

On a summer's writing up...

Summer comes like a deep sigh of relief. Suddenly all the undergraduates evaporate and the University is empty for months. There is a pause in the annual pulse of this part of Sheffield. No more lunchtime queues for the cash machines. No more stumbling down the corridors, passed sedentary masses waiting for their tutorials / computers / lecturers. The University is actually quite nice without the vast majority of the students, although it makes me feel like a miserable old git to say so.

And the few of us left, shell-shocked now, huddle in offices and labs trying to get the work done that we've fallen behind with during the term. Fortunately it rains in Sheffield for most of the summer, so there isn't the distraction of good weather to lure us outside to the parks and beer gardens.

Instead I'm keeping myself busy with my new twin hobbies of avoiding writing my thesis and with harbouring a grinding resentment of people who started at the same time as me and have already submitted. How do they do it? In a startling innovation in procrastination, I've been collecting advice on how to get your thesis written up (I think I'll call it 'meta-procrastination!').

Ultimately the only way to write to your thesis is to actually write your thesis. Like Martin Amis said "the art of writing is the art of applying the seat of your trousers to your chair". If you can't think of how to start, start writing the second paragraph instead of the first, or start in the middle, or start with whatever you are thinking of at the moment you start (that's probably the most natural place, there'll be a reason you're thinking about that thing). If you can't think of a good way to put something, just put it badly and worry about it later. The most important thing is to put something down. Thankfully, when you force yourself it can be quite rewarding, even enjoyable. And this positive experience reinforces the behaviour, dispelling the fears that you've allowed to build up and makes overcoming the block easier next

time. And ideally next time should be soon. Waiting for some mythical point when you'll be free of distractions is no good. It's much better to claim a realistically short period of time everyday. I've set aside the best part of my day - the morning - for writing. I turn off my email and phone and close the door. If you are aware of the effect the environment has on you then you can take steps to control your work environment so that these effects are positive. Psychologists tell insomniacs that they shouldn't work and sleep in the same room, because it sets up associations of work tensions when you are trying to sleep, and the same principles apply for the other way round for work. Try and have a space, somewhere, where you only work. If you can't manage a physical space, try and have a location in time in which you fully concentrate on work. Remove things that you associate with other worlds you inhabit. In my case I turn off all the clocks because they remind me too much of when I'm going to finish working and do something else!

A suggestion I've found works really well is to have a 'sabotage sheet' within reach. Whenever I have an idea, like 'I really must email so-and-so' or 'I must remember to look up this-or-that on the internet' I don't actually start doing that thing, but instead write down the idea on the sheet. The act of writing it down means that I know I won't forget it, but it only takes a second so I don't get distracted by actually doing the thing now.

Supervisors are of varying amounts of help when writing the thesis. Some will be too polite to offer substantive criticism of what you've written, but others (like mine) are a rich source of knowledge about the craft of writing in an academic manner. Try and glean as much advice as you can from your supervisor, they are a professional at this sort of thing (or at least should be!). Perhaps the most useful function of your supervisor is to provide a focus for the production of segments of your work. If

your supervisor doesn't tell you when they expect to see a chapter from you, tell them! Make the deadline explicit between the two of you, to introduce an external structure to your writing up schedule. One of the hardest things about being a postgraduate is the lack of external structure and definite demands upon yourself. Deadlines can encourage the discipline that is sometimes hard to encourage in yourself on your own.

And of course the other important side of writing your thesis is the time when you are not writing your thesis. Although it is important that you don't so physically and emotionally abuse yourself during your time off that you can't do any useful work, it is also important that you have plenty of time off to recharge your batteries. Beyond a wholesome discipline, be gentle with yourself. If you're going to work - work, but don't feel guilty when you aren't working, it'll just mean you can't properly relax and refresh yourself for the next scheduled work point.

Of course different people work in different ways. These points are just advice I've collected along the way and you might find useful. The most important thing is to find out what works for you and to keep faith. Although it can seem an insurmountable obstacle, like Confucius didn't say, "a thesis of a thousand pages begins with a single word". Others have done it before, and you can do it!

And soon enough, like the start of the dawn chorus, the first undergraduates begin to appear back on the streets and in the University buildings. The summer's almost gone, the first semester of the new academic year is tuning up. Here we go, take a deep breath....

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