

Writing a PhD thesis in 10 minutes per day

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I first became aware of the principles in the writing program in 2008 when I was halfway through my honours thesis. For most of my thesis, I had meticulously prepared all of the research material before attempting to write a “final draft” on the first attempt. At that time I was receiving mentor support on campus at Batemans Bay from Kerryn Hopkins who was one of Brian Martin’s PhD students. During one of our meetings I said to Kerryn that I had begun writing a chapter without my usual preparation. “This is what I have been discussing with Brian”, she explained to me – “Write before you’re ready”.

In the frantic final stages of an honours year, this was a liberating moment. I had accidentally moved towards a practice that Brian had begun sharing with his research students and other academics at Wollongong University. The writing program, as it was called, encourages students to write just a little bit every day to get into the habit of producing even small amounts on a daily basis. What seemed like a very difficult deadline at the time in relation to my honours thesis suddenly seemed a lot easier. I was able to write 1000 words or so a day which meant that a draft chapter was completed in under a week, to be reviewed and formalised for a final draft the following week.

Following the successful completion of my honours thesis I approached Brian to see if he would supervise my PhD project. Of the many reasons I asked Brian, one of the most important was that he had an excellent record of helping students to complete their theses. After spending four years under his supervision leading to an “on-time” thesis submission I can see why he has this record. I recall our first meeting at the beginning of my PhD candidature where he explained the writing program in detail. Perhaps because I stumbled upon the basic premise, “write before you’re ready”, during my honours year, I felt very comfortable committing to it and I will outline my experiences during my three and a half year PhD candidature in a little more detail in the hope that others may also benefit from participating in the program.

Firstly, you don’t have to write a lot. My average daily writing was around 130 words per day taking around ten minutes. This might require some preparation beforehand, maybe an hour at the most. One caveat – the program recommends you write every day – I did not write on weekends. Five days per week for 52 weeks of the year meant that 260 writing days produced 33,800 words which equates to more than one third of my PhD. Bearing in mind that the daily writing took 10 minutes to complete with an hour’s preparation, this left a great deal of time in the remainder of the working day for further research, reflection, planning journal articles, conference papers and editing previous work. After writing one chapter using this method, the process of completing my PhD within the allotted 3.5-year timeframe involved a fairly straightforward routine of writing one chapter whilst editing and revising the previous chapter.

The main benefit of writing every day or in my case, writing five days per week, was that I was always confident that I would achieve the writing output required for a PhD thesis, even if I put in the minimum amount of work for one day. Even when I went through stages of being uninterested in my work or preoccupied with other aspects of my life, I could always commit to at least ten minutes of writing.

At one stage of the candidature I had a personal crisis and in a meeting with Brian I said that I could not even commit to ten minutes per day. His advice to me was to ignore the thesis and spend 10 minutes per day writing about the crisis. This technique was very effective and profoundly important in two ways. Firstly, writing about my personal difficulties hastened the healing process and secondly, my writing habits continued and I was able return to my thesis work much sooner than I expected. Although I was originally considering taking a 6 month leave of absence, the end result was a two week absence from my thesis writing.

Submitting totals is important. It was a commitment that ensured I kept writing and also gave me a measure of progress in mathematical terms. Meeting weekly with the writing group in Batemans Bay was another commitment that facilitated ongoing writing. A quick reference list below reflects my experiences and overall thoughts about participating in the writing program.

1. Write every day – anything!! Even if you think you cannot face your topic.
2. For a big project, commencing is difficult. Using Brian's material I began by writing a letter to a friend about everything I knew on the topic and what I hoped to focus on over the next 3.5 years in undertaking this study. This helped me get started.
3. Submit totals to Brian – regularly.
4. Participate in meetings weekly – if possible.
5. Don't write too much and don't worry about quality. Somewhere between one and two hundred words is enough.
6. When you are at your lowest point in motivation, write something. Even 100 words should take less than ten minutes.
7. If personal issues arise that make it impossible to concentrate or care about study, write about these issues.
8. Writing every day for 10 minutes is a surprisingly small commitment
9. Write about other things using the same principles – small amounts but consistent efforts.
10. Other writing tasks that are much smaller than PhD theses suddenly become much easier – e.g. job applications, speeches, lectures, presentations, conference papers, journal articles.
11. When you know a subject, 15 words per minute is a very realistic target.
12. Just write.

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