

Dissertation Writing Tips for Scientists *(Written by Richard Wing 2009)*

We're not gonna lie to you. Writing your dissertation is a daunting task. Your primary opponent in doing this will be your own anxiety about finishing. Please find below some tips and habits that will help you ride out the storm that is thesis writing.

Tip #1: Start writing early!

Most graduate students don't start writing their theses until their committee tells them to. However, you can actually accomplish a lot for your thesis before being told to write. You can even accomplish many of these things a year or so out from actually graduating. Things that you can do easily before being told to write:

-Create the document file that will be your thesis.

Your thesis needs to have a title page, copyright page, acknowledgements section, table of contents, etc. Also, there are specifics on margins and other aspects of formatting that are required by the graduate school. For instance, how good are you with margins? Do you know how to define different header and footer sections? Find the link for this below:

<http://www.yale.edu/graduateschool/academics/forms/formatDissertation.pdf>

You can get there by clicking on "Publications" under the Yale graduate school website.

In any case, you can get all of this out of the way before even writing anything. Think about it this way: how are you going to pack up to leave without having boxes? Once you have the file made, it makes it easier for you to just put in some words here and there. It lowers the effort required to do writing work. So, just do it!

-Start gathering references and learn how to use a bibliography software suite like EndNote.

Although you're not going to have every reference that you need until the bitter end, you should have as many as you can find. In order to do good research, you should have an exhaustive knowledge of the literature in your field. Why not gather these publications up and load them into an EndNote library? It takes a lot of time to do this and will be another energetic hurdle preventing you from writing your thesis.

-Start writing up sections that are likely not going to change

The absolute safest time to do this is after you've published a paper or once you have a project that you're sure you will use for your thesis. (As an aside, the only projects that you should really invest time in are ones that will go into your thesis.)

Sections that typically qualify are: the introduction, materials and methods, acknowledgements, and references. You can start building all of these earlier on.

Tip #2: Build that sucker one piece at a time

There's no law that says your entire thesis needs to be written in one long spurt where you don't sleep for 3 weeks. Some advice:

-10 minutes a day

Grab a post-it note and a pen and jot down an idea. Or, highlight a few key lines of a paper. Maybe type a few sentences into your thesis document or add a few references to EndNote. If you take a little bit of time each day and contribute some info, over time you'll be in good shape.

-Don't be a perfectionist!

Your thesis will be written in imperfect pieces that you will polish later on. Don't try to make something perfect the first time! If you do, you'll get discouraged when, inevitably, what you've written isn't perfect. Just get some ideas down and worry about polishing them later during the final push.

Tip #3: Get examples

All science theses tend to follow the same format:

Title Page, Copyright Page, Abstract, Acknowledgements, TOC, Figure List, Table List, Chapters, and References

However, there are slight variations from field to field and department to department. What you really want to do is to get examples of theses that have been approved by your advisor and your committee so that you have some kind of idea of what is expected for formatting. Previous theses are also a gold mine for references that might support your conclusions. You can find theses from your lab online using the ProQuest UMI database available through the Yale University Library:

- Go to www.library.yale.edu
- Click on "Find Databases"
- Type in "proquest" into the search bar.
- The database is "Dissertations & Theses"

It's a really great tool and you can search by advisor. It gives you .pdf files of theses so you don't have to carry around several 200 page books.

Summary:

Start early, do it a little bit at a time, get examples, and relax!