

Graduate Writing

Writing, thinking and talking are related, iterative processes. Give yourself time and space for all three. They can help you **clarify and develop your ideas**, think of **creative insights** and get **feedback**.

Expect the writing to go smoothly sometimes, and badly or not at all at other times. This inconsistency is normal; don't let it discourage you, but if you are stuck, get help from your supervisor, supportive colleagues or a writing consultant at SASS. You may also like to review our resource on [how to write more](#).

Academic writing isn't linear. It involves an uneven, iterative process of becoming curious about a research question, talking about it with friends or colleagues, researching to learn more, writing to develop more questions and insights, researching more, thinking more, talking more, and writing more.

Organizing and managing your graduate work

Researching and writing a dissertation is a large, complex project to manage. In the years you spend on it, you must manage time, resources, data, and yourself—often with little structure or accountability—and maintain working relationships with others on whom you depend.

This process usually involves:

- setting short-term and long-term goals with deadlines
- monitoring your progress, and adjusting goals, resources, etc. as needed
- anticipating setbacks
- delegating appropriate tasks, if it's possible and a good use of time
- communicating effectively and regularly with your supervisor and others.

Your research and thesis or dissertation might be the first time you have managed a project of this scale and of such a high level of personal and professional importance—and you might feel unprepared. Many graduate students book [learning and writing appointments](#) at SASS to help themselves manage their work effectively. In addition, you may like to review these resources:

Tools and resources for planning your research and writing

- Use our [Thesis Manager](#) to plan your dissertation or thesis.
- Consider [requesting or attending a SASS workshop](#) on writing a research proposal, literature review, or other aspects of graduate-level academic writing.
- Some recommendations of thesis-related books and other resources from [the Thesis Whisperer](#).
- Joan Bolker's book, [Writing Your Dissertation in Fifteen Minutes a Day](#) (New York: Henry Holt, 1998) offers excellent practical advice about writing goals, protecting your writing time, breaking down large tasks into small ones, and more.

- [The Craft of Research](#) by Wayne C. Booth and Joseph M. Williams (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003) is aimed at new and experienced researchers, and addresses the process of research and writing.
- Here is [an outline of the process of writing a conference, thesis or dissertation proposal](#) from Pennsylvania State Graduate Writing Center (accessed April 2018).
- Queen's [data management resources](#).
- Queen's [thesis formatting suggestions](#).
- Queen's [citing and citation managers](#).
- Here is [a detailed comparison chart of reference management software](#) (University of Toronto).
- Consider using software such as [the free generic Gantt chart](#) to help outline tasks and required resources, set deadlines, and monitor progress.
- See [these slides](#) (accessed April 2018) for suggestions on keeping all phases of research organized, especially in computing science. Note: not all software suggestions may be available or optimal.

Managing obstacles to writing

In addition to the complex, demanding nature of writing itself, writers also face a variety of obstacles to giving it their full attention. Some common ones for graduate students include:

- time and effort required to support relationships with family and friends
- demands of paid work, other involvements
- need to build professional portfolio (papers, conferences, committees, etc.)
- distractions (noise, social media, etc.)
- technical issues (computer meltdown, etc.)
- physical state (hunger, fatigue, illness, etc.)
- distracting thoughts or feelings, etc.

Some of these “obstacles” are actually important, enjoyable aspects of a whole life, sustain students through challenging times, or contribute to professional or personal wellbeing and development; other obstacles distract from the writing process without offering anything positive in return. In either case, it's helpful to manage these obstacles, finding a balance that will help you protect your writing time. Here are some strategies you might try:

- Do what you can to **manage family and social commitments**. For example:
 - Recruit the support of your friends and family—ask them to help you by respecting your work time and by reminding you to take breaks sometimes.
 - Schedule time with family and friends, and keep your commitments. Tell your friends and family that you can be available to them during certain hours, but will be unavailable (except for emergencies) during other hours of the day.
 - Anticipate important upcoming events; be prepared to alter your routine. Include unscheduled time in your week for flexibility.
- **Determine how much time you have available for teaching or professional activities** and develop a routine that adds those things to your day without sacrificing your writing or research time. Set boundaries; there are only 168 hours in a week.

- **Manage your technology.**
 - Mute your cellphone during working hours.
 - Set rules about when or where or how you can use the internet.
 - Use internet blocking software to put a hold on social network sites during working hours.
 - Separate your academic work from your personal life by using two browsers.
 - Ensure your work is regularly backed up.
- **Create or find a comfortable writing space** that offers minimal distractions and includes all the things you need (reference materials, computer, paper, pens / pencils, etc.).
- **Pay attention to when you're working well.** Do you focus best with some background noise, or in total quiet? In the early morning, or later in the day? Work with your preferences.
- **Identify your biggest time-wasters** or distractions and have a realistic plan to deal with them. Prioritize the demands on your time, for example by using [Covey's time management matrix](#).
- **Recognize your personal signs of distress or disengagement.** Writing, research and data analysis can be isolating and lonely. Many graduate students doubt their skills and the value of their work at this stage. Speak with someone—a counsellor, your supervisor, a friend—for encouragement or advice.
- **Make a plan** for things you don't have control over, including illness, family issues, unexpected requests from your supervisor, etc. For example, can you schedule some weekly time that has no tasks assigned to it, just in case? Is some of your work portable, in case you need to travel or work away from your home or office?

