Thesis Writing Starter Kit:
A Tool for Group and Individual Writing

2015 Edition

Janet Sheppard, PhD (Counselling Services)

Kaveh Tagharobi, **MA** (Centre for Academic Communication)

University of Victoria

Authors' Note

This document was adapted with permission from the *Dissertation Writing Group Starter Kit*, written by Sohui Lee, PhD (Hume Writing Centre) and Chris Golde, PhD (Office of the Vice Provost for Graduate Education) as a collaborative project for the Hume Writing Centre, Stanford University. The original work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.5 License.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements

The UVic authors wish to acknowledge Dr. Joe Parsons, who contributed the idea that “the whole person writes the thesis,” and who pioneered the work of thesis support at UVic.

We would also like to thank Tracie Smith, Katy Nelson, and Inba Kehoe (UVic Libraries) for their contributions to the “Technology Tips” section. This section also benefitted from input by graduate students and post-doctoral students. Many thanks go out to Neil Barney, Richard Veerapen, Darcy Mathews, and Nicola Walker for their work on this section.

Thanks also to Dr. Laurie Waye and Nancy Ami (The Centre for Academic Communication), who provided invaluable feedback and suggestions, and to Gillian Saunders (The Centre for Academic Communication), who gave additional feedback and edited the document.

The “Activities for Writing Groups” section was created by The Writing Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/WritingGroups/groupact.html).

Using This Starter Kit

Writing is, for many people, a singular activity. In fact only one person can ultimately generate the key strokes we call "writing." However, the isolation of graduate students learning how to write a thesis or dissertation can be a huge impediment to the learning/writing process. This guide deals primarily with strategies based in groups, and specifically writing groups, and can help you to understand the benefits and potential pitfalls of using writing groups. The role of groups in supporting graduate students is not well understood in higher education. What makes some groups work while others don't is even more of a mystery. People who have had negative experiences in groups tend to blame themselves, other group members, or the person who "forced" them into the group format, while in fact there are specific criteria that can make a group more likely to succeed or fail.

Trust and safety are the two ingredients that are foundational to building a successful group. (This statement will be repeated; it is important!) This Starter Kit gives you important information to think about before you meet with others for the first time. It also contains check-lists to help you manage your meetings well and sample forms to help you keep your group on track. While these tools can be very helpful, the authors also wish to acknowledge that some people prefer a more organic and unstructured approach to the writing process. Our hope is that you will read and reflect on what is suggested here and then choose what works for you.

This kit also includes useful information to help you kick-start your individual writing strategies if you feel like you don't know where to start. When you are in the early stages of refining your research topic and you are doing lots of exploratory reading and writing, there are still strategies that can help you be more effective and more productive as you move toward writing your research proposal. The strategies suggested here are NOT intended to be viewed as the "correct" way to write, but they are strategies that have proven to be effective for many.

Are you ready? Let's get started.

Benefits of Writing Groups

Writing groups are a venue for advanced graduate students to meet regularly with people who know them and their work. While some effort is necessary to establish the group's goals and ground rules, the benefits can far outweigh the costs. The most obvious benefit will be continued, effective progress toward completion. There are also other less-obvious benefits:

- The group can be a source of emotional support. Writing a thesis or dissertation is isolating and unstructured, but because everybody is going through a similar process the group can provide compassion, understanding, a space to vent, encouragement, accountability, and insight.

- The group can help to keep you accountable for your progress goals. Fellow students are excellent procrastination detectors.

- The group can become a source of community. People who meet for writing time sometimes end up taking breaks together, eating together, socializing together, and going to the gym together, thus supporting each other in making healthy choices along the way.

- Peers can be great critics. By practicing with a group for a proposal or thesis defense or a conference presentation, you have the opportunity to iron out all the kinks, hear interested but less-informed questions about your work, and build your confidence by hearing what your group liked.

- Groups can open up possibilities for research collaboration, grant opportunities, and work opportunities.

- Group members can be resources for new sources of literature, perspectives, ideas, technology tips, and personal or work-related strategies.

- Groups can help you identify and strengthen your own rhythm and pattern of writing/working effectiveness. This is one of the most important goals for every graduate student. In order to maximize effectiveness, graduate students have to question everything, develop new strategies for learning and working, and then use the ones that work. Groups can help you with all three of these tasks.

Possible Pitfalls

Groups *can* have negative aspects. Sometimes personalities clash, or expectations emerge that will need to be addressed. Sometimes a group member has needs beyond what the group can provide. It is important that participants can leave the group if it isn't working for them.

Groups from the same discipline/department can be competitive. Higher education is a system that breeds competition for jobs, attention from faculty, fellowships, scholarships, TA/RA work, office space, and opportunities. Acknowledging these issues and anxieties is essential to building trust. **Trust and safety are foundational to building a successful group.**

Conflicts about intellectual property rights are increasingly prevalent in higher education. If you are studying topics similar to others in the group, how will you acknowledge and cite each other? If ideas emerge from the group's discussions, who will retain the "rights" to those ideas?

Commitment to the group can differ from member to member. Issues can arise regarding who takes more than they give (time, support, ideas), and who is habitually late or doesn't show up when they said they would. All of these situations need to be aired and discussed at the outset. Set aside time for revisiting the ground rules periodically. People may forget or new members may have joined. Such occurrences are often a challenging time within the group. Renegotiating ground rules is a way to renegotiate trust.

The First Meeting

Before the First Meeting

This Starter Kit includes worksheets to help you work through some important trust-building processes. Read "10 Things to Discuss" and complete the "Personal Goals," "Schedule," "Writing Inventory," and "Group Inventory" worksheets, and bring them to the first meeting. They will help you break the ice, get to know each other's needs, and negotiate a structure and schedule that will work for everyone.

During the First Meeting

Introduce yourselves. Use the worksheets to help you discuss your personal writing goals, previous experiences and/or expectations, and schedules. These conversations are crucial for setting ground rules for the group, getting to know each other, and laying the groundwork for a healthy climate.

Establish the goals and procedures for your group. There are many formats, meeting schedules, and structures for thesis writing groups. Here are some things to consider:

- Do you want to keep the group within your program, supervisor's lab, or department?

This can increase the group's knowledge of each other's work, but it can also increase the likelihood of competition and political issues and make members feel less emotionally and psychologically safe. Interdisciplinary groups can add interesting perspectives and keep the focus on the process, rather than on the content of members' work.

- Do you want to share writing as part of your group process?

See "Asking for, Giving, and Receiving Feedback" for suggested guidelines on requesting/giving/receiving feedback.

- Do you want to use the group to have a "holistic check in"?

In Counselling we say that the "whole person" writes the thesis, so that a check-in about how people are doing in terms of their self-care, health, and well-being, as well as time management and writing tasks, could be considered part of each weekly meeting. You should include a discussion of how much of each session will be spent checking in. (See "Activities for Writing Groups.")

Venting is useful, but only in order to help writers get to the point where they can take in good feelings and useful information. People need to feel heard, but they also need to be willing to try to change their behaviours. How will you address this in your group? How will your group support accountability without using critical blaming language?

- Do you want to use the group as a writing time?

Sharing writing time and space is another way to feel less isolated and more accountable, whether or not you decide to share your writing with each other. (It also doesn't work for everyone.) You can decide what format works best for you and your group.

- Do you want to bring in speakers once in a while to help you learn things?

Faculty members are sometimes willing to come to groups to discuss topics like methodologies, theorists, or their strategies for maximizing publication acceptance. Also consider inviting professional staff who might address procedures, technologies, or other resources that could assist you.

Before the Meeting Ends

Ten minutes of reflective writing is a great process to use to help close each meeting. Use the writing time to help integrate learning and feedback and to set goals for the next meeting. Include concrete strategies for how each person will implement their goal setting.

Before leaving, set a schedule for a first set of meetings so that everyone is aware of when and where meetings will take place and who will attend.

Booking Space on Campus

There are several places on campus that you can use for individual or group work. There are numerous study rooms in the McPherson Library and the Priestly Law Library, which can be booked one week in advance on the UVic libraries website (http://www.uvic.ca/library/) using your NetLink ID. There are also a few study rooms in the Curriculum Library and in the GSS Grad House, which can be booked in person on a reoccurring basis. (For more information, email gsscomm@uvic.ca or call 250-472-4543.)

Carrels are also a great option for individual work and can be found in all three libraries on campus. Within the McPherson Library, grad students can request a carrel rental for a maximum of one year at a time. If your request is granted (demand is high), you will be asked for a $10 key deposit and assigned a carrel in a quiet section of the library. This carrel can be used for independent work at your convenience and has locking drawers, which can be used to store and lock your belongings if you need to leave your workspace.

10 Things to Discuss When Starting a Thesis Writing Group

Successful thesis writing groups have negotiated a shared understanding about the answers to the following questions. There are no right answers, but all members need to agree. *The overall goal of a successful writing group is to help each member of the group keep moving forward and successfully finish the thesis, project, or dissertation*. Write down the agreed upon answers to these questions in the thesis writing group Ground Rules Agreement form.

1. **How often will the group meet, for how long, and where?** Once a week, twice a week, or every other week? Ninety minutes or four hours? Classroom, coffee shop, library, or lounge?

2. **How big will the group be?** Experience suggests that you start with a group of four or five members. This provides sufficient diversity, but (if you choose a feedback-for-writing format) allows each member to get feedback every two to three weeks. If you are checking in and writing together, someone can miss a meeting and the group will still have enough participation to make it a good use of time.

3. **What are the rules for group membership?** There are several things to consider:

- Do members' thesis/project/dissertation topics have to be related?
- Should members be from the same department?
- Do members need to be at the same stage of the research/writing process?
- Do members all need to be at the same level (ie. all MA or PhD students)?
- When are new members added?
- How are potential new members found and recruited?

All variations of the above can work, for different reasons. As stated before, cross-discipline groups can provide safety that same-department groups might be lacking; however, if writing is to be shared, it can help to have feedback givers come from the same discipline, even if their research interests are different. Some successful writing group members have recommended that being in the same discipline and at the same level are the most helpful criteria when a group chooses to share writing and feedback.

4. **What format will you follow at each meeting?** Will each group start with a check-in? How much time is spent on the writing process and how much on sharing feedback?

Here's a possible two hour meeting schedule where writing is shared, with two people receiving feedback:

- 10 minutes for group updates of two minutes per person
- 30 minutes of feedback each for Person A and Person B
- 10 minutes of silent reflective writing
- 10 minutes to preview next week's agenda (whose writing will be read, etc.)

Here's a possible four hour meeting schedule where people write together but don't share their writing:

- 30 minutes for checking in/writing/personal updates
- 25 minutes of focused writing, followed by a five minute break, repeated four times
- Pomodoro©. See "Individual Writing Strategies."
- 30 minute eating/walking/talking break
- 10 minutes of reflective writing to summarize accomplishments and clarify where to pick up at the next session
- 10 minutes to preview next week's agenda (where/when/how long/whose writing will be read, etc.)

5. **What are the "formal" roles for the group and who will perform them?** A *facilitator* keeps the discussion on task. A *convener* sends reminders, sets locations and dates, and holds a copy of the Ground Rules. A *time*

keeper monitors agreed-upon time allocations. A *note taker* writes down key points made during feedback. Do positions rotate? How often?

*Note***:** it's a good idea to rotate positions; if one person does everything or always does the same task, he or she may burn out.

6. **What kinds of work will the group share, if any?** Loose ideas, free writing, concept maps, outlines, rough drafts, polished drafts, or drafts that have been seen by outside readers? Thesis-related only? Or grant proposals, interview protocols, survey drafts, posters, conference papers, CVs, and application letters?

7. **When, how, and in what quantity will members submit work for feedback?** How many days are needed for thoughtful feedback? Central drop-off point, personal delivery, email, or web page? How many pages can be submitted?

8. **What kind of feedback is reasonable to expect?** How much time should readers plan to take? Is it reasonable to ask for detailed editing of grammar and word choice?

