



Approaches to study for international postgraduate students (by Thesis or Dissertation)

Starting Out

If you are in a position to, take some care in your choice of supervisor/s.

- Are they likely to be at the university for the full term of your candidature?
- Do you get along with them and do they understand what you are aiming at?
- Is it possible to have an adjunct or associate supervisor?

Early issues and plans

- Establish how much help the supervisor is prepared to give you with your written English.
- Try writing a critical review (with your supervisor's permission) of a relevant article, even if you are not asked to do this. Ask the supervisor if there are any models you could look at.
- Inquire if there is the opportunity to co-write papers with your supervisor.
- Develop a reasonable time-frame for the completion of different stages of the thesis.
- Plan ahead for those materials you may require from different libraries.
- Establish whether you need to complete all writing before you leave the country.

Start writing as soon as you get the urge. Do not leave it until you have finished all your experimentation or formed all your opinions. Do not worry too much about the quality of the expression at first: you do not want to leave it until you have a mass of material to make sense of.

Seek help early from the Library's Learning Skills staff. Avoid the situation of finding out just before the thesis is due that your English is letting you down.

Strategies for writing

Whether you are enrolled in coursework or thesis, recognise the fact that there are different types of text or **genre** which you may have to learn to write in the course of your candidature. These include:

- the essay or report
- the research proposal
- the article or scholarly paper
- the different sections of the dissertation itself.

Ask your supervisor or lecturer for good examples of these (and why they're good) and read them. You can also ask your supervisor about how he or she writes.

Depending on where you come from, there may have been rather different expectations about what constitutes scholarly thought and **scholarly writing** in your own country. There are many different regional varieties of English: some expressions you are familiar with using may not be accepted as standard English. If you do not find these expressions in your reading, use them with caution.

Some cultures encourage different patterns of **developing argument**; for example, most Western cultures encourage outlining your argument clearly in the introduction, point by point, or acknowledging your sources very specifically. In some cultures, you may be used to suggesting fairly indirectly the point you are making, *or* stating your opinion too definitively before you have shown the evidence.

If you are in a technological field, you may not have written much in your undergraduate degree. You will have to read and write very consciously – not just for the content.

The following suggestions may be helpful.

- Buy a readable **grammar book** early and keep it on your desk for reference; do not rely on your computer's grammar checker (However, do use of the spell checker – you can customise it so that it stops checking those technical terms that you use over and over)
- Be aware that you are **writing for readers** and make it easy for them.
- Pay particular attention to the **literature review**.
Consciously choose suitable **structural patterns**. Chronological structure can get very boring (do not start each sentence with reference to a date, eg. *In 1956... In 1962 ...* etc)
Better structures relate to the development of your argument: points for and against, differences of opinion, changes of view and so on.
Tense choice is important: while the literature review is mostly written in the present tense, you can use the present perfect (*X has found ...*) to indicate that X's view is close to your own, or the past tense (*Y discussed ...*) to demonstrate that it is more distant.
- **Be careful not to overstate your claims**: make good use of qualifying expressions such as *suggests that, may be due to, is most likely to be, could be interpreted as*.
- Use your **paragraphs to develop your case** – each paragraph is a thought-unit. Too many short paragraphs will suggest that you have not thought very deeply.
- Pay careful attention to **linking your sentences and paragraphs** so that your thought processes appear to link together. Use a variety of devices to do this. Typically students writing theses either over-use or under-use **discourse markers**, and not sufficiently aware of the resources of **metalinguage** and **lexical cohesion**.

Examples of **metalinguage**:

This research explores...

This thesis investigates...

There are three stages ... first ...

The first writer to discover ...

Examples of **discourse markers**:

Despite x

Furthermore

In reality

Lexical cohesion means using the vocabulary to link your thoughts together by using, either:

- a synonym or phrase that means the same thing (*this problem, another difficulty*)
- a summing-up word (*all these discussions*)
- a word indicating membership of a class (in a discussion of jaundice, *this disease ...*)
- contrast – the *dry* one (relating back to the wet one)
- simple repetition of the word.

Finally, while Learning Skills staff can help you improve your writing you might still consider paying someone towards the end to proof-read your thesis, preferably once the supervisor has checked the content. But remember, final responsibility rests with you!