

McMaster University's Graduate Thesis Toolkit

McMaster University's Graduate Thesis Toolkit

2nd edition (November 2023)

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Welcome to the McMaster Graduate Thesis Toolkit!



Welcome to the McMaster Graduate Thesis Toolkit – your resource for everything related to writing for your Masters and PhD work. After consulting with graduate students like you, we have developed a series of resources, tip sheets, and experiences from graduate students in the following three themes:

1. Time Management & Organization
2. Technical Aspects of Writing & Editing
3. Staying Well While Writing

We also heard from graduate students that everyone’s thesis experience is unique, and so the toolkit reflects that diversity. We hope the quotes and stories from students throughout will inspire you and let you know that you are not alone in your journey.

This is a general guide for the entire graduate student body, so please consult with your own department for their specific guidelines and processes.

How to navigate this book

You can use the left and right arrows at the bottom of each page indicating the previous and next chapters in this book. You can also use the “Contents” in the top left-hand corner to navigate to any of the topics within the three chapters and sub-chapters. Finally, you can “search” for a keyword in the top right-hand corner.

Note that all links will open in a new window or tab.

Accessibility

The online version of this toolkit (through Pressbooks) is designed to be accessible for all. The text is compatible with text to speech screen readers, photos and graphics are set up with alternative text, and in the top corner of the page, there is a button which enables you to enlarge the text for better visibility. If you require further accommodations, please contact [Student Accessibility Services](https://sas.mcmaster.ca/) [https://sas.mcmaster.ca/] for more support.

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Acknowledgements

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Questions and feedback

Comments and feedback on the Toolkit can be offered using this [form](https://forms.office.com/r/CRgGJjr2f7) [https://forms.office.com/r/CRgGJjr2f7]

For questions regarding the Toolkit, please contact gsevent@mcmaster.ca

PART I

TIME MANAGEMENT AND ORGANIZATION

“Staying focused on research that advances my thesis and not getting bogged down by other work has been hard. How do I manage my time effectively?”

“Staying on task while setting my own deadlines and staying motivated to complete the work has been particularly challenging.”

Does this sound like you?

Use this section to:

- Learn how to schedule writing time and use that time efficiently
- Learn how to set appropriate long and short-term goals
- Learn what a thesis timeline looks like for various Master’s and PhD students
- Learn what tools are available to help you manage your schedule and goals

Resources in this section include a **writing time management tool**, **weekly calendar**, and **goal setting tools**.

Note that all links will open in a new window or tab.

I. Goal Setting: Developing a Timeline

The goal of this section is to provide advice on how to structure a thesis project and create a long-term plan for accomplishing research and writing by setting and achieving goals in a timely manner.

Timelines

There are many factors which can shape your timeline for completing a thesis. For example, the complexity of the project, the need for travel to foreign countries to conduct field work or research, unexpected medical crises, and many more factors can alter timelines.

Nonetheless, having a general, flexible timeline of the thesis project is a helpful way to conceptualize and set achievable goals. When planning your own timeline, there are several things to keep in mind:

1. What kind of thesis will you write?
2. What does the project require you to do?
3. What is the structure of your program? What landmarks do you need to pass before beginning work on the thesis itself?
4. What kind of team are you working within?
5. What are the expectations of your department?
6. What is your available funding and financial need?
7. Outside life: How much time are you willing/able to commit to writing your thesis? What other important commitments do you have?

Your overarching timeline may be affected by unforeseen circumstances, so it is important to revisit and reassess it often in communication with your supervisor and committee. Nonetheless, having a broad timeline for the process will help you to understand what your expectations and the expectations of your supervisor are, and set goals that will support your timeline.

Thesis timeline form

Use this fillable [Thesis Timeline Form](#) [downloadable PDF] to consider what factors will shape your thesis timeline. You are encouraged to revisit this form as your timeline takes shape and make the necessary changes or additions to reflect your overall plan. Be sure to share this with your supervisor and seek feedback.