9. **How will members respond to each other's writing?** Will a request for feedback accompany the text? Will readers comment directly on the draft, in track changes, on a separate response sheet, or via email, or will they make oral comments during the meeting? At the request of the writer or the preference of the reader?

10. **What is the initial commitment?** During the startup phase of every group there is a settling-in period as the group gels. Give it a little time before deciding whether the group is useful. The end of a semester is a good time to revisit ground rules and shift members, but it might be appropriate to check in once a month about "how it's going."

Sample Forms to Help You Get Going

Writing Group Ground Rules Agreement
Group Name:

Agreed to on this date:
Participant Signatures:
Name Signature & Email

1. How often will the group meet, for how long, and where?

2. How big will the group be?

3. What are the rules for group membership?

4. What format will you follow at each meeting?

5. What are the formal roles and who will perform them?

6. What kinds of work will the group read?

7. When, how, and in what quantity will members submit work for feedback?

8. What kind of feedback is reasonable to expect (macro/micro)?

9. How will members respond to each other's writing?

10. What is the initial commitment? (one meeting, one month, one semester?)

We suggest you complete the next several forms before your first meeting.

Personal Goals

1. What are your goals as a writer? (This answer can include the kinds of writing you would like to do, the kinds of audiences you would like to reach, the writing skills you would like to master, etc.)

2. What is your main reason for joining a thesis writing group? (feedback, better writing progress, expanding network of resources, learning from others, more accountability, etc.)

3. How do you think you can help others in your writing group?

4. What, for you, would be the best possible outcome of your involvement with this writing group?

Writing Inventory

1. What is your biggest challenge or obstacle as a writer?

2. What kinds of critiques about your writing style have you received from professors, friends, or other readers?

3. What is your greatest strength as a writer? What do other people normally praise about your writing style?

4. What do you do before you write? What do you do to prepare to write? How do you get yourself mentally ready? Do you have a routine? How might you improve your preparation?

5. What do you do while you write? For instance, do you tend to write carefully, word by word? Or do you write everything out first, without thinking too much? How might you improve this stage of the writing process?

6. What do you do after you write? What do you do to reflect back on and revise the writing you've done? How might you make this final stage of the writing process more efficient?

Group Inventory

1. Describe a memorable experience with working in a group that you had in the past. Was it a positive or negative experience? Why?

2. List five to ten things that can make a thesis writing group work situation terrible.

3. List five to ten things that you think would describe the ideal thesis writing group work situation.

4. Complete this sentence: If a thesis writing group is going to work together successfully, everyone really needs to…

Schedule

Mark with an "X" in any time commitments that you regularly have (class, work, the gym, etc.).
Highlight any spaces that would be ideal times for you to meet regularly with your thesis writing group. Then answer the questions that follow.

Time	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
10:00							
11:00							
12:00							
1:00							
2:00							
3:00							
4:00							
5:00							
6:00							
7:00							
8:00							
9:00							
10:00							

1. How often would you like to meet with a writing group? Twice a week? Weekly? Every other week?

2. In general, would you prefer to meet in the morning, afternoon, or evening?

3. Do you have a car or access to public transportation? How far/long would you be willing to commute to meet?

4. Would you like to meet in the same place every time or rotate places?

5. Would you prefer to meet on campus? If so, where? (Hint: finding access to good writing space is an important predictor of success in establishing a writing group!)

6. Would you like to meet somewhere totally quiet (a classroom, the library, or someone's home) or somewhere with a little more activity (a coffee shop or restaurant)?

7. Would you prefer to meet somewhere that has food/coffee/drinks available? Somewhere with or without background noise or where you can listen to music?

Thesis Writing Group Log
Date:
Meeting Time:

Feedback/discussion during group meeting:

Plans for your writing:

Sample of a Thesis Writing Group Log
Date: J*une 19, 2013*
Meeting Time: *5-7pm*

Feedback/discussion during group meeting:
Discussed my introductory chapter to dissertation. Book review section needs to be expanded. There were some problems with the transitions, especially in the theory section.

Feedback on Alison's chapter on Dickens was interesting. I like how she introduced her chapter with a quotation from the text! I might borrow that. Group provided some excellent suggestions on how she might improve her organization with subheadings. I'd like to use this technique too.

Plans for your writing:
- *Expand book review section by two more reviews (1 or 2 pages longer).*
- *Review the first line of every paragraph and ask if I need to connect the ideas to the previous paragraph with a transitional phrase or word.*
- *Add subheadings to all my major sections!*
- *Work on "micro" revision: circle every "be" verb! Sharpen sentences.*

Activities for Writing Groups

Touching Base

Mutual support can be one of the most important functions of a writing group. Sometimes encouragement and the knowledge that others are interested in and committed to your work and your progress as a writer can be just as helpful as feedback. To that end, your writing group may want to reserve some time in each session to "touch base" or "check in" with each other.

During this time, you could

- Describe your writing activities since the last group meeting in terms of pages written, parts of a project completed, or hurdles overcome.
- Talk about the kinds of pre-writing activities you have undertaken (research, reading, editing previous work, meeting with a professor or advisor, etc.) if you haven't written much since the last meeting.
- Talk about the obstacles to writing that have hindered your progress (writer's block, having three tests to mark this week, needing to gather more data before you can write, etc.).
- Explain how work that was discussed during the last meeting is now evolving in response to group comments. You might explain which comments you chose to act on, or tell how a section of the piece has been reorganized or rethought in response to the group's feedback.
- Share your writing plans for the coming week or two so that your group members will know what kinds of writing they will see and so you can help each another stick to your goals.
- Decide, as a group, on a theme or topic for the next meeting (e.g., productivity, brainstorming, drafting, proofreading, style, writer's block, bibliographic management, etc.). Choosing a writing-related issue to tackle together will help you understand the challenges each member is facing at that moment and enable you to plan meetings that will help group members overcome those challenges.

Sharing Work

If you have decided that you want to share work and ask each other for feedback, what follows are suggestions for ways to manage this process:

- Some writing groups ask members to distribute their work in advance of the group meeting, particularly if the piece of writing in question is lengthy.
- You might distribute your writing at one meeting for discussion at the next, leave writing in people's mailboxes, drop writing off at people's dorm rooms, carrels, or offices, or send writing via e-mail, either by pasting material into an email message or by including it as an attachment.
- Readers can offer the most helpful feedback when the writer has provided a list of questions, trouble spots, or issues for consideration in their responses.

Responding to Work that You Read Outside the Group

The following ideas might help you respond to work that has been distributed beforehand:

- Group members could write comments and suggest editorial changes on their copies of the paper and give those to the writer during the group meeting.
- Group members could prepare a written response to the paper in the form of a letter to the writer or a written discussion of the work's strengths and weaknesses, or complete a form developed by the group.
- Group members could respond verbally to the piece, each offering a personal overall reaction to the writing before opening the floor to a broader give-and-take discussion.
- You could go through the piece paragraph-by-paragraph or section-by-section, with each reader offering comments and suggestions for improvement.
- The author could come prepared with a list of questions for the group and lead a discussion based on those questions.
- One group member, either the author or (perhaps preferably) a different member of the group, could keep careful notes on key reactions and suggestions for the author's future reference.

Responding to Writing Presented During the Meeting
Some groups prefer to bring writing, particularly shorter pieces, to the group meeting for immediate discussion. You might bring a draft of an entire paper, a section of a paper, or just a sentence or two that you can't seem to get "just right." Many of the above ideas will work just as well for writing that has been presented during the meeting of the writing group. However, since writing presented during the meeting will be new to everyone except the author, you might try these additional strategies:

- Read the paper aloud to the group before launching discussion. The author could read, or another member of the group could read while the author notes things that sound like they might need revision. You could either read the entire text or break it into chunks, discussing each after it is read.
- Ask group members to read silently, making notes to themselves, before launching the discussion.
- Read the first paragraph or first section aloud and have everyone in the group briefly write down what he or she thinks the paper will be about or what he or she thinks the thesis of the paper is. Share those responses in discussion.

Sharing Writing without Anticipation of Feedback
Sometimes, especially with new writing or writers needing a boost of confidence, it can be helpful to share writing without anticipating feedback. This kind of sharing can help writers get over fears about distributing their work or being judged, and has the following benefits:

- For writers undertaking long projects, sharing a piece can serve to show the rest of the group the progress made since the last meeting, even if the author doesn't need feedback at that time.
- Sharing a piece of writing without expecting feedback can provide the writer with a deadline to work toward without generating anxieties over whether or not the piece is "good enough" to share.
- Sharing writing early in a writing group's work together can be a no-pressure way to get to know each other's projects and writing styles.

Brainstorming as Part of the Group Process
Writing groups can provide not only feedback and a forum in which to share work, but also creative problem-solving for your writing troubles. Your group might try some of these brainstorming ideas:

- Identify a writing problem that one group member is having. Ask each group member to free-write possible solutions. See "Free Writing" for an explanation of the process.
- Cut up a copy of a paper that needs organizational changes, so that each section, main idea, or paragraph is on its own slip of paper. As a group, move the pieces of paper around and discuss possible options for reorganizing the work.
- After reading a piece, generate a list of items that the group might like to know more about. Organize these questions into categories for the author to consider.

Writing During Writing Group Meetings
Your writing group may choose to write during some of its meetings. Here are some ideas for what to write:

- If everyone in the group has a major deadline approaching, use the session as a working meeting. Meet in a computer lab or other location in which everyone can write and work independently, taking breaks periodically to assess their progress or ask questions.
- Use some writing group time to free-write about your writing project—new ideas, to-do lists, organizational strategies, problems, or sentences for your drafts would all be appropriate topics for free-writing.
- Free-write about the writing process (the group members could all write about "How I start to write" or "The writing environment that works for me" or "When I sit down to edit" and share their responses).
- Write about the dynamics of the writing group as a way of getting everyone's ideas out on paper. You could free-write about the kinds of feedback that help you, what you like about each other's writing, your frustrations with the group, and your suggestions for improving the way the group works.

- Spend a few minutes of each meeting practicing a new writing or editing technique you would like to explore.

Reading During Writing Group Meetings
Just as writing during group meetings can prove beneficial, reading can also sometimes help writing groups work together better. Here are some methods to try:

- Pick a book on writing, such as *Bird by Bird*, *Writing with Power*, *Writing Down the Bones*, *Writing Without Teachers*, or *Writing Your Dissertation in Fifteen Minutes a Day,* and assign yourselves sections to read for each meeting. Discuss the reading during some part of the group's meeting each time.
- Read about a particular writing topic, such as editing techniques or writer's block, during the group meeting, and then spend the session working on that aspect of writing.
- Bring a piece of writing (an article in your field, an article from a journal or magazine that you enjoyed, or a piece of fiction) that you think is especially well written. Read over it as a group and talk about what the author did in the piece that made it so effective.
- Bring pieces of data or evidence that you are using in your writing and share them with the group. If the group members become familiar with the things you write about, they may be better able to help you write about them effectively.

Bringing in a Guest
Guests in writing groups can enliven the discussion. They can be incorporated into the group's meeting in the following ways:

- Invite a friend's writing group to have a joint meeting with yours. Share writing from all participants and also talk about writing group strategies that have worked for each group.
- Invite a professor or other guest writer to your group to talk about his or her writing process and to offer suggestions for improving your own.
- Bring in a friend who is working on a project related to the project of a group member. This may help your group member develop a network of people interested in his or her particular topic and may also show your friend how helpful a writing group can be.
- Invite a counsellor from Counselling Services or someone from the Centre for Academic Communication to attend your meeting. A CAC member can inform the group about communication-related workshops and writing resources on campus, and give quick tips to improve your writing. Contact Nancy Ami (The CAC manager) at thecac@uvic.ca for more information.

