

Trainee Section

Sit Down and Write Your Thesis! Practical and Motivational Tips for Scientific Writing

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Scientific writing can be the most daunting, discouraging, and anxiety-provoking task of the academic experience. Sometimes, when the time comes to write, everything becomes magically more interesting: e-mails, your ResearchGate (or Facebook) page, answering some of those countless surveys, the call to set your next dentist appointment, household chores, even cleaning the cat's litter. How can we manage to write, then? Above all, how can we avoid seeing writing as the worst thing in the world? Can we stop forcing ourselves to stare guiltily at our computer and simply regain the desire to write? These are the questions I wanted to address in a French-language book published in 2014, called *Assieds-toi et écris ta thèse!* In the following sections I summarize some of the tips I discussed in the book.

Block Dedicated Periods to Writing

This is the most crucial advice: to write your thesis, you will need to reserve time to write your thesis. A lot of time, and quality time.

It will, however, be the hardest tip to put into practice. Reserving time for writing is certainly one of the most prevalent problems among university students (and even among their professors!). For the graduate student, writing periods must compete with classes, readings, lengthy assignments, internships, research and teaching assistantships, involvement in student associations, and so on. For all these activities, a director, a supervisor, a teammate, or a grade on a report will act as extrinsic motivators to force you to get to work. However, when it comes to writing your thesis, more often than not, you are left to yourself. Alone with your computer, you might have difficulty disciplining yourself, organizing yourself, and managing your various tasks. It is a common experience to feel lost and isolated.

Blocking time for writing is the best strategy to keep a regular pace that will allow you to achieve your academic goals (and, yes, even write and submit your thesis). Unfortunately, most of us are not very good at setting productive writing periods. We wait to have long stretches of availability—a full afternoon, or even a day or a week. We do not set a limit to the writing period, relying on the feeling of being fed up to stop. We underestimate the time required to write. We do not feel obligated to write as long as the deadline for the report is not imminent (and for writing the thesis, those deadlines

come extremely late in the academic journey). Consequently, writing tasks are undertaken according to an erratic schedule, often under pressure. Things to be written accumulate, deadlines shorten, feelings of anxiety and guilt swell. The pleasure of writing, the pleasant intellectual manipulation of ideas, the initial curiosity that had made you choose this field of research fade until they disappear.

So go ahead and take your agenda to block writing time. Block writing time every day (that is, 5 days a week: you have the right to take weekends off) or almost. Choose short periods (for example, 2 hours). You only need the time to achieve small writing goals. It is motivating to feel that when the period is over, you might have been able to continue: this feeling will make it easier to start writing on your next appointment. Write at the time of day when you are the most fit, depending whether you are an early bird or a night owl. Remember that writing a thesis is not a hobby: don't plan to do it after a hard day's work or after a demanding class. Write before engaging in all of the urgent e-mails you have to answer to, not after. Eliminate distractions from your writing periods (and yes, this means no phone and even no Internet). Respect your writing appointments in an uncompromising and dedicated manner, like you would for a meeting with your advisor. Finally, when the period is over, stop writing and go take a break free of any form of writing.

Develop SMART Objectives

When you have booked several writing periods, you need a strategy to fill them productively. It is a bit naive to think that you will write easily throughout your writing periods without preparation. It is as if you had rented a car to get to your dream destination (this mythical country called PhD): you will have to put gas in regularly to move forward. The full tank that was provided when you took the car will not last forever; similarly, the initial motivation to enroll in an advanced degree program, and the original enthusiasm for your thesis topic, will wax and wane. A wobbly motivation does not necessarily mean that you are no longer in the right place in your graduate program; it often simply means that you need more specific and pragmatic objectives. Defining objectives is like putting gas in the car, it is what will allow you to move forward every day.

There are at least 4 types of objectives to think about when writing a thesis:

1. The long-term objectives are those that you set for a semester or for a predetermined period of several weeks (for example, before going on vacation, I want to have accomplished _____).
2. Each long-term goal must be broken down into a series of smaller, specific objectives, such as the steps of a staircase. Ideally, the time needed to achieve a specific goal would be exactly the time you have set aside for a writing period.
3. The third type of objective refers to the scheduling discussed earlier: when you schedule writing periods, you set time objectives. These are of paramount importance because you will determine whether you have achieved your goals (whether you are good, on the right path, or whether you really are an impostor after all!) on the basis of those belonging to this category. Nobody is productive on a regular basis at the precise moment they decide. Nobody is a machine. Some days, the sentences will write themselves alone on the page as if the ghosts of the past geniuses of your domain had taken possession of your fingers; other days, you will have trouble aligning the few words needed to make 1 complete sentence. Accept that your productivity does not always live up to your expectations. However, you planned to write for 2 hours and you did write for 2 hours? Then you have reached your goal. When you have defined the long-term objectives, the specific objectives, and the time objectives, you will have the space and the motivation to undertake your writing tasks successfully.
4. The last type of goal that will make you even more effective are the project objectives. Always start a project by defining its objectives although they might change along the way. Take the time to define and clarify the objective of any text, chapter, or article: the more precise they are the better they will guide the rest of your writing.