Master's timelines

The following chart demonstrates the diversity of timelines at the master's level. Please note that leaves of absence are subject to approval. Please refer to the [Graduate Calendar](https://academiccalendars.romcmaster.ca/index.php) [https://academiccalendars.romcmaster.ca/index.php] for regulations and policies if you are considering a leave of absence.

Master's Timelines

Student #1

- Thesis
- Faculty of Social Sciences
- Full-time

Year 1

- September to December: Coursework
- January to August: Emergency medical leave

Year 2

- September to December: Coursework
- January to February: Ethics application
- March to April: Data collection
- May to October: Write thesis

Year 3

- November: Defend

Student #2

- Major research paper
- Faculty of Humanities
- Full-time

Year 1

- September to April: Coursework
- May to August: Major research paper

Student #3

- Thesis
- Faculty of Health Sciences
- Part-time

Year 1

- September to April: Coursework

Year 2

- September to April: Coursework

Year 3

- September to December: Ethics application
- January to August: Data collection and lab work

Year 4

- September to May: Write thesis
- June to July: Edit thesis
- August: Defend

View ["Master's timelines" text description](#)

Doctoral timelines

The following chart demonstrates the diversity of timelines at the doctoral level. Please note that leaves of absence are subject to approval. Please refer to the [Graduate Calendar](https://academiccalendars.romcmaster.ca/index.php) [https://academiccalendars.romcmaster.ca/index.php] for regulations and policies if you are considering a leave of absence.

Doctoral Timelines

Student #1

- Traditional thesis
- Faculty of Science
- Full-time

Year 1

- September to December: Coursework (one course taken at the University of Waterloo)
- January to August: Comprehensive exam #1

Year 2

- September to December: Research
- January to April: Comprehensive exam #2

Year 3

- Data collection

Year 4

- Wrote thesis

Year 5

- September to July: Wrote/revise thesis
- August: Defend

Student #2

- Sandwich thesis
- Faculty of Engineering
- Full-time

Year 1

- September to April: Coursework
- January to August: Comprehensive exams

Year 2

- September to December: Failed comprehensive exams; took medical leave

Year 3

- June to October: Defended proposal
- November to August: Lab work; published three joint-authored articles

Year 4

- September to March: Wrote introduction and chapter introductions for sandwich thesis
- June: Defend

Student #3

- Traditional thesis
- Faculty of Business
- Part-time

Year 1

- Coursework (one course per semester)

Year 2

- Parental leave

Year 3

- Coursework (one course per semester)

Years 4 to 5

- Comprehensive exams

Year 6

- Research

Years 7 to 8

- Write

Year 8

- August: Defend

View [“Doctoral timelines” text description](#)

Sample PhD timeline

The following chart provides a detailed example of a PhD timeline for a History PhD student.

Timeline

Sam's PhD

2016-2021

Fall 2016-Winter 2017: Coursework

- Take two courses
- Comprehensive reading course
- Read material

Summer 2017: Proposal

- Write proposal

2017-2019: Research

- Research trips
 - USA: November 2017
 - Germany: Summer 2018
 - Switzerland: Summer 2019
- Summarize findings

2017-2019: Literature review

- Read secondary literature

Fall 2018: Create outline

- Compile sources

2019-2020: Write

- Write chapters
 - Chapter 1: June 1
 - Chapter 2: September 1
 - Chapter 3: December 1
- Edit chapters

2021: Revise

- Supervisor feedback
- Committee feedback

July 2021: Defend

- Submit dissertation for defense
- Defend
- Submit final revisions

View [“Sam’s PhD timeline” text description](#)

2. Goal Setting: Developing Goals

It is important to have goals to work toward during every stage of a thesis project, as the process is most likely much less structured than others you have encountered in your education so far. It can also be overwhelming to try to think about the entire thesis at once. To combat that overwhelmed feeling of wondering where or how to begin, it can be helpful to break down the work you need to do into smaller, more manageable chunks, with actionable, time-sensitive pieces.

