

Thesis writing tips for trainees: first steps

1. Collect information

- Familiarize yourself with the instructions provided by your graduate school and by your faculty/department. These describe the requirements that you must follow for the general structure, specific sections, length and formatting.
- The information for U of T SGS can be found here:
https://www.sgs.utoronto.ca/academic-progress/program-completion/formatting/#section_1
- Review a few recent theses written at your grad school or from within your department. You can ask your supervisor to give you examples of strong theses written by his/her previous students or find these online (at U of T, most of these are available through T-space).
- Collect your committee reports, and papers written by you and by your group. These are valuable resources.

2. Plan

Writing a thesis is a daunting undertaking, so take some time to think about it and understand the details of the task. Make a practical plan. This is important, but don't "over-plan". Your plan should be somewhat flexible, as it will evolve as you progress. Decide practical questions including where, when and how you will write.

WHERE?

- Create a workspace that is comfortable, practical and minimizes distractions. You will be spending lots of time in front of your computer, so make sure to create a healthy, comfortable and ergonomic writing space. Sitting on a couch with your laptop may work short term but will not be a good option for the entire thesis writing process. An added benefit of a designated spot is that every time you sit down at that workspace, your brain will get the signal that it is thesis writing time. For details on a good ergonomic computer workstation refer to the following link: <https://ehs.utoronto.ca/office-ergonomics-infographic/>

WHEN?

- Are you a morning or an evening person? Do you prefer to write continuously for hours with minimal breaks, or would rather take regular breaks? Would you like to work on the thesis every day or have off days? Whatever your preferences are, create a daily and weekly routine and adhere to these. Your daily routine should include a strict start time, regular breaks including meals, exercise and shorter breaks for stretching. Minimize disruptions. Have breaks at set intervals. Avoid frequent visits to the fridge to see if there is something new to eat. Check your messages only at certain times. On the other hand,

remember that there will be days when your progress will be slower. Don't be too hard on yourself if this happens from time to time. After a few days, re-evaluate your plan and make changes as needed.

- Procrastination is the biggest enemy of writing. The truth is that most people will rarely feel like sitting down to write. Most trainees have to actively force themselves to get started. You should not wait for the "I'd love to work on my thesis" mood. A regular routine can be very helpful for getting started. Having short-term goals and fast initial accomplishments will make you feel that you are progressing, which in turn can help you fight the urge to procrastinate.
- Set a realistic timeline and adhere to it. Initially, it is hard to assess how long each task will take. Therefore, you will need to re-assess your timeline based on what you learned about each task. Talk to others who have recently written their thesis for their thoughts on a realistic timeline.

HOW?

- The task that is in front of you can seem daunting. Many trainees say that they just don't know where to start. Indeed, a major cause of delay is that people feel overwhelmed by the challenge and have little confidence in their own ability to accomplish the task. A good strategy to overcome these common feelings is to generate a plan that breaks down the tasks into smaller, graspable pieces. This will create a very practical to-do list and enhance your feeling of being in control. Once you have started, you will gain confidence in your ability to accomplish the tasks. So, the key is to have a plan and just to get started and gain as much control over the job as possible.
- Define the specific stages and subtasks. Don't worry if your initial list is incomplete, you can always extend it. The major tasks will include literature search to identify relevant papers, reading of research papers, generating figures, writing specific sections, inserting citations, etc. The different sections do not have to be written in order. Decide what the best order would be for you to tackle these specific tasks (see section 4 for more on this). Ask for help as needed. Next, further break down the larger task into smaller pieces, until you reach very specific doable steps. Finally, you should get input for your plan from others with thesis writing experience and your supervisor.

3. Define the key message of the thesis

The first important task is to define what the key questions and the central message of your study is. Hopefully, you have already done this during your committee meetings and presentations. This is an important early step, because it will direct the focus of all other chapters. The section that describes your questions and aims is a central part of your thesis.

It is very helpful to write this section first by answering the following:

- What is the central research question your work is addressing?
- What is the rationale for your study
- What was the hypothesis (if any)?

-What were your specific aims?

These should be summarized in concise, very specific statements. The initial draft of this section will help you write the other sections, but keep in mind that you will likely need to revisit this section and refine it before finalizing the thesis. In addition, it is also helpful to write a paragraph on the key findings, conclusion and message, which will form the core of your summary and the final chapter.

4. Define the structure, sections and order of writing

The structure of your thesis will depend on your department's instructions, determined by your discipline and the type of research you did. Follow the guidelines of your department.

The key sections of most theses include an abstract, a general introduction containing a literature review, a description of the research questions and aims (and rationale), materials and methods, results, conclusions and discussion.

Make an outline of the content of each section. You can one-by-one, as you move to the specific section, but some people prefer to make an outline for all sections at the beginning.

Get input from your supervisor. Keep in mind, as you proceed this outline will likely evolve and become more detailed over time.

The order of writing is important. Do not be afraid to write the sections out of order, as some sections are easier than others. The abstract is the last section to write.