

GET YOURSELF TO WRITE!

To get started, I'd like you to answer some questions first. And before you even begin to think about what I might want to hear, what you need to say so you won't destroy your image as a perfect scholar or anything in that line... this is all about you! I'm not here to mark your papers, to write a reference for you, to decide whether or not to employ you in the future. I'm here to help you with that huge task that writing a thesis is; and don't worry, I'm not going to ask you to hand in your answers. So please be honest with yourself – if you don't know where you're standing, how orientate yourself towards your goal?

What made you come here today?

What exactly is it that you hope we can help you with?

Why did you decide to write that thesis you're here about in the first place?

Have your intentions changed since you started?

Since when have you been working on your thesis?

Have you started to write yet? If so, when? How much have you written so far?

If not, what has kept you from starting to write?

WHY WRITE (NOW)?

- ◆ Less time pressure during final stage of your thesis
- ◆ Writing and thinking are interlinked: by writing down your thoughts, you force yourself to become clear about what you have to say.
- ◆ What is put down in writing will not be forgotten or lost (but can still be changed).
- ◆ Whatever you have written down can be reviewed, both by yourself and by peers/friends; flaws or mistakes will become more apparent that way and can be corrected in time – and "failures" like these actually better your work.
- ◆ By realising you can start writing before you are finished with thinking, research etc, (i.e. whatever you write down now doesn't have to be the final version yet), you free your mind of restraints unnecessary and unhelpful; that way new ideas may form.
- ◆ Writing like this is actually quite enjoyable: just try things out; if they don't seem to work, try something else.

HOW GET YOURSELF TO WRITE?

- ◆ Be realistic and honest with yourself: what is your aim in writing your thesis? Is it just the doctorate title you're after – or would you like to become another Einstein? You have to know what you want to determine what you need to do...
- ◆ You don't *have* to do anything – you write your thesis and do your work because you prefer this to some other state or consequence, it's your choice! Realising this helps enormously, both with motivation and against fear.
- ◆ Find people that are in a similar situation, whom you can talk to about what you're doing and how you're doing, what's going on and what's going wrong... It is essential to realise you are not the only one struggling and suffering!
- ◆ Find out what works for you: What surroundings do you need? At what time of day does your mind work best? When do you need a break? When do you need to eat, or get some fresh air?
- ◆ Don't try to cram too much into your days – if you spend more than five or six hours at your computer, chances are the outcome isn't that good after all! Go for quality rather than quantity.
- ◆ To survive writing a doctoral thesis in good health, you need to have enough time for sports, proper food and a social life anyway! (Or would you rather become ill just when you simply don't have the time, or even end up in a psychiatric ward?)
- ◆ *No man is an island...* Do ask for help and support whenever you need it!

- ◆ Don't forget: your brain needs a whole day (i.e. 24 hours *in a row!*) of rest every single week.
- ◆ And it keeps working while you're asleep, so keep a note-pad and pen next to your bed; you will be surprised how often you will wake up in the mornings with brilliant ideas coming out of nowhere...
- ◆ Your brain is much smarter than you think anyway, it will come up with even more brilliant ideas whenever you expect them the least (e.g. when you're at the cinema, waiting at some traffic lights, or even making love... but better not tell that to your partner, they won't like it!). So keep pen and paper handy all the time.

- ◆ Get to know your word-processing programme first, be it *Word*, *Open Office/NeoOffice*, *LaTeX*¹ or something else. This is really important: by making use of the options and possibilities it offers, you will save a lot of time (and nerves) later. So do put some effort into getting to know it properly *now*, don't put it off pretending you don't have the time! You definitely won't have it later, when you'll just wish you'd listened to me back then...
- ◆ If you haven't got them already, get hold of a good dictionary that tells you not only the meaning of a word but also how to use it properly² (yes, even if English *is* your first language, you can't do without), and a good book on English grammar – and learn how to use both of them!

- ◆ Know your audience: who will actually read your paper? Because writing is about being read, you know...
- ◆ You *need* to know any rules and regulations that apply to your thesis – seriously, even if you do not like reading and understanding stuff like that (and nobody does!). If necessary, get help: from your supervisor, the *Fachschaft*, the *Brücke*...
- ◆ Know about methods, standards and conventions in your field of research.

- ◆ Think about the structure of your thesis first: What is the backbone? What is the order of things as you understand them now? This needs to be reflected in the general outline of your thesis. And because of that, the outline will change with your growing understanding. (So see above: get to know your word-processing programme! It will enable you to alter your text accordingly without much effort.)³ Always keep your thesis outline up to date with your findings.
- ◆ This general outline is your job description as well, the programme of what you will need to do. Keep an up-to-date print-out copy visible whenever you're working on your thesis; it helps remind you of what you're doing and why exactly.

1 Yes, I *do* know this is actually not a word-processing programme...

2 Your choice depending on whether you apply American or British usage – just make sure you stick to one of them.

3 See (or rather hear...) talk on *structure and lay-out* on Nov. 26th.

- ◆ Be realistic about your timing schedule – but be aware that any given task tends to need the amount of time you allocate for it. So if you are over-generous with your schedule, you will need the scheduled time, just because of that. Try cutting down on timing; you might realise that helps you get rid of a perfectionism that kept you from working before.
- ◆ Trying to be perfect is the best way not to be good anyway! Aim lower, so you can jump higher.
- ◆ Concerning your data storage, there are three basic rules: 1. save, 2. save, 3. save. And make sure you keep your storage devices in different places – even if the university burns down or your house gets burgled, you won't want to lose more than, say, a week's work.

- ◆ Write simply – as you would when trying to explain things in talking. Science and research are *not* about putting things in complicated words, or long and winding sentences; it's all about searching the truth while being open about the methods you're applying.
- ◆ Be as precise as you can. If you can't be precise, ask yourself why: because quite often this hides a flaw in thinking. Or is it that you won't stand up for the thoughts you're trying to put down on paper, i. e. your hard disk? If you consider these thoughts of yours true, then write them down clearly; if not, why write them down at all? Do not hide in complicated wording that is not supposed to be understood! And if you're not sure yet, delve deeper – this is what research is about.
- ◆ Don't be frustrated when what you believed right yesterday turns out to be wrong tomorrow. This is a necessary part of the process; in the end, this is what turns you into a real scholar: being open to new insight.
- ◆ Your supervisor is just that – so go ask for their opinion on what you've done so far on a regular basis. How regular depends on both your situation and theirs; if you're not sure, you might just ask them or their assistants what is considered appropriate. But do not put it off – if you're going the wrong way, you will want to know as soon as possible, so you can get back on track.

**AND, MOST IMPORTANTLY:
ENJOY WHAT YOU'RE DOING!**