Preliminary goal setting tips

- **Set goals you control.** If your goals depend on the actions of others, have a plan B or shift focus to a goal you can control. So, if the book you are awaiting does not come through from interlibrary loan, move on to another aspect of the project. If your advisor is late returning comments on a chapter, shift to writing or revising another section.
 - **State your goals in positive terms.** Write what you want to happen, not just what you want to avoid.
-

Developing manageable goals

When you are setting your goals for the week, the month, the semester, or even the year, make sure that those goals are attainable. Set “S.M.A.R.T.” goals that are Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time Limited:

Breakdown Your Goals!

What is my goal?

S Specific

- Clearly articulate what you need to do
- Determine what you will write
- Determine when you will write
- Determine where you will write

M Measurable

- Define your goals in numerical terms
- Determine the number of pages you will write
- Determine the hours you'll stay on task
- Take inventory after work sessions to gauge productivity

A Achievable

- Set goals you can realistically achieve in the time available
- Think in small, defined increments
- Stay on task
- If you reach your goal early, work towards the next goal

R Relevant

- Decide which goals are most productive and important
- Are you trying to develop work habits?
- Are you experimenting with a new writing technique?
- Are you trying to produce pages?

T Time Limited

- Determine when you will review, evaluate, and test new targets
- Set small weekly or daily goals
- Systematically evaluate what is working
- Celebrate progress or troubleshoot when needed

View ["Breakdown Your Goals!" text description](#)

3. Goal Setting: Long-Term and Short-Term Goals

Broadly speaking, there are two types of goals: long-term and short-term.

Long-term goals

Long-term goals may take many months to accomplish and are made possible by the completion of many short-term goals. When planning, it is easiest to first set out what your long-term goals are, as they are often the most obvious to you. Included below are some examples of long-term goals a PhD student may consider:



1. Complete thesis
2. Coursework
3. Comprehensive exams
4. Proposal
5. Achieve ABD status
6. Fieldwork/data collection/research
7. Literature review
8. Writing and revisions

Short-term goals

Short-term goals are the smaller pieces that comprise long-term goals. Once you have laid out what you need to accomplish long-term, break these up into smaller and more manageable parts. It may be overwhelming to know how many things you need to do for your dissertation, but it also helps you to figure out what to do when.

4. Further Reading about Goal Setting

Kelsky, Karen. *The Professor is In: The Essential Guide to Turning your PhD into a Job*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 2015.

Service, Owain and Rory Gallagher. *Think Small: The Surprisingly Simple Ways to Reach Big Goals*. New York: Michael O'Mara, 2017.

Scott, S.J. *S.M.A.R.T. Goals Made Simple: 10 Steps to Master your Personal and Career Goals*. Cranbury: Old Town Publishing, 2014.

Wilson, Susan B. *Goal Setting: How to Create an Action Plan and Achieve Your Goals*. New York: AMACOM, 2008.

5. Time Management: Scheduling Time

The purpose of this section is to help you develop tools to manage your time effectively, facilitating the achievement of your goals. Students often must balance a thesis with many other projects and priorities, so learning how to effectively time manage is very important.



Scheduling time

The most effective way to manage your time, stay focused, and keep track of important meetings and deadlines is to use a calendar, either digital or analog. Monthly and weekly calendars will help you track due dates and see blocks of time that can be devoted to thesis work.

You may also want to consider tracking how much time you spend doing different tasks, and when you are most productive, either using your calendar of appointments or a productivity tracker such as [Toggl](https://toggl.com/) [https://toggl.com/] or [Clockify](https://clockify.me/) [https://clockify.me/].

“Challenge: keeping all the other balls in the air, when I just want to double down on writing my thesis.

