

Writing Up: How to survive your PhD

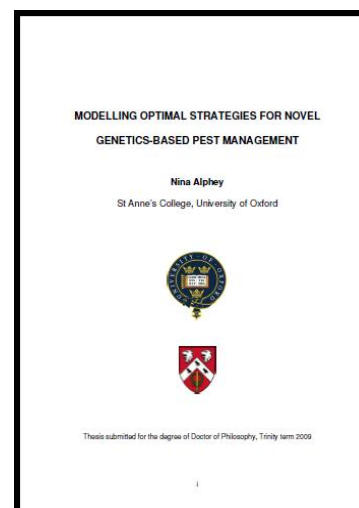
Dr Nina Alpey, Postdoctoral Research Fellow, St Anne's College, submitted her DPhil thesis in 2009

The thought of writing up a DPhil thesis can be daunting. To make matters worse, there is often some looming deadline, such as the end of your student funding or the start of a postdoc position, which limits the time available and adds to the pressure. There are many sources of advice on writing up a PhD thesis. Your supervisor will be your main port of call, but a range of advice from different quarters should help.

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Images: Daria Luchinskaya (LHS), Nina Alpey (RHS)

The Vitae web site (strapline “realising the potential of researchers”) has advice on thesis writing (www.vitae.ac.uk/pgrthesis) as well as more general tips and advice to help you through a PhD (register for the mailing list at www.vitae.ac.uk/pgrtips). There are many self-help books available too – examples are listed below. Be careful, though. If, like me, you are the kind of person who could easily have spent more time at school drawing up and colouring in a revision timetable than actually revising for the exams, then such books can be a big distraction. Instead of seeking out a particular recommended book and reading it from cover to cover and then repeating with another book mentioned in that first one, just pick up the first one you can and flick through the chapter on thesis writing, scanning for what are likely to be the parts most relevant to you. Much of it will be common sense anyway; you are looking for the few gems that make a difference to you.

Go to your supervisor's shelf or subject library and flick through a few recent theses in a similar area, to get a feel for what the finished product should look like. For one or two, sketch out what is in them and how they are put together and translate those into what your thesis will look like. The overall structure varies, especially between subjects, but will often be an introduction, some kind of background, methods, results or findings, discussion and/or conclusion. Find out what is normal in your field and think about whether that fits your work. Is there usually a separate “literature review” or is prior work usually referenced from within each substantive chapter? Are methods set out in a separate chapter as is often the case for laboratory-based experimental research) or will each chapter contain its own? The overall framework should tell a story; Cryer likens it to reporting on an expedition having returned from a voyage of discovery. Having a good overall plan makes it much easier both to get through the whole writing up process (Marshall and Green note that doing a PhD is more like a war of attrition than a single heroic assault) and to get “from pieces to thesis” at the end.

You should also sketch out the content of each chapter before you write it. Set out its purpose, link it with other knowledge (including earlier and later chapters of your thesis), specify the work you carried out and describe its outcomes. The introduction should set the scene and indicate what to expect from the rest of the thesis. The general discussion or conclusion draws all the strands together, shows how your work fits into the wider body of knowledge, and looks to the future (imagine there were plenty of time and funding available and write about what could be done next, even if you know you are going off to do something entirely different). Turn that outline in your head into a list of headings, sub-headings and bullet points as a first step to writing that chapter. This can be especially helpful if you are confronted with writer's block.

Writing a thesis, viewed from the start, is a huge task. Getting started can present a problem. There are tricks and tips to help with this. Use anything you already have, including papers, your report for Transfer or Confirmation of Status, notes you made when reading key papers, posters that you created or talks you prepared, however informal. Use "salami tactics" – break a huge task down into small manageable chunks and pick those off one at a time. Don't start at the beginning, start with something easy, such as describing materials and methods for the piece of work you are most comfortable and familiar with. As something begins to take shape, your confidence grows. Even with a good plan, some details change and the thesis can evolve as you write, review, edit and get feedback, so leave the overview and summing up parts until you have a good idea how the substantive chapters have turned out. I suggest you don't edit and polish your rough draft introduction until quite late on and leave the general discussion/conclusion and abstract until near the end.