Planning and Goal Setting
Your writing group can also help you plan your writing schedule for the week. A word of advice here: it is wise to have a conversation about goal setting before you begin. This is because many people see goal setting and accomplishment as a black-and-white/success-or-failure endeavour. In the world of thesis writing, it can be very helpful to see goal setting as a way of choosing focus and *setting intentions* around the tasks of the next week. Some suggestions on how to include goal-setting in your group are as follows:

- Discuss your writing goals, both broadly and for the immediate future. Ask your group if these goals seem realistic.
- Ask group members to email you with reminders of deadlines and encouragement.
- Create a group calendar in which you all set goals and deadlines for your writing. This calendar could be for a week, a month, a semester, a year, or more.
- Give each other writing "assignments" for the next meeting.

Asking for, Giving, and Receiving Feedback

Feedback is the core of what thesis writing groups do. It is often cited as one of the main reasons why people join thesis writing groups in the first place. Feedback is a way for people to learn how their writing effectively communicates ideas, but feedback itself is a communicative art. When feedback is vaguely worded, people who ask for feedback may not get the specific answers they need. When feedback is harshly phrased, it is often difficult to take, and the constructive elements of the feedback may not be heard. When unwilling or unprepared to listen to feedback, people who receive feedback may not experience the benefits of the process.

Asking for Feedback: The Feedback Request

When submitting writing ahead of time, notify your readers in advance in a feedback request about what they ought to look for before they read your dissertation section or chapter. If you circulate the text via email, send the document with a cover letter or a note in the text of the email. The feedback request should include the following:

Summary and Goal: Provide a brief summary of your argument (one sentence) and what you would like to accomplish in this piece or at this stage of writing.
Biggest Weakness: Explain what you think is the biggest weakness in the chapter or section.
Prioritized Feedback List: Help your readers prioritize their response by providing a short list of the kind of feedback that would be most helpful at this stage. The most effective requests for feedback are explicit about "macro" writing issues (involving ideas, structure, sequence, and transitions/flow) or "micro" writing issues (grammar, syntax, diction, appropriate field language) that the writer wants to improve on. Identify specific areas that you'd like them to target (sections of the chapter, introduction, and conclusion) and how they should focus on these. Identify what you don't want your readers to focus on. It is sometimes helpful to tell your readers that you are aware of some writing issues (such as citation styles) that you plan to address at a later date.
Realistic Requests: Be realistic in your request. Don't ask your readers, for instance, to proofread and correct every grammatical error. They are not editors and will not want to be treated as such. For this kind of service, you should contact your department or the Centre for Academic Communication for information about professional proofreaders or editors you can hire.
Before The Group Meeting: Print out your cover note. When meeting with your writing group, you might review what you had written so that everyone is reminded of the kind of feedback you would like.

Giving Feedback

How you deliver feedback is as important as how you ask for feedback. In a thesis writing group the relationship that you build among the members should be one of trust, respect, and engagement. Your style of giving feedback should help to cultivate these feelings through four positive approaches to feedback: *supportive, specific, descriptive*, and *prioritized.*

Ineffective/Negative Feedback vs. Effective/Positive Feedback

Ineffective/Negative Feedback	**Effective/Positive Feedback**
Attacking: hard-hitting and aggressive, focusing only on weaknesses.	**Supportive**: delivered in a non-threatening, encouraging manner. ***Say something positive about the piece first*.** "To me, the best-written part of this piece was. . ." or "The most interesting idea in this chapter was…" ***Acknowledge your understanding of the writer's goal*** based on your careful reading of the feedback request. ("I realize that your main point was…")
General: statements aiming at broad issues which are not defined.	**Specific**: focusing on specific writing areas or issues. ***Explain issues*** by pointing to concrete areas of the writing.

	Provide a solution/suggestion to help improve them by explaining how you have handled such problems. ("When I have a problem with transitions, I usually…")
Judgmental: criticizes the writer. ("You aren't very good at conclusions.")	**Descriptive (audience perspective):** describes the problems in the piece of writing from the perspective of the reader, whether it is yourself or another imagined/real audience. ***Speak from your perspective***. "This conclusion didn't really work for me" or "My reaction to this was…" ***Speak from a reader's perspective***. "Your supervisor/committee might understand this line like this…" or "Hawthorne scholars might question some assumptions here…"
Scattered: focuses on too many writing issues or touches on issues that the writer does not want to discuss at this stage. Too many suggestions are overwhelming and disheartening for the writer.	**Prioritized**: prioritizes feedback in order to address the writer's main concerns without overwhelming him or her. ***Select only two or three "big points"*** to cover verbally during thesis completion group discussions. ***Write a list of additional "big points" and "little points"*** that the writer could take away with him/her after the group discussion. ***Tailor your comments to the writer and the needs listed in his or her feedback request***. While your big points may cover issues other than those listed in the writer's feedback request, be sure to include some responses to the matters that the writer is most worried about.

Receiving Feedback

The previous section has reviewed how to ask for feedback and how to give feedback through four positive approaches; however, you should also consider how to receive feedback. For some people, it is difficult to receive feedback because they experience it as pure criticism. Being so guarded, they formulate a response even before the feedback is completed, or avoid opportunities to receive feedback.

While you will not accept or act on all feedback, it is important to be positive and open in the manner you receive it if you are to maximize the feedback experience. The following are some suggestions for receiving feedback effectively:

- **Listen to all of the feedback first.** Write down notes and questions. Listen without interruption or objections. Try to respond or ask follow-up questions only after the speaker has finished. Remember that your writing group is trying to help you become a better writer and finish your thesis or dissertation.
- **Be an active listener.** Listen carefully and try to understand the meaning of the feedback.
- **Be engaged**. If anything is unclear, restate your understanding of what you thought the speaker said.
- **Be respectful**. Try not to be too defensive. While one reader's response may be the result of that reader's own misunderstanding, their perspective as a reader deserves attention. If several readers agree that a section is confusing, the problem probably lies in the writing.
- **Keep a feedback log**. Use your "Thesis Writing Group Log" to keep track of the kinds of feedback you get in your writing. Do readers often suggest changes in organization? Do people frequently tell you that they don't understand words you use? Do readers praise your clarity?
- **Identify patterns** in the kinds of feedback you receive, so that you can locate problems and strengths in your writing.

Address the problems within your writing by drawing on writing guides, seeking the advice of your thesis writing group, meeting with your supervisor, or visiting the Centre for Academic Communication.

Revision Strategies

What is revision to you? What are all the things you do when you revise? How do you revise? What is your process of revising?

Macro-revision and Micro-revision

Almost all published writers—whether poets, novelists, or scholars—re-write their work. Revision is so crucial to the writing process that some believe it is when *real* writing starts. Revision isn't just about correcting grammatical errors and improving flow. Revising is also a creative part of the writing process that asks you to critically rethink your writing strategies. It is the part of the process when ideas become more fully formed, meaning is clarified, and arguments are better supported or rearranged to be more persuasive.

Thesis writers can more efficiently and more effectively revise their work after receiving feedback if they break down their revision strategies into two types: macro-revision and micro-revision. In order to do this,

- Sort your feedback answers into "macro-revision" and "micro-revision" to-do lists.
- Address the macro-revisions first. If your confidence has been shaken during the feedback process, this can be challenging, but you need to address your ideas before your syntax and punctuation.
- Re-read (a day or so later), focusing on macro-revision issues, then micro-revision issues.

Macro-revision focuses on the presentation of the "big picture" and addresses global writing issues. When you revise, macro-revision should be done first. As you target your essay for macro-revision, you will bring ideas into sharp focus by reviewing the organization of the section, chapter, or entire "book," reassessing evidence, and sharpening the idea. Macro-revisions include the following activities:

- Rearranging your writing to improve argumentative flow: move sections or sentences around to present the most rhetorically effective case, highlight an argument better, and improve the logical progression of an argument.
- Subtracting ("trimming the fat"): eliminate sections that don't fit into the argument to exclude extraneous or tangential arguments that can distract the reader.
- Adding (bringing in new examples and including more explanations): identify "gaps" in the argument to bridge ideas or illustrate a point better.
- Improving transitions and making main points consistent: make explicit connections between ideas (between sections or between paragraphs); review how the reader is reminded of the thesis argument or central idea throughout the piece; make sure that evidence and data are connected to the topic argument.

Micro-revision focuses on the "little things" that matter a lot in writing: the language choice, syntax, and grammar directs readers through your ideas, but also sets the mood of the writing and helps shape what readers think of you as a writer and scholar. Working on micro-revision before macro-revision is not efficient because you may end up deleting sentences and paragraphs that you worked so hard to polish. Micro-revisions include the following activities:

- Cleaning up: proofread for grammatical and typographical errors.
- Sharpening sentences or words: find a better phrase or word to make your writing smoother, more vivid, and more expressive. This includes replacing some passive verbs with more descriptive action verbs and revising the syntax of sentences and phrasing to improve writing style.
- Tightening sentences: write less to say more; cut out extraneous words, and condense points to clarify meaning and make sentences more concise.

Review your answer to Question 1 in "Revision Strategies." Sort your revision "to do" list into "Macro-revision" and "Micro-revision" elements.

Use this list to guide you through your first cycle of macro-revision and then your cycle of micro-revision. The check-list or to-do list will help you keep track of all your revision activities, maintain focus, gain a sense of “work done,” and help you to disengage from fear and negative self-talk (if they are problems for you).

Individual Writing Strategies

Even when writing in a group, you are still performing the act of writing individually. To do so, you need to know the rules of academic writing and strategies to put your writing into the framework of those rules. These strategies are mainly concentrated around three important stages of writing: planning, writing, and revising. This section provides an overview of these three stages and makes some suggestions about the strategies you can use to plan, write, and revise your writing accurately and effectively. You may already have strategies and practices that work for you, and this information is intended only as a guideline to support you as a developing writer.

In *Academic Writing Essentials*, Doyle and Waye (2011) suggest a time scheme for completing a piece of writing. Any academic writing has three distinct stages: planning, writing, and revising. What they propose is that writers should only spend 20% of the total completion time on writing, and the remaining 80% should be divided between planning and revising. This model, known as the 40-20-40 model, helps writers separate the different stages of completing their research, and thereby avoid the conflicts and overlaps that make writing the lengthy, chronic "problem" that many dread. By planning very carefully and thoroughly *before* starting to write and by taking care of all editorial revisions only *after* finishing a first draft, writers will be able to get going with the writing stage much faster and with greater ease. This can be particularly important and useful for thesis and dissertation writers, as the writing process can become a tedious and confusing stage for those who are writing longer and more complex documents.

To be able to write a first draft of your thesis or dissertation efficiently and with relative ease, you need to have planned your writing structure in advance carefully and in great detail. It is very hard to make progress during the writing stage if you don't have a bigger picture of your writing and a map of the trajectory of your ideas. With proper and adequate planning, writing a first draft of your research should be the easiest and shortest task of finishing your project.

The best way to write a first draft quickly and with no interruptions is to have a detailed outline that breaks down the writing task into the smallest writing unit, the paragraph. But to create such a detailed outline, you need to have accomplished some important planning steps first.

Finding the Focus of Your Research

This section contains some ideas to help you shape your research and come up with a plan to start writing. If you already have an outline and feel confident that you are ready to start writing, skip to the writing section.

The key to finding your way when surrounded by different ideas is choosing a centre (or focus) and then trying to arrange the other ideas in relation to that centre. Every research project needs a focus. A good way to find that focus is to think deeply about your research questions. What is it that you want to find out? What is that big question that has driven your research? If you can pinpoint this one question, you have found the centre of your research. You may find yourself circling back, finding clarity, and then losing it again. This is part of the process and your writing group can help you to talk it out. Also try free writing, which is explained below. There is definitely more than one way to finding your focus. You will also have more than one research question, but there should be one that is the most general and encompassing. This general question should be your main research question and the other questions can be secondary research questions.