Tip: Writing out half hour blocks, and filling each block, one with thesis, and the next with non-thesis work, and back and forth. Keeps things fresh, I don't get stuck nearly as much, because I'm engaging different parts of my brain.”

Anthropology, 3rd year, PhD

6. Time Management: Working Efficiently

The key to working efficiently is to know what you need to do and know when you are best equipped to do it.

Finding out what time of day is best for you to do “brainwork” will allow you to schedule less intensively mental work for when you are already burnt out. For example, if you feel most productive between 8 a.m. and 1 p.m., schedule thesis work for the morning, and non-thesis work for the afternoons. This includes meetings, administrative work, answering emails, and even grading.

Try “blocking” your time: group like activities (meetings, teaching duties, scholarship applications, research, writing) so that thesis work is not constantly interrupted.

Let’s compare two example schedules. In the first iteration of the calendar, meetings are scattered and thesis work is not scheduled.

Weekly Calendar

	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
8 AM						Yoga 8 AM to 10 AM	
9 AM	Yoga 9:30 AM to 11:30 AM						Yoga 9:30 AM to 11:30 AM
10 AM		Office Hour 10 AM to 11 AM			Meet Student 10 AM to 11 AM		
11 AM					Sherman Centre Meeting 11 AM to 12 PM		
12 PM			Project Meeting 12 PM to 1 PM	Teach 12:30 PM to 1:30 PM			
1 PM							
2 PM					Department Talk 2:30 PM to 3:30 PM		
3 PM							
4 PM							
5 PM							
6 PM							
7 PM							

View [“Weekly Calendar \(version 1\)” text description](#)

In the second iteration, thesis time is scheduled, as is time for “other” work, according to what the student knows about their own work habits. Teaching duties and meetings are also grouped together.

Weekly Calendar

	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
8 AM							
9 AM	Yoga 9:30 AM to 11:30 AM	Thesis Work 9 AM to 1 PM	Thesis Work 9 AM to 11 AM	Thesis Work 9 AM to 11:30 AM	Thesis Work 9 AM to 12 PM	Thesis Work 9 AM to 1 PM	Yoga 9:30 AM to 11:30 AM
10 AM							
11 AM							
12 PM			Project Meeting 12 PM to 1 PM	Teach 12:30 PM to 1:30 PM			Overflow from Week (if needed) 12:30 PM to 4:30 PM
1 PM			Sherman Centre Meeting 1 PM to 2 PM	Office Hour 1:30 PM to 2:30 PM	Administrative Work 1 PM to 2:30 PM		
2 PM		Administrative Work (Emails, paperwork, grant applications, work for other projects) 2 PM to 5 PM	Administrative Work 2 PM to 5 PM	Meet Student 2:30 PM to 3:30 PM	Department Talk 2:30 PM to 3:30 PM	Administrative Work 2 PM to 4:30 PM	
3 PM							Administrative Work 3:30 PM to 5 PM
4 PM							
5 PM							
6 PM							
7 PM							

View ["Weekly Calendar \(version 2\)" text description](#)

7. Time Management: Prioritizing

At the beginning of a semester, it is useful to sit down and map out your major deadlines: coursework, teaching or research assistantships, scholarship and grant applications, and your personal goals, as discussed in the previous section.

