Writing Your Way to Success

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To write or not to write? Is that the question?
Actually no - that is not the issue at all.

Writing matters. Writing your way through your research degree is a key path to success. To write is to ‘know’. In other words, it is through the act of writing that we best think and through writing that we can find out what it is that we know (or do not know). Ideas and questions are found within ourselves through the act of writing.

Confident writers know that writing brings adrenaline. Writing is part of being. Writing is a passion that brings struggle but also much else.

This does not mean that writing is always easy. Often it is not. But having difficulty in writing is not necessarily a permanent state. There are steps to take that can assist. We learn to write better through writing and gain confidence along the way. Part of doing a research degree is about learning to become a better writer. The way to do this is to write.

Although this may sound like circular advice, practicing football, netball, cooking or golf is how you improve in football, netball and so on. You train to get better. It is just the same in writing. And when you are writing well, endorphins flow, just as they do for those involved in sport. (Note, endorphins also flow with eating chocolate; writing has the advantage that it contains no calories.)

Motivation
What is your motivation to write? Think about it. Write it down.
Writing your way through a higher degree can be motivating on its own if you have a topic that you are passion about and a goal, with clear timelines, that you are trying to attain. Getting your proposal finished, your timeline written, the thesis done, and/or a publication or two out for review are motivations on their own. Being able to cite your own publications within the thesis is very motivating, as is preparing for a conference.

Procrastination
“Do you procrastinate?”
“Um, well … I need to think about that. I will let you know.”

Procrastinating about writing? Do you have writers’ block?
Here are some strategies that might help:
• Admit and understand your avoidance
• Reduce anxiety (writing something will help here – start with an easy section like your acknowledgements; you can always rewrite them at a later date)
• Practice consciousness (be aware of what you are really doing or not doing)
• Practice micro strategies (little by little – plan to write an overview, even a few sentences or a set of dot points)
• Enlist support (get a critical friend to keep asking: what are you writing? Ask a family member to keep interruptions at bay)
• Be straight but kind to yourself
• TRY A LITTLE ACTION

Write, write, write
Maintain a research journal. Write down your ideas, questions, concerns, links between readings, memos about what needs to be done, people to chase up, and so on. Keep it with you all the time. An A5 booklet fits in the bag. Choose good quality paper so that it is a pleasure to use.
One thing about ideas is that are few and far between, and incredibly fast ... so write them down before they are lost.

Commit yourself to a writing plan. Make a deal with yourself and/or your supervisor or a critical friend to write regularly and to present drafts for feedback. Plan in more detail how much writing you anticipate. One example of a specific aim is to write 1000 words a day … this soon builds up and provides drafts on which to work as well as motivation as the print out increases. Set meeting times to discuss what you have written with your supervisor. These provide targets for writing, and also mean that a timeline for feedback develops and progress is wonderfully apparent (and therefore further motivates).

Read like a writer
The term ‘read like a writer’ was coined decades ago by Frank Smith and is good advice for us all. Smith used the term to highlight the opportunity that reading gives us to look at how others write. Save words, take note of key phrases, consider layout, look at genre and see if it really does suit the purpose at hand. Read other theses. Look at how authors begin new chapters, sum up sections, create links between parts, integrate current literature, use metaphors, state findings, raise questions, weave an argument through a large document, support an argument, and frame theory in relation to practice. Look at examples of writing that work well and contrast with those that do not. Consider the differences. What style works for you? What style will your examiners favour?

How many drafts is enough?
It takes as many as it takes. Most of us need to draft and redraft as we build up our writing. We need to put the work aside, reread it and make changes. This enables us to firm up content, consider style, attend to surface feature errors (spelling, grammar, punctuation), and see gaps. When editing check that you have been consist, for instance, in terms of:
- Tenses
- Voice: active or passive
- The use of the first vs. third person
- Spelling (eg. Focused or focussed; organization or organisation)
- Referencing (use a standard referencing system)
- Use of chapter notes.

Variety in writing is also important. Consider the multiplicity of choices that writers face such as:

- Structural decisions (format, layout)
- Clarification of terms
- Use of language (be consistent but vary where appropriate)
- Use of metaphors where appropriate
- Directions for readers:
  - advance labeling (eg. The issue of transition is discussed in the following chapter.)
  - recapitulation (eg. In the preceding section, the issues surrounding … were discussed.)
  - purpose statements (eg. It is now appropriate to consolidate these ideas and to examine …)
  - expressing the writer’s viewpoint
    (eg. Gee’s (2000) theoretical frame is a most useful tool for critique in this instance.)
- Presentation of data (tables, graphs, text ‘chunks’, matrices, maps, concept maps, quotations from participants, and so on).

Writing as Analysis
As indicated in the introduction, writing is also a key aspect of the analysis processes within the pursuit of a research degree. To write is to think is to analyse. Good writing is precise, concise
and logical. It takes time to create all three – Winston Churchill is famous for various things including his statement indicating an inverse relationship between quantity of words and time for preparation.

Final Drafts
When you get to the final draft … it is NOT over. Contrary to urban myths that abound among doctoral students, it is very rare to find a first ‘final’ draft that is ready for submission without much work. The final editing phase is frequently under-estimated. Full time students often need two to three months for this period unless there is some major rewriting to do – in which case the time requirement will be increased. Checking all quotations, all data and all references for accuracy and consistency is vital. Reading the content carefully for an integrated critical argument, supported well by convincing evidence is essential. Putting the work aside for a little while might help in coming back to the content. If you have a critical friend who can read this for you and is not familiar with the content, you could gain some useful feedback about clarity, links between parts, and strength of argument, as well as interest level. Sorting out the surface features of the writing is a must - examiners are not inclined to look favourably at poorly presented work no matter how interesting the content might be. The methodological aspect of the thesis must also be strong. Consider how well this is discussed in terms of detail but also the relationship to the key question. Check out current literature. You will need to do some more literature searches just to check that you have not omitted something pertinent and new. Allow time for these important final steps and treat this phase of the research journey seriously for it can mean the difference between a first rate piece of work and a poor second.

Your magnum opus is the result of many months’ work, and considerable perspiration, frustration, and, we hope, some inspiration. The satisfaction of achievement is large for every student when the writing is eventually done. By starting to write early, and keeping on writing throughout the process, you can minimise the pain, and maximise the endorphins.