Free Writing

One technique for finding the centre of your thesis or dissertation is free writing. Free writing is uninterrupted writing for a specified length of time. You decide to write for, let's say, ten minutes without even lifting your fingers from the keyboard or your pencil from the paper. The purpose of this activity is to clear your mind of all the confusing ideas and the connections between them. The nonstop writing prevents you from trying to plan ahead before knowing the focus of your research. When you force yourself to keep writing for ten minutes, it helps you lay out your ideas and, therefore, to see the overlaps and possibilities for connecting and organizing them.

If you come across any sort of uncertainty or confusion (an idea that you don't know how to develop or a thought that you think does not belong to that section), record your uncertainty or confusion instead of stopping. If you don't know what to write, keep typing "I don't know a good example of this. I don't know a good example of this." In this way, you are actually providing yourself with valuable feedback about the areas that need more research or planning.

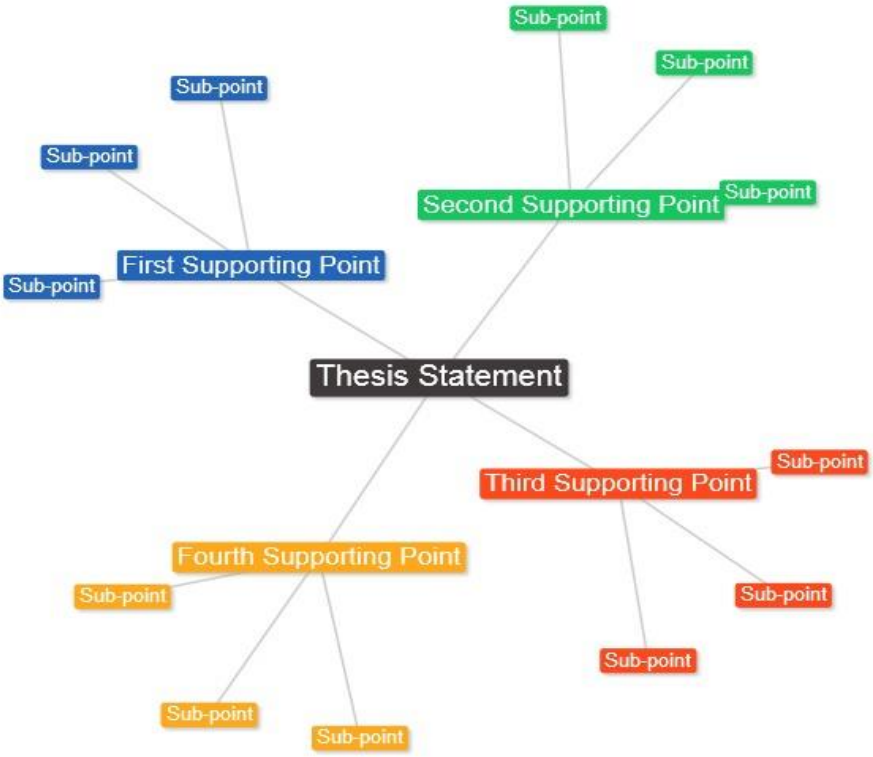
Planning

Making a Mind Map or Concept Map

Once you know the focus of your research articulated in the form of a main research question and a series of secondary questions (that are strongly connected to and supporting the main one), you can start planning your thesis.

You can start by thinking of the ways these questions can be answered. The answer to your main research question can be your *thesis statement* and the answers to your secondary research questions can be your *main supporting point*s (probably the thesis statements for your chapters or sections). It is true that you might not have definitive answers to these questions at this stage. You still can think of a working thesis statement and a series of main supporting points.

The next step is visually arranging these ideas in the form of a mind map or a concept map. Normally, you'd place the thesis statement in the middle and then connect the main supporting ideas around it. The supporting ideas or evidence for your main supporting ideas would be arranged around them in the same manner, forming a hierarchy of ideas within your argument. Making a mind map of your claims helps you see your ideas, their connections, and their hierarchies in a visual way. Putting your most general claim (thesis statement) in the middle of the mind map and then connecting the supporting ideas to it lets you see what ideas are more important and more immediately connected to your main claim. In the case of a thesis or dissertation, the first series of nodes connect the chapters to your thesis, and then you can create individual mind maps for each chapter. Similarly, the chapters would have their own supporting subsections, giving you the opportunity to think of headings and subheadings within each chapter or section. Following the hierarchy of your ideas, you should eventually get to the level of paragraphs, and this is what you need in order to draft an easy and quick first version of your research.



To make a mind map you can use unlined paper, flip chart paper, or software that allows you to develop a digital mind map. For information on ways of making digital mind maps, see the “Technology Tips” section.

Defining the Scope of Your Thesis/Dissertation

After creating your mind map (probably a series of mind maps in the case of longer research, like theses and dissertations), you can define the scope of your project more easily, as now you can see what ideas are closer to the centre of the mind map (thus being more relevant and important). The further you move toward the periphery of the mind map, the more you will notice that the ideas are connected with more and more nodes to the centre. This is a good lead if you need to narrow down your scope, as you can start pruning from the outside, getting rid of those ideas that (despite their brilliance) are less immediately relevant to your thesis.

Creating an Outline

Once satisfied with your mind map, you can start putting your ideas in order. While the mind map illustrates all your ideas and their hierarchies, it still does not tell you what should come first and what next. This is when making an *outline* becomes very helpful. An outline is basically the same thing as a mind map; the only difference is that the sections and their subsections are set in a particular order. Like mind mapping, this is also a step that needs thorough and careful thinking. You want to know how you are going to sequence your ideas before you start writing, since it is harder to move your ideas around once you are working on a written text. The ultimate goal is to completely separate the planning (and revising) stages from the writing stage. If you manage to do that, making progress with your writing becomes much easier and smoother.

You can start writing when the outline is so detailed that you know exactly how many paragraphs you need under each heading or subheading within a section of a chapter of your dissertation, and what the main ideas and supporting ideas for these paragraphs are. Once you have such an outline, you can start writing.

Writing Your First Draft

Start writing one paragraph at a time. Turn each main idea into a topic sentence and then develop it by providing supporting sentences. (For more information on paragraph structure, see the “Paragraph Writing” section.) Think of different ways to support your ideas. You can explain, describe, analyze, compare, use examples, provide details, cite statistics, integrate quotes, and so on. Make sure that the individual sentences within each paragraph follow a logical order, so that your paragraph has a natural “flow.” Use transitional words and phrases to show the type of connections each sentence has with the sentences before or after it. (For more information see "Transitions within Paragraphs” section.) Try to end the paragraph with a “concluding sentence.” This sentence has two goals: first, it circles back to the main idea, and second, you can use it as a way of making a transition to the next paragraph. (For more information see "Transitions between Paragraphs” section.)

You should note that it is very important to keep this stage as much about writing as you can. This means that you should not be planning or revising, as this will prevent you from progressing with your writing. If you find yourself thinking about the order and/or the content of your paragraphs, it means that you could have done more planning. Similarly, revising, hesitating about word choice, and correcting grammar and spelling have to be left for the revising process. You will have enough time at that stage to improve your writing at the sentence level in your future drafts.

If you feel that you have a brilliant idea or something useful that you might forget, devise a system for quickly recording it (on your phone’s sound recorder for example), so that you can consider it at a later time. The key idea is to turn as many ideas as you can into written text as quickly as possible. This is when what we will call “focused writing” can prove helpful.

Focused Writing

During this time, your only goal is to write as much as you can without letting other things (planning or revising) interfere with the writing process. You should completely ignore all vocabulary, grammar, punctuation, spelling, and formatting issues. In order to keep planning out of this activity, make sure you have a very clear outline of the main ideas you want to weave into written text.

Many graduate students who are writing their theses and dissertations have problems getting started with the writing process or are soon stopped by “writer’s block.” Focused writing helps you to focus on transforming the concepts in your outline into written text. In a sense, this type of writing is very much like how experienced knitters work with the patterns they know very well: they are only doing a manual activity that does not require a lot of concentration, because they are following a prefabricated plan or pattern. With a detailed outline, you can write faster, and in small chunks of time; therefore, you can make use of the short times you have during the day for writing your dissertation.

Pomodoros©

This is a time management strategy, not just a writing strategy, but it is an excellent tool for focused writing. Developed by Italian cognitive psychologist Francesco Cirillo when he was a graduate student, the technique is named for the tomato-shaped kitchen timer he used to time his work sessions. The technique is simple and effective. Time your work, in 25-minute sections. Turn off all social media—no email, Facebook, or phone. Keep a pad of paper for writing down intrusive thoughts (because they will come), and then go right back to work. When the timer goes off, take a five-minute break (stretching, bathroom, email checking are possible uses for this short break). If you can’t focus for 25 minutes, start shorter and build up. Some graduate students like to go for 40 minutes. There is no perfect length for a pomodoro; the point is focused, uninterrupted writing. After four pomodoros, take a longer break. (For more information, check out http://pomodorotechnique.com.)

Paragraph Writing

To write good paragraphs, it is important to know how they are structured. Why do we divide our writing into separate sections? What is the point of breaking down text into small chunks? Is it a visual aid? Probably! But the most important reason is to signal the transition from one idea to another. Paragraphs signal the change of ideas, and this is the key point to understand about their structure.

Structure of a Paragraph

Main Idea: Every paragraph should only have one "main idea" that the whole paragraph revolves around. This is the most central and general idea in the paragraph. You can't have more than one main idea in one single paragraph; otherwise, your paragraph will not have a clear focus.

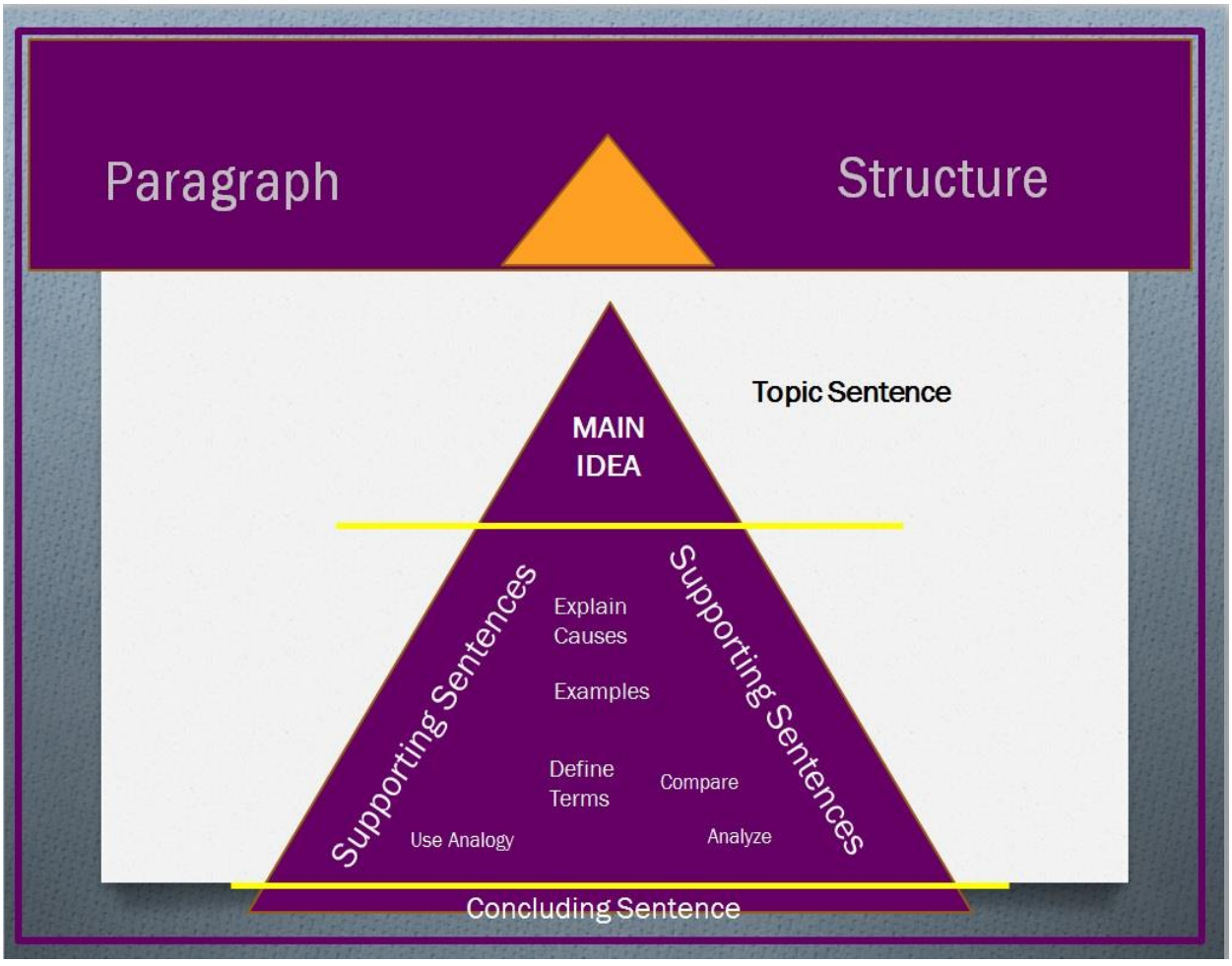
Topic Sentence: It is a very good idea to clearly articulate the main idea of the paragraph in one statement; this is what we call the "topic sentence." It usually appears at the beginning of the paragraph, but it could be anywhere else based on the rhetorical approach you have selected.

