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Writing Up: A Tool Kit for Constructing your Written Project

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For many people, their dissertation represents the largest piece of written work they will have had to produce to date. Writing tens of thousands of words is a qualitatively different problem than writing shorter essay or assignment style pieces. With scale comes the challenge of making sure that the document as a whole flows, is clearly structured and reads like a single integrated piece. In reality, you will find yourself writing different sections at different times sometimes months apart. It is not uncommon for these different sections to vary slightly in focus, structure or tone and this can mean that the final project reads as somewhat disjointed. The problem is that both projects and writing styles differ, so there is no single recipe for success. The research topic, methods, supervisors and your own way of working are all key aspects of developing a high quality document that will be assessed against the kinds of criteria set out in Appendix 2.

The purpose of this chapter is to highlight a few key points about the process of writing up your research project, as distinct from the process of doing the research itself, and offer some advice on writing effectively. Though obviously interrelated, it is worth teasing these two tasks apart since it can make the whole process more productive. The chapter begins with a look at mapping out your writing, before offering suggestions on how to find your focus and maintain it. The chapter then looks at overcoming writer's block, rewriting and editing, and the use of technology. This is followed by a series of writing tips, before the chapter concludes with some practical advice on the relationship between you and your supervisor.

Getting started

At some point, you will find yourself facing a blank page. More accurately, it will likely be a blank screen since almost everyone writes via a keyboard, screen and word processor today. Finding a way to get started is often the first challenge. You may have had to put a research proposal together before starting the dissertation proper. If so, then you will have an outline structure from which to work. A sensible first step is to create a contents page, which sets out those aspects of a research project that are commonly recognised such as an abstract, introduction, literature review, etc. Appendix 3 sets out some examples of typical project structures and includes details of indicative word count for each section. Whilst not cast in stone, these are a helpful guide and can offer you a way of gauging progress. Many students begin with the anxiety that they cannot imagine finding enough to write about. In practice, the reverse is often true, and finding a way to compress your project is more of a problem than the lack of words available.

Take each of the chapter headings from your contents page and break them down into subsections. For example, the methods chapter might open with an overview of the nature of knowledge claims, before moving on to the range of possible choices that you considered for your own research project. A justification for the methods that you have chosen might follow, then a detailed account of how you will operationalize these methods in the research that you conduct. The structuring of each chapter in your dissertation is determined by your own writing style, however appendix A3 provides an example of the common elements that normally appear within each chapter and a rough estimate of how many words each theme or subsection might require. The order and titles of these sections and subsections are likely to change as your project progresses, yet producing this map of your dissertation will allow you to see where you are headed, and what you need to do to get there. Writing the content is a slightly more involved undertaking, and the following observations and exercises are designed to simplify that process, and encourage you to write regularly.

Writing as thinking

“With the door shut, downloading what’s in my head directly to the page, I write as fast as I can . . . If I write rapidly [then] I find that I can keep up with my original enthusiasm and outrun the self-doubt that’s always waiting to settle in.”

Stephen King (2002, p. 210)

The language we use when we talk about our interests and goals is typically much less formal than that which we use when writing the same things down, yet informal writing can actually be a very helpful way of thinking through ideas. When there is nobody else there to listen or read, use the blank page to communicate with yourself. Using the first person, write down what it is you want to look at, what you want to find out, and what you want to say now, what you want to write about next, what you don't want to look at and why you are explicitly setting your boundaries. Try to write for a few minutes without thinking about the rules of language, or deleting or editing anything. Ignore your internal critic, and allow yourself to write freely. You can use as many or as few words as you like, and if you get stuck then you can just start a new line. The aim of this exercise is to relax, make a record of your ideas, and work your way up to writing formally for an audience. Rowena Murray (2006, p. 89) notes that this 'freewriting' technique can help writers "work out their relationship to knowledge [and] help us test how much we have actually understood." Over time, you may find this practice of 'writing as thinking' offers a quick way of bringing your aims into focus and kick-starting your writing sessions.

Murray (2006, p. 104) offers the following seven prompts, which can help refine your thoughts into more formal language. By completing these sentences, you will develop a set of statements to keep you focussed as you write your dissertation. You will likely revise and clarify these statements several times throughout the duration of your project, so do not feel you have to get this right first time.

- My research question is . . . (50 words)
- Researchers who have looked at this subject are . . . (50 words)
- They argue that . . . (25 words) Smith argues that . . . (25 words) Brown argues that . . . (25 words)
- Debate centres on the issue of . . . (25 words)
- There is still work to be done on . . . (25 words)
- My research is closest to that of X in that . . . (50 words)
- My contribution will be . . . (50 words)

Although you will probably find it helpful to return to these exercises as you progress through your dissertation, it is important to remember that these are designed to stimulate your writing sessions, and should not be seen as a substitute for regular, formal written work. The key to completing a dissertation on time and to the best of your ability is getting into the habit of writing every day.