder in your path rather than a pebble. Boulders block the view in front of you. It's time to seek advice about the direction you should take. Talking out loud to fellow students or your supervisors can help. At this stage of the process it's likely that you haven't broken the task into sufficiently small components. Talk to someone. You may work out the direction for yourself as you talk out loud.

Rest stops

Rest stops are also important. They allow you to view how far you've come – just flick through that record diary – and to rekindle the energy necessary for the next part of the climb. Don't waste time on your viewing platform thinking about how much further you have to go. Make the decision to take some time off from the thesis and enjoy your time off. Give your mind a complete rest from the thesis.

Submission of the thesis

It is unlikely that you will be completely happy with your thesis by the time it is submitted. So don't think that you need to wait till you're perfectly satisfied before you should submit. For a start, it will reflect only part of the work you've done. For another thing, there'll be directions you haven't covered due to the choices you've made along your journey. Additionally, you won't know the current predilections of each of your examiners.

Some students submit with the resignation that they may have to "revise and resubmit" and end up with the category "accept with corrections" or even "accept as submitted". The latter category is the best! Ultimately it is the category that you will earn. At that point, with reference to Edmund Hillary's famous quote, you will have conquered not just the mountain, but yourself. You will have proven that you have the tenacity to succeed in the quest to obtain a postgraduate degree. Just as your examiners have done themselves in the past, you will have passed the pebbles and climbed the mountain.

What other resources are available?

Websites:

- Phinished is a discussion and support group for students who cannot seem to finish their dissertations or theses: www.phinished.org
- An excellent website by the University of Queensland, providing comprehensive information and support for PhD students: <http://www.uq.edu.au/student-services/phdwriting/phlink30.html>
- A collection of resources including pamphlets, websites, online courses for postgraduate students developed by the Academic Enrichment Services, the University of Melbourne <http://www.services.unimelb.edu.au/asu/writing/types/index.html#theses>
- A website offering resources including planners, time management guides and strategies to assist PhD students. <http://www.ithinkwell.com.au/>

Books:

- Kearns, H., et al. The PhD Experience: What they didn't tell you at induction. 2nd ed. Adelaide: Flinders Press, 2009
- Kearns, H., and Gardiner, M. The Seven Secrets of Highly successful research students. 2nd ed. Adelaide: Flinders Press, 2008
- Kearns, H., and Gardiner, M. Defeating self-sabotage: Getting your PhD finished. 2nd ed. Adelaide: Flinders Press, 2009
- Kearns, H., and Gardiner, M. Time for Research: Time management for PhD students. 2nd ed. Adelaide: Flinders Press, 2009

Where can you get help from others?

- Counselling services are available free-of-charge to students at Newcastle (4921 5801), Central Coast (4348 4060) and Port Macquarie (6581 6200).
- Talk to a counsellor at the Callaghan campus (4921 5801) or at the Ourimbah campus (4348 4060).
- Make an appointment to see your doctor.
- Lifeline 131 114 offers a 24-hour service, as do the Psychiatric Emergency Centre (1 800 655 085) for the Hunter region or the Central Intake (4320 3500) for the Central Coast area.

Acknowledgements: Thanks to University counselling services in Australia and overseas whose resources have been used to help compile these Tip Sheets.

Produced by the Counselling Service, The University of Newcastle, June 2008. Reviewed & revised May, 2011.