Supporting Sentences: All the other sentences in the paragraph should support the main idea with reasons, examples, definitions, details, statistics, explanations, and so on. These sentences do not introduce new ideas; instead, they build on the same idea by supporting it and elaborating on it.

Transitional Words and/or Phrases: In order for your paragraph to "flow," it is very important to pay attention to two things:

1) The conceptual relevance of consecutive sentences, and
2) Using proper transitional words or phrases between the sentences to signal that conceptual relevance.

Concluding Sentence: Ending your paragraph with a sentence that refers to the main idea of the paragraph (reminds the reader of what they should take away from that particular paragraph) and also hints at the next paragraph's main idea will give your paragraph a sense of coherence and unity. In this way, this final sentence also provides flow between paragraphs.



Developing Paragraphs

When developing a paragraph, it is important to keep your focus on the main idea and try to support it as strongly as you can. If you manage to stay focused on the main idea and provide enough information to support it, you are guaranteed a good paragraph structure. However, it is important to think about the order in which your supporting sentences appear and the way they are connected. It is also important to highlight these connections for the reader by making clear transitions within and between your paragraphs. This will help with the clarity of your writing, and allow readers to follow the logical flow of your ideas.

Transitions within Paragraphs

Since all the sentences in a paragraph should connect to and support the *main idea*, there should be both *logical* and *linguistic* connections among them, creating *internal flow*.

Logical Connections: Make sure each sentence is logically connected to the ones before it. Every sentence should be built on the points established in the previous sentences. The most evident examples are cause and effect sentences. One sentence explains a situation, and the next one states what results from that situation. However, there are other, more delicate, logical connections between sentences. Sometimes, just the presence of a shared idea within two consecutive sentences creates that logical connection between them.

In the following example, the second sentence takes the concept of "cleverness" and explains it. Similarly, the last sentence builds on "the ability to learn tricks" from its previous sentence by giving an example:

"Dolphins are very **clever** animals. They can easily **learn tricks** and remember them later. For example, some can be **trained to paint** with a brush held between their teeth."

Linguistic Connections: To highlight and explain these logical connections, you should use linguistic links. Based on the type of connection between the sentences, you can choose the right linking word or phrase:

Contrast: but, yet, in contrast, however, though, nevertheless, etc.
Addition: and, or, nor, also, too, in addition, furthermore, moreover, etc.
Sequence: first, second, secondly, in the second place, next, lastly, finally, etc.
Cause: because, on account of, since, for that reason, etc.
Effect: therefore, thus, consequently, hence, accordingly, as a result, probably, etc.
Comparison: in the same way, by the same token, likewise, similarly, etc.
Example: for example, for instance, e.g., specifically, to illustrate, to demonstrate, etc.

Transitions between Paragraphs

Two things will ensure the transition (or the "flow") between your paragraphs:

The meaningful sequence of the main ideas of consecutive paragraphs: Make sure each paragraph's main idea logically leads into the main of idea of the subsequent paragraph. This is best achieved by working on your outline. It is much easier to move your main ideas around and change their order if you are looking at the bigger picture. Your outline is the road map of your argument, and there you can make sure that the transitions from one main idea to another are clear and logical.

Using transitional words and phrases between your paragraphs: Highlighting the connections of the main ideas between your paragraphs through transitional words or sentences helps the reader see these connections more clearly. By establishing a linguistic link between the last sentence of a paragraph and the first sentence of the following paragraph, you can create "flow" within your text. In this way, the concluding sentence of each paragraph has a double role: it concludes the current paragraph and hints at the next paragraph's main idea at the same time. In addition, using transitional words (therefore, however, similarly, etc.) is very useful; however, these words work much better if the two sentences share a linking concept or element as well. Consider this example:

End of paragraph: All in all, it is very clear that human **anatomy** is not the most ideal for hunting and **meat** consumption.

Beginning of the next paragraph: **However**, the same **anatomy** has evolved through millennia so that it best functions with **meat** protein.

Notice that the transitional word ("however") makes the most sense when the two sentences share the concepts of human *anatomy* and *meat* consumption.

For thesis and dissertation writers, sometimes it will be necessary to make longer and more elaborate transitions, as the text they are working with has many more sections and subsections. It is not uncommon that, in such cases, the writer dedicates a whole paragraph to making a transition between the main sections of their chapters. After all, the chapters (and the sections within those chapters) in a thesis or dissertation are like mini essays and need their own introductions and conclusions. It will help the flow of your thesis or dissertation to explain the relevance and connection of your different sections and subsections through short transitional paragraphs. These paragraphs don't have their own main ideas, nor do they introduce new concepts. What they do is simply explain how the sections before and after them are connected.

Revising and Self Editing

Once you have turned all the ideas in your outline(s) into written text, another process starts that aims to improve the formal and structural aspects of that text. With focused writing's disregard for editorial issues, it is obvious that there is great need for revision, especially at the sentence level. However, it is important to remember that you still need to revise your text at other, more general levels.

Hierarchy of Issues

It is important to remember that there are different issues that need your revision. These issues are different in content and scale, and they do not have an equal value, either. The Centre for Academic Communication has drawn a "Pyramid of Writing Issues,"[1] in which you can see the hierarchy of revision issues from more important to less important.

[1] Adapted from OWL at Purdue by Jessica Blythe and Shu-min Huang (2010) TWC, University of Victoria

Different Stages of Editing

If you are going to spend 40% of the total time it takes you to finish your thesis or dissertation editing and revising, the process should be a thorough and multi-stage one. Each revision should focus on one issue to ensure maximum accuracy and efficiency. Worrying about formatting and spelling while you are still unsure about your organization is useless. Not only does this divert your attention away from the more important issues, but you also might end up spending too much time on the format of a section that you will eventually delete.

Revise Your Argument

The first few times that you revise your draft, you should look for the clarity of your thesis and make sure all your sections are relevant to that thesis and sufficiently support it. You should do the same for each individual chapter, and even the sections within those chapters, to make sure they have the same coherence on a smaller scale.

Revise Your Paragraph Structure

Once you are happy with your overall argument, and its path, sequence, and the logical connections within it, you can start working on your paragraphs. This time you will revise to make sure every paragraph has only one main idea, and that it clear, fully developed, and supported by the other sentences in the paragraph. You can eliminate every sentence that you feel is not supporting your main idea or break up the paragraphs that seem to have more than one main idea. You should look for the transition between your paragraphs, and you might want to change the order of the supporting sentences within the paragraphs to make sure they flow.

Edit Your Sentences

After revising your writing at the level of paragraphs, you should start paying attention to individual sentences for things like grammar, word choice, and punctuation. Many students find this hard and are concerned that they might not be able to spot all their errors. EAL students in particular might think they have more problems and sometimes they might even be told by their supervisors that they need to have someone edit their thesis or dissertation. While there are editorial services outside the university that can do this for you (albeit for a price), you should know that there are resources to help you self-edit your thesis or dissertation.

It is true that the Centre for Academic Communication cannot edit your writing (how many pages can the tutors edit for you, after all?), but they can still help you become independent in doing this yourself. If you know what to look for in your writing and how to identify typical errors, you can take the editing into your own hands. This is a stage where you need to act strategically, try to learn a few rules, and determine the most typical editorial mistakes that you tend to make. A writing tutor at the CAC can go over a few paragraphs of your thesis or dissertation with you and help you discover the patterns of your editorial errors. In this section, we review some of the most general rules for writing strong sentences. By knowing these rules, you will have a lead on what to look for when revising your thesis or dissertation at the sentence level.

Pay Attention to Your Subjects and Verbs

The core of any sentence is its subject and verb. The verb is the action in the sentence, and the subject is the agent of that action. Many weak sentences are weak because there is something wrong with their subject-verb pair.

- Missing Subject or Verb

Review your sentences to make sure they are not fragments (missing a subject or verb).

Example: An issue requiring the immediate action of not only the governments but the NGOs and the general public.

This is not a sentence, as there is no verb in it. Note that although “requiring” is actually a verb, it is not the verb for the subject of the sentence. To fix this, we need to ask ourselves what we want to say. What should be done and who is the agent responsible for doing it?

Edited: Not only the governments, but also the NGOs and the general public, need to take immediate action to solve this issue.

- Connection and Clarity of Subject and Verb

When editing your sentences, always look for the subject and verb. Ask yourself what is happening in the sentence and who is responsible for doing it. Is the subject of the sentence really the one that takes the action of the verb? Sometimes this is not the case and, therefore, you might need to change the structure of your sentence.

Example: This interpretation can easily refute, as there is much evidence against it.
In this sentence, the subject is not the doer of the verb, as the interpretation does not refute itself. Instead, it *is refuted* by someone else. We should either state who can refute the interpretation, or add a "be" verb to the sentence to create a passive voice construction and show that the real subject is absent.

Edited: One can easily refute this interpretation, as there is much evidence against it. OR This interpretation can easily be refuted, as there is much evidence against it.

Avoid Wordy Sentences

When reviewing, always ask yourself if you could convey the same idea in fewer words, sentences, or even paragraphs. In academic writing, brevity is almost always preferred. This is why you should always double-check to make sure everything you have written is absolutely necessary. This checking ritual can happen on different levels (words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, or even sections). The only criterion you have is to see if you can communicate the same message with fewer words, phrases, etc.

Example: Obviously, there are so many contributing factors that affect this issue and the first one is the way water resources are heavily exploited by the local farming population.
Pay attention to the words that are underlined. How much do they contribute to the ultimate message the sentence conveys? Can you find a way to rewrite the sentence without those words?

You should not limit yourself to working on the sentence you already have by trying to delete some words in it. You can also eliminate wordiness by completely changing the way you write a sentence.

*Edited***:** The way water resources are heavily exploited by the local farming population is one of many factors that affect this issue.

EAL Common Errors

In addition to the rules of "academic English," there are more "general" rules in English grammar that, like in any language, are more natural and innate for its native speakers. For those who have English as an additional language, there are rules that need to be learned and remembered. The next few issues, although still important for any writer, are more commonly found in the writings of EAL students.

Use the Right Article

Many writers (especially EAL ones) have a recurring problem with articles ("the," "an," and "a"). You should know that articles are necessary to define the nouns in a sentence. If you have a noun, you should find a way of defining it, and, most of the time, it is with an article. However, sometimes you can define a noun without an article, too. The plural "s" sometimes accomplishes this.

- When to Use the Plural "s"

If you are referring to a noun in a general way(i.e., not a particular one or a particular group of that noun) you should add the plural "s" to the end of that noun.