When writers get stuck: Getting back on track

Feeling stuck? Most graduate students face times in their work that feel unproductive. These times may indeed be unproductive, but they can also be a sign of the invisible work of scholarship, such as creative or analytical thinking. Know yourself well enough to tell the difference, but consider that graduate students are often unnecessarily and undeservedly self-critical, resulting in a negative emotional state that can interfere with progress.

Challenges to staying on track

Many factors can contribute to a feeling of being stuck:

- **Competing demands and roles that take time away from writing and research.** Graduate students are not just students in demanding programs; they are also family members, caregivers, employees, friends, members of research or professional groups, teachers, practicum supervisors or TAs or lab assistants, emerging professionals giving conference presentations and writing papers, community volunteers, and more.
- **Negative emotional states about oneself or the work,** such as isolation, disinterest, frustration, lack of confidence, incapacitating self-doubt, feelings of unworthiness, etc.
- **Unclear direction** or uncertainty about next steps.
- **Incomplete understanding** of the material.
- An **unhelpful writing process.**

Strategies for getting back on track

Set reasonable expectations of yourself

- **Understand the expectations** of your program and supervisor, and the terms of teaching employment, so that you can make good choices regarding your time and activities.
- **Assess your personal standards** of the quality and quantity of your work, and adjust your efforts accordingly. If you expect more from yourself than you do from others, consider the impact of this attitude on your work and your wellbeing.
- If you are **unsure** whether you are meeting the **academic standards** for your research area and graduate degree, compare your work to published theses or dissertations in your field, and ask your supervisor for specific feedback on the quality of both your work and your writing. The [writing consultants at SASS](#) can help too.
- **Set short- and long-term goals** based on what you wish to **accomplish** and what you wish to **experience**. These goals could include academic and personal goals.
- **Identify small concrete actions** that will help you meet your goals or overcome barriers to your goals.
- **Assess the demands** on your time to create realistic expectations of what you can accomplish. Mental fatigue interferes with productive thinking and writing, and quiet time enables creative problem-solving. Breaks from work are healthy and productive!
- **Be kind to yourself.**
- Consider this very practical **set of suggestions** [from the University of Melbourne](#) for graduate students who are trying to meet the requirement of “originality” in their work; these suggestions are also helpful for those struggling with academic impostor syndrome, those having difficulty seeing the value of their work or identifying the heart of a thesis, and those who don’t feel clear about academic expectations.

Give yourself some structure

- **Make a [weekly schedule](#)** based on 1-hour blocks if you have multiple daily commitments, or 3-hour blocks if you have a lot of unstructured time.
- **Learn [how to write more](#).**
- Do the hardest work during your peak concentration time; leave other tasks for less alert times.

Practice self-care

- Use [campus resources](#) to **maintain your emotional, mental and physical health**. Talk to someone about your situation, feelings and possible course of action. Distress will have a negative effect on your ability to write and think creatively.
- Support your **health** by giving yourself 7-8 hours of sleep each night, regular nutritious meals, exercise, and time for relaxation and fun. You are a “human being,” not a “human doing”!

Get some perspective

Consider where you are in your writing, so you can respond appropriately to get back on track.

- Review your past work to re-orient yourself to your original research question or revised focus. Ask a question to direct your thinking.



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- Re-establish your work routine OR take a day or two off to refresh yourself.
- Talk to a colleague to get a different point of view on your work.
- Accept discomfort as temporary, knowing it will pass.

Let stuckness motivate you to persist

Students often hit what seem like stumbling blocks in the research-learn-write cycle, where they feel as though they can't progress because they don't yet understand something, or aren't sure what they want to say, or how to say it, or how it fits in with their broad structure. These *threshold points* are uncomfortable, but often a good sign of an imminent breakthrough. Don't give up!



Engaging in an effective writing process (**talking, thinking, writing**) will help you deepen your understanding and resolve methodological or conceptual issues. [Booking a writing appointment](#) or talking to your supervisor or other colleagues can be very helpful in this process.

Try keeping a journal or file of your thoughts. At the end of a work period of reading, data analysis or writing, articulate a question or a statement that reflects something you are unsure of or wish to think more about, and write this in a journal or file. Then stop work for the time being.

As you go about the rest of your day or night, your mind will unconsciously process this topic. When you return to work, come back to what the problem, and write down your current thoughts about it.

This file will be an ongoing description of the development of your thinking on a topic, which you can use to remind yourself of your path, direction and growth, and as a focus of discussion with your supervisor or a research or writing group.

Improve your current knowledge base

If you are stalled in your writing because you lack understanding of part of your subject matter:

1. Use a mind map to outline material on your topic, to create a hierarchy of information or concepts based on key topics, sub-topics, sub-sub-topics, etc. Think of the map as being like a table of contents, rather than a detailed summary.

2. Based on the mind map, identify gaps in your knowledge or research, and decide which gaps ought to be filled and which gaps might not matter for this particular project.
3. Make practical decisions about the scope of your project, and identify any additional learning that you need to do. It can be very helpful to discuss your choices with your supervisor or experienced colleagues at this point.
4. Develop your understanding of key material, as you need to. Speak to your supervisor for direction if you need it.

Re-engage with your work or writing

- Consider the context of your dissertation within your life and career. Completing a thesis or dissertation is a very big event, but it is also a beginning, not the culminating event of your life. Your entire body of knowledge does not need to be included. Set limits on the scope and completion time.
- [Boost your motivation and reduce your procrastination.](#)
- Use the online [accountability group at phinished.org](http://www.phinished.org).
- Book a [learning strategies appointment](#) for support.