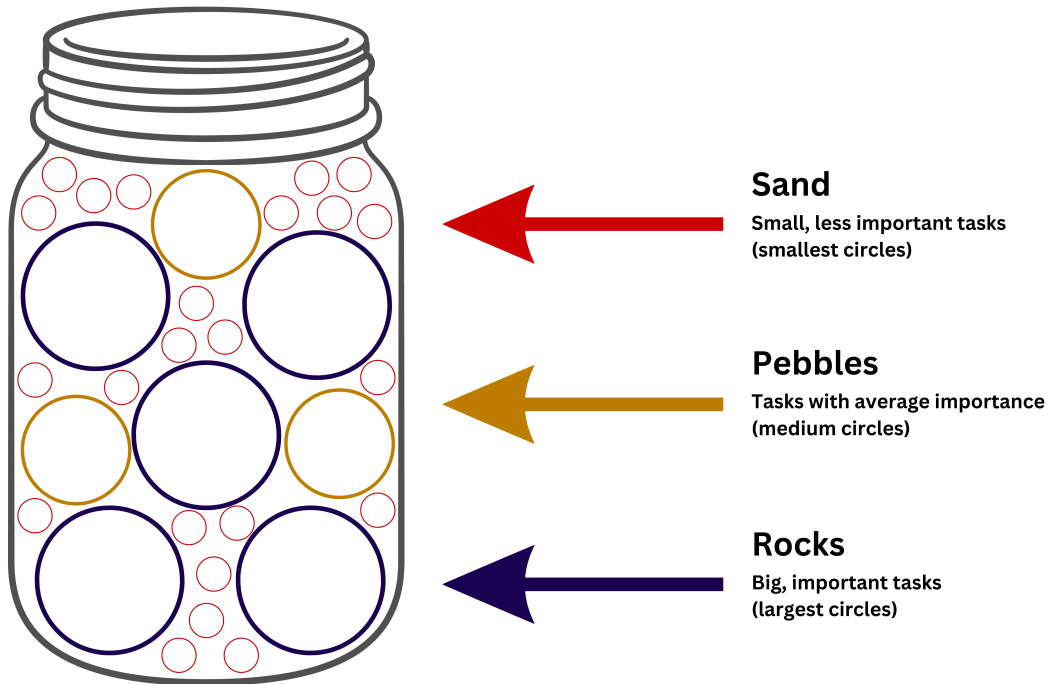
Once you have made your list of goals and deadlines, try ranking them in order of importance. Identify your top three goals and focus your energy there. Once those are accomplished, move on to less vital or time-sensitive goals.

The Pickle Jar Theory

One way to conceptualize time management and prioritization is “The Pickle Jar Theory”. Think of your week as a jar, with limited space, and your commitments as rocks of varying sizes. The rocks represent big, important tasks, like finishing a chapter of your thesis. The pebbles represent tasks with average importance, such as meeting with your advisor. Finally, the small grains of sand represent small, less important tasks, such as answering emails.

In order to make the most effective use of your time, schedule the larger, most important items first. These big rocks take up the most space; if you pour in the pebbles and the sand first, the rocks will not fit as easily. Conversely, if you place your rocks in the jar first, and then pour in the pebbles and the stones, they can fill the spaces between the rocks and you can fit more into the jar.

The Pickle Jar Theory



This metaphor shows the benefits of prioritizing. Make sure the most important items go into your agenda first, and then fill gaps to make the most of your time.

8. Time Management: Accomplishing Difficult Tasks and Maintaining Momentum

How to prioritize your time

Use these suggestions to help you determine how to organize your time and prioritize the tasks you need to complete.

Prioritizing

1

What would you like to do? Make a list (i.e., thesis work, other projects, hobbies, social events, etc.)

2

What do you need to do? Start any time-sensitive tasks. Estimate how long each task will take.

3

Rank tasks from most important to least. Remember: your health is essential.

4

Look at your schedule and your time estimates. What can you accomplish? Try to stick to your time estimates.

5

Know when to cut, starting with nonessential tasks. Reassess often.

View [“Prioritizing” text description](#)

Accomplishing difficult things

There are two schools of thought on how best to approach difficult or daunting tasks:

1. **Eat your frogs first.** Start your day with the item on your task list that you are dreading the most. Get it out of the way so your mind is clear to focus on other,

more enjoyable (or less intimidating) tasks.

2. **Build momentum.** Begin with easy/fun tasks, or begin with a task you have left half-finished from the previous day. This will get you into working mode and help you feel positive about the day's outlook. Once you have a more enjoyable task or two completed, move on to the more difficult/involved tasks.

