

## Thesis-writing for perfectionists

*I think I've got writer's block. I write and rewrite every sentence because I want it to be just right but then this pressure I put on myself is part of what 'blocks' everything and it takes literally ages to finish a chapter. Sometimes I know that feedback would help me to move on but I won't even give a draft to my supervisor until every footnote is exact.*

Sound familiar? Perfectionism, manifesting as writer's block, is a common ailment that afflicts many postgraduate students when writing up their theses. It's not surprising that many postgrads are perfectionists. You need excellent results to be accepted into a postgraduate program and your history of academic success is, in turn, evidence of a desire to do your absolute best. It can be challenging on a number of levels, then, if and when you hit thesis-writing difficulties.

There's no easy way to change habits and mind-sets that you may have spent a lifetime perfecting, but consider the following points:

### ***Your primary objective must be to finish your thesis***

*Of course you want it to be good* but, past a certain point, there are hidden costs in breaching deadlines and possibly overrunning your candidature.

. Every time you extend the deadline for a written task the pressure increases for the finished piece to be ever better, thereby justifying the extra time and effort you have spent on it. Your satisfaction with your writing decreases correspondingly, however, and—hey, presto—you're in a vicious cycle that makes submitting your thesis unrewarding, if not impossible.

**Strategy** Always balance your objective of producing a brilliant thesis with the objective of completing it on time. Become familiar with the 'good-enough' approach:

- it's good enough for now (an early draft);
- it's good enough given my circumstances (acknowledging constraints and competing demands);
- it's good enough for a thesis (recognising that a thesis is not a book and not your final word on the subject).

### ***You may be overestimating what's required in a thesis***

For perfectionist postgrads, a trap that's all too easy to fall into is the one of measuring your writing against the best in the field. Because you spend so much time reading books and journal articles, paying particular attention to the 'big names' and leading innovators in your discipline, you can begin to think that this is the standard; that this is the kind of work you need to produce in your thesis. Think again.

## **Strategy**

Don't make the assumption that what you are writing is the equivalent of a publishable book. A thesis is an assessment tool, used by two examiners to gauge whether the candidate has satisfied the requirements of a research 'apprenticeship'. As such, it's a working document—often, with all the 'working-out' shown—rather than a polished publication. Have a look at some recent successful (passed) theses in your discipline and you'll notice that they don't 'read' as well as journal articles and books. (Australian theses are available online at <http://adt.caul.edu.au/>). Theses have not been professionally edited—and it often shows. Also, the student must establish their credentials by a thorough (and sometimes laborious) review of the existing literature and research. The organisation of material and the flow of the discussion are often less skilfully handled by student writers. But all this is fine—for a thesis.

## ***Your supervisor may be unwittingly complicit with your perfectionism***

Some academics are themselves models of perfectionist angst but even if your supervisor is not, he/she can unwittingly trigger your perfectionism. Does your supervisor always encourage you to take things further, to investigate this point, to expand on that one, to consider X and possibly include Y, even when you thought you had a near-to-finished draft? If this is a pattern, as a perfectionist you may be trying to anticipate and meet in advance all possible recommendations and so you rigorously explore every avenue and detail—sometimes losing sight of the bigger picture and your overall objectives in the process.

## **Strategy**

Offering suggestions, asking questions and brainstorming alternatives may be your supervisor's way of expressing enthusiasm and engaging with the project. It may not mean that the draft needs extensive revision. Always check then—by listening carefully or asking directly—whether your supervisor requires additional work to be undertaken on a piece of writing. If they do, ask for specific directions. Alternatively, ask your supervisor to indicate sections of your draft that do *not* require any revisions

## ***Where to get feedback***

When you are having difficulty with thesis writing, additional sources of feedback are always helpful—remember, if you are struggling with perfectionism, your own judgement may not be the most rational and objective. A Language and Learning Skills adviser can read your work and offer comments and suggestions about structure, argumentation, use of sources and clarity of expression—phone 8344 0930 to make an individual appointment.

Another useful resource is [UMPA's Thesis Writing Guide](#) by Jim Campbell, which is available at UMPA reception and has a host of helpful web links and information.