

Introduction

Welcome to *Managing Your Thesis or Dissertation*! This workbook will help you organize your thoughts, research, and writing so that you can create the best thesis—which we all know is a *finished* thesis. While this book is intended for graduate students working on their thesis, project, or dissertation, you can use it for any writing project. Grant applications, statements of research intent, and proposals can all be written more efficiently and effectively using the tools in this workbook.

I've used these methods with graduate students I've worked with at the university where I work and I've used them myself. As a PhD student I needed to be organized for a variety of reasons. For the first half of my PhD, I was a single parent. My mornings and evenings were jam-packed with parenting, but my days were scarily free. For the second half of my PhD, I was a mom of one and step-mom of four while working full time. Both scenarios required planning and self-discipline. While graduate students who are as busy as I was in the second half of my studies may feel little pity for those with empty hours during the day, those who have empty hours can crave structure and human interaction. Without such structure you can find yourself scheduling naps and justifying to yourself why you get an hour off to watch *Oprah*.

This workbook was also developed from what I watch graduate students go through. In my role as coordinator of the Writing Centre at the University of Victoria, I've worked with many graduate students who are overwhelmed with the process of writing such a large and complex document. Those who come through the writing centre complain of unhelpful supervisors, conflicting feedback from committee members, a hectic schedule, pressure to produce published articles and present at conferences, a lack of departmental writing support, and a whole host of other things. This doesn't mean that graduate students are complainers; it means that they are busy people being asked to do a number of things, including researching articles, reading them, writing about them, planning their own research based on their understanding of them, and then writing about this research. A graduate student's life is, indeed, very full, and even fuller if you have children, a spouse, a job, health issues, and/or other commitments. Add to this list the need for exercise, sleep, a balanced diet, and a steady job once that thesis is finished, and you're likely as stressed out as I was as a graduate student and as the graduate students I work with.

Some would argue that stress is a natural part of being a student. In some ways this is true. I don't believe, however, that things should be more stressful than they need to be. Writing a thesis is stressful because you have a tough audience to please and you're probably new to the format and expectations of a thesis. However, the stress of how to get it done doesn't need to eat away at you. By following the principles in this book you can reduce the amount of stress that the thesis creates for you. It's like climbing a mountain: If you focus on the summit—the finished thesis—then it becomes hard to even put one foot in front of the other. If you create a map to help you climb the mountain—which this workbook will help you do—then you can stop paying attention to the summit and start focusing on what you need to do today to get that thesis done.

To create this map, I used eight principles of project management. These are the same eight I introduce to students in workshops and tutorials. Project management is an approach to handling large undertakings such as developing a new computer program or building a house. While it isn't a perfect fit for graduate student work, these eight principles are a good match:

1. Drawing out your ideas and their connection to each other in a concept map,
2. Analyzing the scope of the project,
3. Identifying tasks to be done,
4. Creating the Work Breakdown Structure (WBS),
5. Identifying the critical path,
6. Making a Gantt chart to organize the work,
7. Understanding ownership of the project,
8. Using your resources.

By applying these principles of project management, you will learn to break your writing into a to-do list and a timeline that's not only reasonable but also achievable, regardless of writing ability or family and work commitments. These principles are introduced and complemented by:

- A step-by-step guide for developing a writing plan and timeline,
- A workbook section that invites students to make maps and charts to guide and plan their writing,
- Ideas to help balance the many roles graduate students play in addition to student (parent, research assistant, full-time worker, etc.), including tips for time management,
- Suggestions for overcoming procrastination, perfectionism, and over-identification with one's writing, as well as
- A formula to follow again and again when writing a larger piece of work.

While there are computer programs designed to help you organize all of these principles, unless you plan to use project management software in the future then you are better off learning the principles that apply best to you and focus on your thesis. Learning new software can be interesting and rewarding, but it can also be time consuming and procrastination inducing. My recommendation is that you use this workbook, learn these eight principles, and once your thesis is done, decide whether to pursue your interest in project management. If you are truly interested, then post-thesis is a great time to learn more about it.

To get the most out of this workbook, I recommend using coloured pencils or markers and sticky notes. There are extra pages at the back for future projects or if you want to start an activity over again, so don't hesitate to write, draw, and shade without too much thought. You can always make changes later. While you may feel a bit silly at first—after all, it may have been years since you wrote in a colour other than black or blue—you'll soon find that the activities in this book will in fact help you organize better, feel less stress about writing your thesis, and produce more writing.

I wish you the best of luck with your thesis! Breathe deeply, plan thoroughly, and finish that thesis.



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