Example: In most education systems, teacher is underpaid.

Here, we are talking about students and teachers in a general sense. We are not talking about a particular student or teacher or even one unknown given student or teacher. That is why we need to pluralize both students and teachers.

Edited: In most education systems, teachers are underpaid.

- When to Use an Indefinite Article ("a" or "an")

If you are referring to one particular example of a noun that is unknown to the reader, then you should use "a" before that noun or the adjective preceding the noun. That particular noun can be unknown to the reader either because you are referring to a hypothetical example of that noun or because it is the first time you are referring to it.

Example: Heat the substance in boiling tube.

Since you are talking about one (any) boiling tube, you should say,

Edited: Heat the substance in a boiling tube.

- When to Use the Definite Article ("the")

If you are referring to a particular example (or a particular group) of your noun, then you need to use "the."

Example: Heat the substance in a boiling tube, and then place **the** tube in the rack.

The second time you refer to the tube, use "the," as it is already known to the reader.

Collocations

Knowing the definition of a word is not enough to use it correctly in context. You need to know how it is used, and part of this is knowing the words that appear with it. The way a word is paired with other words is called "collocation," and there are resources EAL students can use to make sure they are using the right combination. The most common difficulty is the use of prepositions, since different languages use different prepositions with the same words:

Incorrect: The government needs to make a quick decision in this matter.
Correct: The government needs to make a quick decision (about/on) this matter.

There are "collocation" dictionaries that specialize in word juxtapositions. *Oxford Collocations Dictionary* is a very good example, and part of its database is available online at www.ozdic.com. To use this dictionary, you need to

enter the main word in the phrase (for example, “decision”), and then you will be given a list of other words that go with it, categorized by part of speech (i.e., the verbs that go with “decision,” the adjectives, the prepositions, etc.).

Which/That

“Which” and “that” are used when you add more information to your sentence in the form of a new phrase or sentence. Even though these two words might have the same meaning in many other languages, in English, they are used in different situations. “Which” is used when the added information is not essential to understanding the sentence. This means that the sentence or phrase that follows “which” can be bracketed and even ignored, and the rest of the sentence still stands grammatically and conceptually autonomous. “That,” on the other hand, is used when the sentence or the phrase that follows it is necessary to complete the sentence; that is, without the sentence or the phrase after it, the reader would still be waiting for you to finish your sentence.

Example: Bacteria, which are microorganisms, cannot be seen without a microscope.

You see that the part between the commas can be ignored, and the sentence still makes sense. This is because the information between the commas is not essential to the understanding of the sentence, as it is not restricting a specific group of bacteria. It simply states a fact that is true for all bacteria.

Punctuation point: Note that “which” is preceded by a comma, and a comma is also necessary at the end of the non-essential phrase.

*Example***:** Bacteria that are good for us are called probiotics.

As you see, the sentence would not make sense without the information that comes with “that.” This information is restricting the subject of the sentence (bacteria) to a specific group (the ones that are good for us); therefore, “that” is used to introduce this piece of restrictive and essential information.

Punctuation point: There are no commas used with “that.”

Using the Wrong Part of Speech

Another thing that can be confusing for non-native speakers of English is the way words with the same root have different grammatical types or “parts of speech.” Most languages have the same parts of speech: nouns, verbs, adjective, adverbs, etc. However, English is particularly efficient with using the same root to create different parts of speech. Suffixes and prefixes, sets of letters that are added to the beginning or end of words, change nouns into adjectives, verbs into nouns, etc. It is important for EAL writers to pay attention to these small differences, as it is easy to take one word for another.

Incorrect: With the Internet, the speed of <u>communicate</u> is increasing very rapidly.
Correct: With the Internet, the speed of <u>communication</u> is increasing very rapidly.

The suffix (-ation) changes the verb (communicate) to a noun (communication), which is what the sentence needs.

Using a Thesaurus

Thesauruses are great tools for finding words with similar meanings (synonyms). However, you should always double-check the words that you find in a thesaurus to see if they are really what you are looking for. Synonyms are never exactly the same, so it is very important to use an English-to-English dictionary to check the meaning and usage of the words that you find in a thesaurus. In addition, some EAL writers overuse their thesaurus because they think they can avoid repetition and simplicity by using different words for the same concept. Although it is true that variety and complexity can improve your writing, most of the time using different words for the same key concept will only make your writing inconsistent, vague, pompous, and really just awkward. Look at this example:

Awkward: The aggregation has purchased contemporary apparatuses in latter years.
Normal: The company has bought new equipment in recent years.

It is not necessary to change every word in your sentences to avoid repetition. Actually, repeating the same words can be useful, and create a sense of consistency and clarity. Moreover, brevity and simplicity are very important in academic English. It might be different in other languages and academic cultures, but in the context of North American academia, your audience expects you to communicate your ideas in the clearest and most concise manner. Finally, synonyms do not have the same meaning in all contexts, so relying only on a thesaurus can easily mislead you into using vague and awkward words. Use a thesaurus in moderation and always double-check the words you find in a dictionary to make sure they mean the same thing you want in your context.

Difficulties Writers Face

There are several different problems that can make progressing with your writing harder. In this section, we will talk about some of the most common difficulties that writers (especially thesis and dissertation writers) face, and discuss some strategies for overcoming these problems.

Procrastination

Procrastination is described by Pychyl (2014) as a complex, pervasive problem that can have serious life-impacting consequences. For graduate students, there are several factors that seem to contribute to the behaviour. Perfectionism, or the belief that every task must be performed perfectly, results in avoidance. This is not uncommon with students who come to writing a thesis with very high expectations; however, given that the purpose of writing the thesis or dissertation is to learn how to conduct, analyse, and write up complex and original research, you must be prepared to fail over and over as you refine your writing. This is the iterative process that is part of research.

Irrational thoughts also contribute to procrastination. For example, "My supervisor will be disgusted with me and will not want to supervise me anymore." The sad irony here is that procrastination leading to avoidance will result in negative supervisory relationships far more often than submitting written work that needs revision.

Another cause of procrastination is anxiety, something many graduate students live with. One of the most important things that you can learn as a graduate student is to not try to make anxiety go away. Rather, learn to manage it. Practice mindfulness daily. Educate yourself about self-compassion, which acknowledges your flawed humanity and gives you permission to be a "being-in-process." Practice yoga, which will increase your ability to notice what is going on in your body while helping you to stay physically well.

Make sure that you stay connected to the "why" of your project—the more personal meaning your project holds for you, the easier it will be to resist procrastination. Grad students are often avoiding an unpleasant (or anticipated as unpleasant) experience. Pychyl (2014) says that we are most likely to avoid things that are

- boring
- frustrating
- difficult
- lacking in personal meaning and intrinsic rewards
- ambiguous (you don't know how to do it)
- unstructured

Writing a thesis will inevitably be all of these things at some point. Breaking complex tasks down into very concrete specific elements can help. So can joining a writing group. Sometimes it's easier to work on things with others who know what it's like.

You could be avoiding writing because you are not feeling confident about it. This is one of the reasons that a writing group can be the most helpful; it creates a container for accountability, and helps you develop community. You are not the only one who is afraid. Talking about this with your writing group can help you break through procrastination.

One of the most common (and legitimate) sources of fear can relate to your uncertainty about the direction and organization of your argument. It is admittedly hard to start writing before having a clear idea about what you want to argue and how you want to make the argument. Having a well-thought-out and detailed outline can greatly help with overcoming the fear and uncertainty that is behind procrastination. Pychyl (2014) suggests setting *implementation intentions* to help increase the likelihood you will work on your goals. *Implementation intentions* are ways to not only break your goals down into smaller, concrete, specific tasks, but also to connect them to your environment: you name where, when, and for what length of time you are going to do them.

Another fear that makes us postpone writing is the fear of the sheer volume of the writing we need to generate while writing a thesis or dissertation. A good outline gives you an efficient way to divide your writing into smaller parts. It is harder to put off writing only a section of your thesis. Using techniques like the Pomodoro© technique can help you break down those tasks into small units of focused writing time, making it easier to proceed, one "pomodoro" at a time.

If you find that you are procrastinating to the point where you are avoiding your supervisor, your writing group, and your friends, don't suffer alone. Chronic procrastination can be linked to other mental health concerns. Contact Counselling Services to get help understanding and working through your avoidance.

Perfectionism

Another common reason why graduate students struggle with the writing process is perfectionism. One common side effect of perfectionism is struggling with the length of your writing. Perfectionist writers find it harder to keep the scope of their theses or dissertations to a reasonable size. They tend to do a lot of reading, take thousands of notes, and may find it hard not to include all these notes in their research. Getting rid of sections or even paragraphs might be harder for such writers. Does this sound like you?

As with procrastination, the solution to this problem can also be found in the planning stage. Pruning ideas and sections of your thesis or dissertation is much easier on an outline or a mind map. Narrowing down your argument and cutting down some sections of your thesis or dissertation must be done with your thesis statement and main research question as the criteria. You can clearly see on a mind map the proximity and relevance of your ideas to your thesis statement. The further your ideas stand from the centre of the mind map, and the more nodes necessary to connect them to the thesis, the more justified the decision to delete them. You can clearly see that the bubbles on the periphery of your mind map are so remotely connected to the core that you might easily include them in a different research project.

This leads to another strategy for letting go of some parts of your writing. Always remind yourself that this thesis or dissertation is likely not the last piece of research you will do, and that no writing can perfectly say everything about your topic. There is always the possibility to use your brilliant ideas in other research. Actually, one of the functions of a conclusion chapter or section is to state the limitations of your present study and to mention the possibilities for further research. Explaining the parts that you have left out of your research and explaining why can have a positive psychological effect on perfectionist writers. Now that you have mentioned the important ideas that you cannot include in your current research and explained why, it might be easier to let go of them.

There are other problems like writer's block, fear of writing, or lack of confidence that tend to have similar roots as the previous ones, and therefore can be dealt with using the same strategies. So, to sum up:

- Make sure that you are only *writing* during the "writing process."

This might seem very obvious, but most writing difficulties arise when students try to plan, write, and edit simultaneously.

- Plan thoroughly before starting to write.

If you have a detailed outline, it is very unlikely that you will experience writer's block. You know exactly what you want to write, and, when you are writing, you are simply developing your well-thought-out ideas into paragraphs. This also helps with breaking your writing into smaller parts, a technique that, in turn, helps with writing problems such as procrastination, perfectionism, and lack of confidence.

- Try some "free writing" techniques to get you started.

Deciding to write non-stop for a specified amount of time helps you get going with writing and overcome problems like procrastination and fear of writing.

- Learn to edit your own writing.

Seek regular feedback and set goals to improve your writing based on the tips in the feedback.

If you find that your resistance to writing is too great, seek help. The Centre for Academic Communication and Counselling Services are two great places to go for help.

Imposter Syndrome

Imposter syndrome (note: “imposter” is spelled both ways, with an -or and an -er ending. In this kit we prefer -er) is best described as a state of mind. It is not a form of mental illness, but rather a collection of beliefs that are, in part, reinforced by the context of graduate school. It refers to a fear of being found out as less smart, capable, and worthy than others might think. Grad students who struggle with imposter syndrome often fear that they have been admitted to graduate school “in error,” that their supervisor will find out, and that they will be shamed and asked to leave. Some of the symptoms include an inability to internalize positive results, such as praise, recognition, or awards, and a tendency to overwork. Originally researched as a women’s issue (Clance & Imes, 1978), imposter syndrome was thought to be correlated with the drive for high achievement. In higher education, however, the phenomenon seems to show up across genders fairly evenly (Valerie Young, 2011). Vulnerability to imposter syndrome also relates to history; graduate students who have experienced betrayal, abandonment, or bullying in childhood are particularly vulnerable. Also, graduate students who are “first generation”—the first to attend university or pursue a graduate degree in their family—are also frequently more vulnerable to this experience.