Agree an approach with your supervisor in advance, at least in outline. This need not be an overall timetable; a rigid schedule may hinder more than help at this stage, although a rough one can help judge how realistic you are being. It is a good idea to find out what your supervisor hopes and expects to see, at what stage of drafting and roughly how many drafts of the various parts he or she is willing to consider. He is unlikely to be impressed to receive an entire polished thesis for the first time only a week before the absolute final deadline for handing it in! Ask if there are any crucial periods when he or she will be away or busy.

As far as I can tell, everyone finds that writing up takes longer than they expected. So allow plenty of time. For example, it took me a week just to glue all the separate chapters together with a single combined bibliography, a table of contents and lists of figures, tables, etc. Reformatting existing material can likewise take ages, so try to minimise this. Set up a template (easily done in Word or LaTeX, for example) with the right margins, font sizes, heading and sub-heading styles, etc, and write (or paste pre-existing material) into that. Check the University guidance (http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/gso/forms/#_Toc27557430) and specific requirements for your subject before making a start. Plot out the rough size of each of your chapters bearing in mind the overall word or page limits. Allow time to redraft, refine and polish and take account of feedback from your supervisor and others. It is a good idea to put a newly drafted chapter to one side for a few days then return to it in editorial mode to read it through, make any obvious improvements, check the narrative flow, edit out any unnecessary padding, plug a few gaps you may have left for later, and so on.

It can also be hard to know when to stop, especially if you have perfectionist tendencies. There will always be more work you could do – put those extra ideas on a separate list or into a shoe box for later.

A thesis littered with spelling mistakes and poor language will be hard to read and may annoy your examiners. But a few typos here and there or slight differences in how figures align are not going to interfere with anyone's understanding of the content and are not worth spending a lot of time seeking out and tweaking. It might be that only a few people will ever read your thesis (you, your supervisor, and your examiners) – it could help to remind yourself of that any time you are inclined to get carried away.

If you know your time management is poor, get some tips and advice specifically on that. One key aim is to avoid distractions and focus on the goal, i.e. spend your time working on the thesis rather than other things. For example, use carrots (rewards) and sticks (punishments) to motivate yourself, and choose things that will work for you personally. Another broad aim is to work more efficiently and productively in the time that you do have. Figure out which times of day (or night) are the best for you to do certain kinds of work – reading, thinking deeply about difficult issues, turning rough notes into formal prose, repetitive tasks such as reformatting or organising your bibliography entries in Endnote, etc. Take periodic short breaks (or change activity), eat proper meals and drink sufficient fluids, regularly get a good night's sleep, do some exercise, and all the other sensible things you know about but for some reason don't apply in practice. Find a suitable place or places to work - not too hot or cold, comfortable (but not too comfortable), distraction-free – and arrange the materials you need for the current task around you for convenient access. Don't work where you sleep. Try to have a regular special place where you write, be that the office, desk at home, or a particular spot in the library.

Draw on your support network. Collectively, your friends, relatives and colleagues have a vast capacity to read or proof-read your work and to help you stay focussed and meet your deadlines. There are also people within College and the University to help you stay on track, for example by dealing with stress. Keep in mind the ultimate goal. Many students will tell you that the satisfaction of seeing your complete, printed and (temporarily) bound thesis is one of the highlights of doing a PhD, and for some people submitting it for examination can be even more rewarding than hearing "Congratulations Dr [your name]" at the end of the viva. I suggest you plan your celebrations to include something really nice as a reward to yourself soon after submitting your thesis to the Exam Schools. It is an impressive achievement, and you will be entitled to grin about it for days or weeks after that, with knowing smiles from your friends and colleagues who got there before you and wistful anticipation from those who are still on their way there.

**Some useful books:**

"How to write a thesis", Murray (ISBN 978 0 335 21968 3 / 0335207189)

"How to get a PhD", Phillips and Pugh (ISBN 033520550X)

"The Research Student's Guide to Success", Cryer (ISBN 0335206867)

"Your PhD companion", Marshall and Green, (ISBN 1857039483)

"The unwritten rules of PhD research", Rugg and Petre (ISBN 0335213448)