

## **On Thesis Writing**

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### **How much should the supervisor be involved in thesis writing?**

Prof. Mimi Zou from the Faculty of Law pointed out that, “doing a PhD is a process of self-learning and the role of the supervisor is to facilitate that.” Prof. Sophia Jeong from the Business School emphasized that the supervisor is a “doorkeeper, who opens the door to academia.” Prof. Helen Zhao from the Faculty of Arts suggested that when writing the thesis, integrating the theory is especially difficult, and this demands the supervisor’s special attention: “[My supervisor] kept an eye on the theoretical part for me, which was very helpful because that was what I had most trouble with. I can see that my students also struggle with the theoretical discussions. With regards to research methodology, once you explain to them what sort of information is required, then it is easier for them to write this section, but for the theoretical part, they always feel a little insecure. Sometimes, I have to keep a special eye when students prepare for this section in order to make sure that information that needs to be included is there and is clearly explained.”

### **What is the process of thesis writing like?**

Over half of the interviewed supervisors revealed that they had a difficult time when writing their thesis. Prof. Sophia Jeong recalled the time when she had serious doubts about what she was writing, and that for a while she even wondered if she had chosen the wrong path in pursuing a PhD. “At some point you will hate yourself”, she said. Prof. Ehsan Bolandifar from the Business School agreed, “Everyone has to go through this pain because the learning process is not that simple.”

### **What is the secret to writing a good thesis?**

The interviewed faculty all agreed that there is no universal golden rule for writing a good thesis, except to keep practicing. Prof. Ehsan Bolandifar proclaimed that, “Writing is very challenging. No one knows it when they begin, but it’s just a matter of experience and the only way to get experience is to write, write and write, revise, revise and revise. That’s it. There are no shortcuts. You can only learn to write by doing it again, again and again.” Similarly, many of the supervisors revealed that during their PhD days, they might prepare over twenty drafts before their thesis was ready for submission.

Unfortunately, writing is not a skill that can be achieved overnight. It is largely a tediously recursive process, which demands a wearying amount of effort and a significant commitment of time, as revealed by Prof. Mimi Zou, “Writing, editing, writing, editing, until you get something that it is sort of okay. Many, many drafts - that would be my approach.” Dozens of turnarounds between the supervisor and the student seems to be the normal practice, and eventually, as Prof. Hualing Zeng from the Faculty of Science concluded, “The final paper should look completely different from the first draft.”

### **How to develop the habits of academic writers?**

When it comes to writing, simply remembering the rule of thumb to keep practicing is admittedly inadequate. The interviewed research supervisors offered a variety of techniques that they either adopt themselves or that they instruct their students to do when writing their thesis.

Several professors emphasized trying to develop a habit of daily writing. Prof. Chin Ming Hui from the Faculty of Social Science considered it a very good way to overcome procrastination: “If you can keep writing for say half an hour every day, then when it comes to writing your thesis, you will be more efficient. On many occasions, problems arise when you suddenly have to produce 8,000 words in one week. That feels very tough. If you tell yourself that you can write a little every day, then this will be less stressful in the long run. And when you develop this habit, you may not feel as miserable as before.” Prof. Hui also said that exactly what to write is up to the student – whether it is writing a manuscript, or preparing a life reflection, or creating anything on a coherent theme; the point is “just to write” and try to make it part of daily routine. Similarly, Prof. Sophia Jeong suggested trying something that was recommended by her supervisor to tackle writer’s block: “Set a timer for fifteen minutes and then start writing. You just need to write for fifteen minutes.” She emphasized that it was the continual practice that mattered most, which led to the final target of being able to write without stress.

### **How to organize the writing?**

Prof. Dahua Lin from the Faculty of Engineering revealed a common issue in relation to academic writing: “When I read the student’s work, I have a feeling that I cannot follow him after the first two pages. He failed to maintain a logical flow. When a professor writes, he always has the whole picture in mind, so that he will not deviate when describing his ideas.” Prof. Lin considered that a combination of coherence and precision defines academic writing, when he said that ideally, “every sentence should serve for the ultimate purpose.” To achieve this goal, Prof. Mimi Zou recommended using a mind map as a visual tool “to see where your ideas are going and draw links between your ideas,” so that the student remains consciously aware of

the development of his/her thoughts when writing.

### **What are the available resources to enhance writing?**

Even though writing is essentially a lonely occupation, there is a community of academic writers to whom the inexperienced can turn. Prof. Ehsan Bolandifar encourages his students to learn from accomplished academic authors. He believes that the existing literature provides some very useful instructions for students on how to write. The students should be able to identify authors in their field who are famous for their writing and “see how they try to cook everything together, to put everything in place”. He advised, “Not just to read this literature as a way of understanding the problem, but also as a way of understanding the writing - how an author communicates the story.”

### **Would professional editing help or not?**

Professional editing is a thought to be a useful service for some, but in terms of how it may benefit the students, attitudes differ among the interviewed supervisors. While faculty from the Sciences tend to be more cautious about recommending professional editing, which they fear may hamper independence, the faculty from Humanities, Social Science, and Business are more in favor of such a service. Prof. Sophia Jeong considers that professional editing is not in fact writing, as it “does not really touch the ideas” and “it is purely superficial”. In addition, Prof. Helen Zhao suggested that it would be good to have the thesis read by someone other than the supervisor, as the latter is too familiar with the content and usually only has time to quickly look through it. A professional editor does not only “offer language help”, but also provides an outsider’s perspective to see if the writing “makes good sense to an educated reader.” As far as Prof. Zhao is concerned, this constitutes a crucial component in the preparation of a quality thesis.