What Helps?

- Get support

Talking about it in a safe, supportive environment helps. You really aren’t the only one. Your writing group can become a community where you can show up just as yourself and be good enough. Seek out counselling if you can’t talk with your friends or peers; it is a safe, confidential environment and can help you reconnect with your strengths, motivation, and well-being.

- Reconnect with your sense of self

Get objective feedback from trusted sources regarding your strengths and weaknesses. Revisit your purpose for pursuing this degree. Spend time thinking about what things are important in your life. Practice self-compassion.

- Relate to yourself kindly

There are three parts to this: treat yourself with kindness, as you would a good friend; recognize our common humanity and shared imperfection; practice mindfulness—learn and practice how to be with what is in the present moment without trying to change it (accessed from Kristin Nuff, PhD, http://self-compassion.org/).

- Help others

If you are suffering from stress, anxiety, or depression, it is all too easy to become self-focused and isolated. Do something small for someone who needs it. Share kind words or a cup of coffee, or volunteer for a cause you believe in. These small acts can help reconnect you to compassion for self and others.

- Learn how to deal with your stress more effectively

Check out counselling resources or classes through Athletics and Recreation Services. Look for groups that help you cope with anxiety and depression, and practice mindfulness. Look for yoga, pilates, or meditation classes. Make time for them!

- Get into nature

Nature heals. Find ways to get out of man-made environments. You can slow down and appreciate the gifts of living on this amazing planet more easily in natural settings.

- Refuse to let go of the rest of your life

You are more than your identity as a graduate student—even though your non-grad school friends and family may not understand what you are experiencing, they will be there when you are done, and finishing is part of the goal. Maintain a larger perspective.

Advice for EAL Graduate Students

- Before everything, be aware that having English as an additional language is only one (and maybe a small one) of the factors influencing the successful completion of your thesis and dissertation.
- Things like research methods and rigour in critical thinking come before the writing process when writing a research and dissertation.
- Even in the writing process, your ability in English comes after your abilities in organizing your ideas, creating logical connections, and following valid ways of developing your ideas. However, there might be some areas that you can improve to have a smoother writing experience in a language that is not your first.

Strategic

- Do more planning before writing.
- Take note of the trajectories of other writers' arguments.
- Reflect on the road map of your own argument during revision.

Linguistic

- Learn more written English vocabulary.
- Learn about the rhetorical strategies that native English-speaking writers use to communicate their messages.
- Try to minimize interferences from your first language (i.e., never translate from your mother tongue into English; instead, try to start writing in English from the beginning).
- Always proofread your text for lack of clarity.

Cultural

- Familiarize yourself with North American academic expectations.
- Learn the rules of academic integrity in your new academic environment.
- Seek out and use the available resources and services on campus. The Centre for Academic Communication has resources to help you with most of the points mentioned above. Contact the English as an Additional Language (EAL) Specialists (Gillian, eal1@uvic.ca or Kaveh, eal2@uvic.ca) if you need help.

Finally, remember that academic English is no one's first language. So no matter how basic or advanced your writing skills are, and whether English is your first language or not, you still need to learn the rules and develop the necessary skills to make academic communication easier and clearer. The ultimate goal is for those in academia to be able to communicate their insights and knowledge, and this can only happen if everyone shares a homogenous system of rules. Learning about this system and mastering the skills necessary to use it is a gradual process and individuals need to constantly look for strategies that are best for them. The writing tips and suggestions provided here may work differently for different writers, but if you spend enough time learning about them and trying them out, you will eventually find the strategies that work best for you. Once you learn the most important rules and have the right skills and strategies to use them, you have the necessary tools to help you communicate with the academic community. But don't forget! Like any other tools, you will always need to maintain and update them!

The Last Word

This starter kit is full of information, tips, and resources to help you get started writing and keep writing, revising, and editing your thesis or dissertation. It doesn't, however, contain everything that is related of the process of completing a thesis or dissertation. For example, it doesn't tell you how to handle difficult supervisory relationships, or how to understand the rules governing intellectual property within your discipline. There will be much learning for you in your graduate student experience, and the hardest parts will be those that are not mapped out through coursework or clear guidelines. If you have lost your way or lost hope, the most important thing to know is that there is help out there. Do not suffer alone; it will harm your health, your progress, and your relationships. Ask for and keep asking for help. Ask your peers in your writing group. Ask your supervisor, your graduate advisor, and your graduate secretary. If you can't find the help you need within your program or discipline, go to Counselling Services, the Faculty of Graduate Studies, the Graduate Students Society, or the Ombudsperson. You may be referred once or twice, but persist. Persistence and hard work got you here. They can also get you to the help you need.

Annotated Bibliography of Recommended Readings

Dissertations and Theses

American Psychological Association. (2010). *Publication manual of the American psychological association.* Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Manual for APA style, used by writers in psychology, sociology, business, and economics.

Becker, H. S., & Richards, P. (2007). *Writing for social scientists: How to start and finish your thesis, book, or article* (2nd ed.). Chicago: University Of Chicago Press.

Rather than focusing on writing per se, this book has useful chapters on Editing by Ear, Risk, and Getting it Out the Door.

Bolker, J. (1998). *Writing your dissertation in fifteen minutes a day: A guide to starting, revising, and finishing your doctoral thesis.* New York: Henry Holt and Company.

One of the classics on writing a dissertation (although it takes more time than the "hook" in the title suggests!). Lots of sensible advice.

Booth, W. C., Colomb, G. G., Williams, J. M., Turabian, K. L., & University of Chicago. (2013). *A manual for writers of research papers, theses, and dissertations: Chicago style for students and researchers.*(8th ed.). Chicago: University Of Chicago Press.

A classic on style.

Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Particularly aimed at social science and education audiences, this text explains different methodologies clearly and gives examples of each one.

Cook, C. K., & Modern Language Association of America. (1985). *Line by line: How to edit your own writing*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

This book is considered a classic writer's guide. Although written in the mid-eighties, it is still widely used in all disciplines.

Galvan, J. L. (2015). *Writing literature reviews: A guide for students of the social and behavioral sciences* (6th ed.). Glendale, CA: Pyrczak Pub.

Struggling with your literature review? This guide can help you find your way through.

Gibaldi, J. (2009). *MLA handbook for writers of research papers* (7th ed.). New York: Modern Language Association.

Classic manual for writers in the humanities.

Ross-Larsson, B. (1996). *Edit yourself: A manual for everyone who works with words.* NewYork: W.W. Norton & Co.

This book is concise, easy to use, and highly valued by professional editors.

Waye, L. (2011). *Managing your thesis or dissertation: A workbook for graduate students*. Dubuque, IA: Kendall Hunt Pub Co.

This spiral bound workbook helps graduate students map out their thesis or dissertation in order to understand what they need to do, when, and how, by applying eight project management concepts to the process of academic writing. Practical and useful.

Academic Writing

Boice, R. (1990). *Professors as writers*. Stillwater: New Forums Press.

Written by a well-known researcher on faculty careers, this book has a lot of good advice applicable to graduate students.

Boice, R. (2000). *Advice for new faculty members*. Boston: Pearson.

A nice book based on the author's years of research on advice to new faculty members. The subtitle, "everything in moderation," sums up the advice. This is about how to do enough without killing yourself. Equally applicable for graduate students, particularly the advice on writing.

Booth, W. C., Colomb, G. G., & Williams, J. M. (2008). *The craft of research* (3rd ed.). Chicago: University Of Chicago Press.

This accessible book explains how to build an argument that motivates readers to accept a claim, how to anticipate the reservations of readers and to respond to them appropriately, and how to create introductions and conclusions that answer that most demanding question: "So what?" Useful for researchers at all stages.

Schimel, J. (2011). *Writing science: How to write papers that get cited and proposals that get funded*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

This book distinguishes itself from other scientific writing guides in that it focusses on how to tell an effective story while adhering to scientific standards. Highly recommended by scientists at all stages of their research careers, it also wins praise because it is itself engagingly written.

Silvia, P. J. (2007). *How to write a lot: A practical guide to productive academic writing*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

In this brief and encouraging book, the author explains that writing productively does not require innate skills or special traits, but specific tactics and actions. Drawing examples from his own field of psychology, he shows how to overcome motivational roadblocks and become prolific without sacrificing evenings, weekends, and vacations. Also includes detailed advice from the trenches on how to write, submit, revise, and resubmit articles, how to improve writing quality, and how to write and publish academic work.

Academic Writing for EAL Students

Swales, J. M., & Feak, C. B. (2001). *Academic writing for graduate students: Essential tasks and skills : a course for nonnative speakers of English*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

This book covers almost all aspects of academic writing. In addition, the tips on improving vocabulary and grammar can be useful for EAL writers. You also might find the explanations of standard structure of reasoning quite beneficial.

General Writing Books: Classics for Inspiration!

Goldberg, N. (2005). *Writing down the bones: Freeing the writer within*. Boston: Shambhala.

A practicing Zen Buddhist, Goldberg offers encouragement, inspiration, and practical advice to people who aspire to write. Her enthusiastic and creative approach to writing as practice has been found useful by writers from many disciplines.

King, S. (2010). *On writing: 10th anniversary edition: A memoir of the craft* (10th Anv ed.). New York: Scribner.

King's book is part autobiography and part practical advice. It will not be a waste of time. An example of King's wisdom: "Write the first draft with the door closed; write the second with it open."

Lamott, A. (1995). *Bird by bird: Some instructions on writing and life*. New York: Anchor.

This delightful book will not solve your mechanical writing problems, but it is, as one reviewer on Amazon said, "more than a few anecdotes and good advice; it's a lifeline in the thrashing seas of rough-draftdom, a foothold on the sands of jealousy and vain ambition." It reminds even thesis writers that writing is "about letting go, growing, facing truths, and holding on."

Sher, G. (1999). *One continuous mistake: Four noble truths for writers.* New York: Penguin Books.

Gail Sher applies the teachings of Buddhism to the process of writing. She has taught graduate classes at several major California universities. Less a workbook than a series of meditations, this book beautifully reminds us of good writing practice habits and the value of learning through mistakes and "not knowing."

References

Clance, R. & Imes, S. (1978). The impostor phenomenon in high achieving women: Dynamics and therapeutic intervention. *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice*, *15(3),* 241-247.

Doyle, S. & Waye, L. (Eds.). (2011). *Academic writing essentials*. Boston: Pearson.

Pychyl, T. (2014). A life of productivity. [Web Interview]. Retrieved May 12, 2015, from http://alifeofproductivity.com/why-you-procrastinate-10-tactics-to-help-you-stop/

Young, V. (2011). *The secret thoughts of successful women: Why capable people suffer from the impostor syndrome and how to thrive in spite of it.* New York: Crown Business.

Appendix

Technology Tips

This section is *not* intended to provide a definitive list of technologies/software necessary to writing a thesis. It is the case, however, that in recent years technology has taken on a much larger role in the effective management of research and in writing a thesis/dissertation. This technology tips section is a selected list of currently available technologies that graduate students have reported very useful in the past five years. Be aware that each person has to do the research and become informed in order to make good decisions about what will work best for him or her. There is no "best" tool; you need to decide what to use, and then learn how to use it. Also remember that technologies change rapidly. This document could be out of date very quickly.

Beware, however, the trap of avoiding writing by spending days researching what might be the "best" technology tool!

Whatever storage systems and technology you use, make sure you follow proper back up procedures: experts advise you to keep three copies, in two different formats, in two different places. For further information see http://www.uvic.ca/systems/support/informationsecurity/datasecurity/index.php.

DiRT

Developed by librarians, this Digital Research Tools site may be one of those that has "too much" information. But if you want unbiased information on a huge range of digital research tools used for scholarly purposes, check this out: http://dirtdirectory.org/.

Bibliographic Management Tools

With digital research growing exponentially, finding the software that will help you manage your bibliography early in your thesis is extremely important. There are numerous tools available. Some are free, and some cost money. Each has its strengths and weaknesses.