And don't forget: a smart objective is Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time-bound. "Write thesis" is about the worst objective you can have (and yet how many times have I seen it written in personal agendas or on post-it notes, as if you could forget it).

Plan, Write, Edit, and Repeat

Writing a thesis is like building a house. When you have bought the land and decided to build the cottage of your dreams, is it time to lay the first brick? Not really. Rather, you will want to spend some time—a lot of time!—at the drawing board. You want to draw a detailed plan and anticipate all the stages of building your house. Then you will start on the big jobs and maybe coordinate the advancement of several tasks in parallel (the plumbing, the electricity, etc). Only when the house is built can you take care of the finishing (painting the walls, putting curtains on the windows, etc). In scientific writing, this is the equivalent of 3 very distinct stages: planning, writing (actually typing the words), and editing. Each of these steps is essential to the beginning of the next step, and you will have to give equal importance to each of the 3. When you feel stuck, ask yourself: do I have a plan that is specific enough (ie, that tells me what to write)? And if I do, am I

trying to edit myself as I write? When you have the plan, accept the mess of the construction site, trust the process, and stop trying to fit curtains on a window that is still unattached to a wall.

Which bring us to the subject of the perfectionism quicksand. That is what the pursuit of perfection really is: a deadly quicksand that wants you to believe it is a beautiful beach. Do not wait to feel good, inspired, or competent to start writing. On the contrary, establish a regular and immutable writing schedule, and stick to it: that is how you will develop your competency. Excellence will come from experience: do not let the impostor's syndrome paralyze you. You will be good enough (even excellent!) if you try, if you allow yourself to make mistakes, and if you are willing to learn from them. Fight procrastination and perfectionism fiercely while maintaining a caring attitude toward yourself. Success will come from an organized work method, skills in defining realistic goals and in reaching them, a good knowledge and use of your strengths, and a good life balance that will keep the risk of burnout at a distance. The search for perfection, meanwhile, will lead you repeatedly and inexorably to failure. Do not fall for it.

Writing in English when English is not your native language

J'ai longtemps voulu écrire de la science-fiction en français, mais j'ai fini par écrire de la science en anglais [I have long wanted to write science fiction in French, but I ended up writing science in English].

—Nadine Forget-Dubois

In the foreword to *Ecrire Un Article Scientifique En Anglais: Guide de Rédaction Dans La Langue de Darwin*

Thus begins the foreword of Nadine Forget-Dubois' book on scientific writing in English for Francophones. When English is not your first language, or any of your languages, the frequent necessity to write in English to publish your work adds to the difficulty of scientific writing. Nadine Forget-Dubois nevertheless encourages non-English speakers to

Table 1. Some useful books on writing

Bernheim E, Noreau P. La thèse: Un guide pour y entrer et s'en sortir. Montréal, Canada: Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 2016.
Belcher WL. Writing Your Journal Article in 12 Weeks. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2009.
Boice R. Professors as Writers: A Self-Help Guide to Productive Writing. Stillwater, OK: New Forums Press, 1990.
Bolker J. Writing Your Dissertation in Fifteen Minutes a Day. New York, NY: Holt Paperbacks, 1998.
Forget-Dubois N. Écrire un article scientifique en anglais. Québec, Canada: Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 2016.
King S. On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft, Scribner trade pbk ed, 10th anniversary ed. New York, NY: Scribner, 2010.
Mongeau P. Réaliser son mémoire ou sa thèse: Côté jeans & côté tenue de soirée. Québec: Les Presses de l'Université du Québec, 2008.
Silvia PJ. How to Write a Lot. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2007.
Silvia PJ. Write It Up. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2015.
Sword H. Air & Light & Time & Space. How Successful Academics Write. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017.

embark on writing in English, and to resist the urge to just pay someone to translate the work. She argues that, in any case, scientific style (what she coined “Darwin’s language”) has special rules that even English-speaking writers do not always master. Perhaps you will need time, grammar books, or a professional editor to help you correct your clumsy phrasing, but you know what? So will most of your English-speaking peers. By following the steps presented earlier (plan, write, edit, and repeat), you can overcome the initial discomfort of writing in a foreign language, and allow yourself to write imperfectly and to edit your text thoroughly afterwards. Many of my Francophone students have told me that the most difficult step is to face their apprehension of writing in English (an old feeling that has been dragging since high school).

After, they realize that they are good writers in English, sometimes even better than in French because their final text is more direct, exempt of those useless words that often stick to sentences when we write in our mother tongue.

In summary, obtaining a graduate degree, especially writing the ~~damned~~ beloved thesis, is not an easy undertaking. To achieve this, you will have to remind yourself constantly that the experience is difficult for everyone. Maybe not of equal intensity or at all times, but the trying emotions associated with writing a thesis seem to me more and more like a universal experience. You are not alone. Now, do not just trust me. Go look for yourself: to create or maintain the motivation to write, reading on the topic of writing can be very helpful (see [Table 1](#)).