Mendeley

Mendeley is a free reference manager and academic social network designed to help organize documents, collaborate with others online, and discover the latest research. It allows you to make your own searchable library, cite as you write, and read and annotate PDFs. Mendeley is a desktop and a web program. It requires you to store all basic citation data on its servers, which are located in the United States. Upon registration, Mendeley provides the user with 2 GB of free web storage space, which is upgradeable at a cost.

Endnote

Endnote is a citation manager you can use to create, store, and manage libraries of bibliographic references and automatically create and format bibliographies in virtually any format. When using online journal databases, such as JSTOR, you can export references and abstracts and then import them into Endnote. Endnote can also store PDF files, so that you can search your database, open a reference, read the attached journal article, and mark it up as you go. Your desktop Endnote library can synch with other versions on tablets or phones, so that you can both manage and use references on different platforms. The most recent version allows for unlimited file attachment storage and unlimited cloud storage. Exporting and sharing your libraries with collaborators of fellow students is easy.

Endnote X7 is software stored on your computer and is available from the UVic computer store. You can also download it directly from the Endnote EStore, and students save 62% off the regular price.

Endnote Online/Endnote Basic is web-based via Web of Science. Endnote Online/Endnote Basic is hosted in the United States. Personal information will be stored on servers outside Canada.

Refworks

Refworks is an online research management, writing, and collaboration tool. You can use it to gather, manage, store, and share all types of information, and to generate citations and bibliographies.

Refworks is internet based and all your data is stored on its servers, which are based in the United States. A subscription to Refworks costs $100.00 USD.

Zotero

Zotero is an open source project based at the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media, at George Mason University. As a citation manager, you can use it to create, store, and manage bibliographic references and automatically create and format bibliographies and footnotes in your papers. Zotero software is stored on your local drive and it comes with a browser add-on designed for web-based research.

For more information about bibliographic management tools and for comparisons among tools, see http://libguides.uvic.ca/citations.

Cloud Storage Services

When writing a thesis or dissertation, you probably have hundreds of digital files that you are constantly using: notes, drafts of your chapters, PDF journal articles, and so on. It can be a struggle to keep them in one place. You are working on your laptop, but you also may work at a workstation in the library; maybe some of your files are on your desktop and others on your tablet. How can you keep all your thesis/dissertation files in the same place? Emailing your files to yourself takes time, and using a USB drive is not always safe. This is when the idea of having all your files hovering over your head in a cloud all the time sounds like the perfect solution! There are many "cloud" storage services out there that give you the ability to store your files online and have them available simultaneously anytime, anywhere, and on any device. In this section we list the features for a few of the most popular ones.

Dropbox

Dropbox, which has Android, iOS, Mac, and Windows apps, is a free cloud storage limited to 3 GB of storage (upgrading involves a monthly cost, but has advantages in terms of numbers of users and size). It can create folders on your computer that appear just like any other folder, and it automatically synchronizes any files you store in this folder with any other computer or device you have linked to your Dropbox account. It lets you work on your files and edit them, and any changes, additions, and deletions to the files are synchronized. Dropbox gives you the option to share your files with others through a link, thus providing the chance for collaboration on the same file, and it lets you search your files through your own device's searching features. There is a web client in addition to the apps.

Google Drive

Google drive has all the features listed above for Dropbox. In addition, it provides platforms to create documents, presentations, spreadsheets, forms, drawings, and so on. This is essentially a free, online basic office suite, which is not as fully featured as the Microsoft equivalent, but can still prove very useful. Google Drive has a stronger searching feature than Dropbox, which allows you to search for not only your files, but also for content within your files. It functions through your basic Google account

Writing Tools

Scrivener

Scrivener is writing software that focuses on composition and organization. It is well suited to long-form writing like a thesis, since it has tools to outline your work and structure ideas in a familiar and intuitive way that parallels rearranging paper index cards on a cork board. You can make index cards for every chunk of writing you are working on. This feature gives you the chance to work from your detailed outline while writing. You can write down the main idea for each section or even paragraph on your index cards, and then develop those ideas as you write your paragraphs. It also allows you to take notes and work with reference documents (such as a journal articles, images,

and even sound files) on one half of a split screen while you compose on the other. In this way, you can look at your reference files while quoting, paraphrasing, and summarizing them. There are different modes you can work in, including clutter- and distraction-free composition. In the background, Scrivener can track project statistics and writing targets.

Scrivener has a "binder" on one side of the screen that lets you move easily and quickly around your document from one section to another, rather than scrolling through pages of text. You can arrange text into larger or smaller pieces, allowing you to focus on specific details or sections without being distracted by the whole (sometimes imposing) document. Much of thesis writing is about getting things in the right order, and Scrivener makes it easy to step back, look at the structure of the document, and move things around as you need to. Scrivener also takes "snapshots" of your work as you go, making it easy to return to an earlier version if you make a mistake or experiment with changes in structure. It can also automatically back up to Dropbox.

Scrivener works well with bibliographic software such as Zotero (http://thedigitalresearcher.com/how-to-use-zotero-with-scrivener/). While Scrivener has formatting capability, many find it easiest to export the Scrivener document to MS Word when they are ready to compile and format of the entire manuscript. The program is very affordable, works on multiple platforms, and is incredibly stable and reliable. Scrivener has a bit of a learning curve, but spending a few hours learning this intuitive program may save you days or weeks over the duration of your research.

Evernote

Evernote is another great tool for note taking and organizing. While Scrivener's strength is in compiling longer documents, Evernote is particularly useful for keeping track of smaller thoughts and ideas: notes, drawings, images, sounds, and any files that you want to create or upload. You can think of it as a combination of cloud storage services and a note-taking platform. It also has strong searching and organizing features, making it a convenient tool for organizing your thesis and dissertation notes on the go. You can categorize your notes into notebooks and add tags to them, thereby making them very easy to find and connect.

A great feature of Evernote is the ability to let you upload files (MS Word files, for example) by dragging and dropping them into a note, and then open these files anywhere and any time by double clicking on an icon in the note. This will open the file in a temporary folder on your device, and you can edit it from there. After finishing your work and saving the changes, the file automatically gets uploaded into the same note, saving you the trouble of downloading and uploading your files every time you edit them. Evernote has apps for Windows, Mac, iOS, Android, and Windows Phone, in addition to its web client, which is available through any browser.

LaTeX

LaTeX is a document preparation system for high-quality typesetting. It is most often used for medium-to-large technical or scientific documents, but it can be used for almost any form of publishing. LaTeX is *not* a word processor! LaTeX contains features for

- Typesetting journal articles, technical reports, books, and slide presentations
- Controlling large documents containing sectioning, cross-references, tables, and figures
- Typesetting complex mathematical formulas
- Advanced typesetting of mathematics with AMS-LaTeX
- Automatic generation of bibliographies and indexes
- Multilingual typesetting
- Including artwork and process or spot colour
- Using PostScript or Metafont fonts

Dragon NaturallySpeaking/Dragon Dictation

Dragon NaturallySpeaking is computer-based speech recognition software that translates spoken communication into electronic text. It allows you to use your computer microphone (or an external microphone) to dictate your ideas and follow along with your thoughts as they appear on screen. Your dictations could be brief notes or complete and

complex full sentences with citations, since Dragon can recognize editing commands such as “period,” “comma,” “enter,” and “open/close quotations.” Dragon can thus be used throughout the writing process to simply help you transcribe your ideas into text while generating an outline, or to lessen typing fatigue when you are in the throes of writing your chapters.

Like any speech recognition software, Dragon may not pick up exactly what you say without errors. However, its accuracy can be improved by taking the time to “train” it. This training takes approximately 30 minutes and involves following the program prompts and reading specific words and phrases. This training allows the program to become familiar with your voice and is intended to lessen transcription errors.

This computer software has recently been converted into a free IOS app called Dragon Dictation. The app also translates your verbalized thoughts into text, but it is portable and does not require you to train it. You can simply download this app, open it on your phone or tablet, and begin working at home or on the go.

Concept/Mind Mapping Tools

Mind maps are a great way to provide a visual image of your ideas, helping you to narrow down your topic, find your direction, and organize your thoughts before making an outline. There are many mind-mapping tools available, both online and as downloadable applications. Below are only a few examples. You can also try other ones, like www.mindmup.com (online) and X Mind (app).

Text 2 Mind Map

Text 2 Mind Map is a free, online, simple mind-mapping tool that allows you to quickly create mind maps, organize them using color codes, and play with them by clicking and dragging the nodes and bubbles. You can export the mind maps in the form of images or PDF files.

Inspiration

Inspiration is computer software that allows you to create mind maps and outlines as you conceptualize your research and/or writing. Using colours, shapes, lines, and graphics, you can generate a visual representation of your thoughts and connect or re-arrange your ideas. With the click of a button, you can then convert your mind map into an outline. Inspiration can also be used to generate and convert an outline to a mind map.

Inspiration is also available for iOS as an app called Inspiration Maps. This app has very similar functions to its computer-based predecessor, but it is much more tactile. It allows you to construct, arrange, and manipulate your mind maps and outlines with the touch of your finger. You can then convert your maps and outlines to PDF files and email them to yourself or others.

Coggle

Coggle is a free, web-based mind-mapping utility that may be of use to writers who prefer to plan their writing visually in a hierarchical manner. It is web based and hence accessible via a Google account on any connected device. The user interface is uncomplicated, colourful, and “softer” than many other mind-mapping programs, and it saves your document automatically as you work, archiving previous versions of your file while offering readily accessible “help” functions.

It allows you to download your mind map as a PDF, jpeg, or plain text document and easily share it online with project collaborators or supervisors. The plain text version looks like an outline, which can be used as a template for headings and subheadings if you copy and paste it onto a Word document.

Coggle lacks some of the more technically sophisticated options, such as creating direct links to your PDF files or citations, but the user-friendly features may be a good intro to mind-mapping as a method within your writing process.

Lifestyle Apps

Taking short breaks and shifting your focus to your body, your breath, your thoughts, and your feelings in a noticing, non-judgmental way, can help you make more effective progress in your writing and help keep you healthier in the process. There are many apps available that offer support in mindfulness, relaxation, and meditation. They are available for your desktop, your tablet, and your phone. Some are free and some are for purchase. The brief list here is offered as a very small sample of free apps that have all been recommended by students and helping professionals who use them. These apps work particularly well in combination with pomodoros.

F.lux

This free download program adjusts the colour and brightness of your computer monitor to correspond with the solar cycle and your sleep patterns. (So it dims and yellows when the sun goes down or a couple of hours before an inputted bedtime.) It has been known for some time that graduate students are vulnerable to sleep disruptions. By working on a computer monitor you could be contributing to your own sleep problems through overlong exposure to the blue light of the monitor. The f.lux app helps to ease eye strain and the sleep disruption that the blue light from monitors is known to cause.

UP Coffee

If you are relying on caffeine to keep you working, you might want to try this app. UP Coffee allows you to input every cup of coffee you drink and records your daily intake of caffeine, as well as alerting you to the possibility of sleep disruption. While it does rely on self-regulation (and, therefore, has the problems usually associated with such methods), some graduate students report that it can be a good reminder to dial it back a bit. (There is, perhaps, no better incentive than a little notice telling you that you consumed 783 mg of caffeine yesterday to make you reevaluate and go for green tea instead.)

Calm

Calm is both a website and a downloadable app. You can choose meditation breaks from 2 to 20 minutes and you can modify the scenery and the sounds.

Meditation Oasis

This website includes many resources relating to meditation, including an online course, blog postings, podcasts, and meditations of varying types and lengths. There are also cds available and smartphone apps.

Breathe2Relax

Breathe2Relax is a portable stress management tool. It is also a hands-on diaphragmatic breathing exercise. Breathing exercises have been documented to decrease the body's "fight-or-flight" (stress) response, and help with mood stabilization, anger control, and anxiety management.