Consider experimenting with both – which method works best for you?

“Challenge: A challenge I faced was staying on task while setting my own deadlines and staying motivated to complete the work, given the magnitude of the task.

Tip: Thesis writing is a marathon and not a sprint – take it day by day and break down larger tasks into smaller, more manageable chunks. Reward yourself along the way as you complete each step and meet each deadline and create times and places for work and times and places for other important life things.”

Sociology PhD Graduate

Tips for maintaining momentum over time

1. **End every work session with a short description of what you'll work on in the next session.** This way, even if there are extended periods of time between working on a particular project, you will have a reminder of where to start and be able to get back into “the zone” easier.
2. **Form a support group**, or what Blair calls a “Community of Practice” – a group of students in your department and elsewhere who are at a similar stage in the thesis process.¹ This community can help you stay motivated, provide suggestions and feedback when you are stuck, and help shift your perspective. The [“Staying Well While Writing”](#) section of this toolkit has more suggestions for how to build an academic community.
3. Work smarter, not more. Try the **Pomodoro Technique** to work intensively with frequent breaks.²

The Pomodoro Technique



View ["The Pomodoro Technique" text description](#)

"Writing such a long document is a daunting task which provides plenty of fuel for procrastination. Moreover, organizing such a long document, such that it tells a coherent and compelling story, is a herculean task. To deal with the time management aspect, I used the Pomodoro Technique, which worked quite well for me. Typically, this consists of 25 minute intervals of focused work followed by a 5 minute break. Often, I would prolong the 25 minute session to 50 minutes and take a 10 minute break instead if I felt in the flow of writing; however, I never worked for more than 2 hours at a time and made sure to take a longer break (at least 30 minutes) every 2 hours."

Chemistry, 2019

Notes

1. Lorrie Blair, "What Is a Thesis?," in *Writing a Graduate Thesis or Dissertation*, ed. Lorrie Blair,

Teaching Writing (Rotterdam: SensePublishers, 2016), 1–6, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6300-426-8_1.

2. Francesco Cirillo, *The Pomodoro Technique* (New York: Currency, 2018).

9. Further Reading for Time Management, Prioritizing, and Working Effectively

Pacheco-Vega, Raul. "Organization and Time Management." <http://www.raulpacheco.org/resources/organization-and-time-management/>.

Accessed 18 June 2019.

Farkas, Dora. "10 Surprising Time Management Strategies to Help you Graduate." Blog Post, *Finish Your Thesis*. 1 January 2018. URL: <https://finishyourthesis.com/time-management/>. Accessed 18 June 2019.

Forsyth, Patrick. *Successful Time Management*. London: Kogan Page, 2007.

Mewburn, Inger. *How To Tame your PhD*. New York: lulu, 2013.

Peters, Robert. *Getting What You Came For: The Smart Student's Guide to Earning a Master's or a PhD*. London: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997.



PART II

TECHNICAL ASPECTS OF WRITING AND EDITING

“The format of a thesis is confusing. I’m still unsure as to what is necessary to include.”

“Sometimes I feel I get too engrossed with trying to make my sentences perfect that it takes away from my writing.”

Does this sound like you?

Use this section to:

- Learn the technical requirements of a thesis or dissertation
- Learn methods for keeping data, information, and citations organized
- Learn how to begin and complete large writing tasks, such as the literature review
- Learn techniques for effective editing
- Learn helpful strategies for writing when English is not your first language

Note that all links will open in a new window or tab.

10. The Thesis Writing Process

The purpose of this section is to help students successfully meet the requirements for a thesis in their specific program, and to help students keep their sources and notes organized.

What is required?

(1) Planning a project

S. Joseph Levine recommends that, during the planning stage, you “Give yourself the luxury of being expansive in your thinking... Try and be creative.”¹ This means that early on in your project, you should:

1. Creatively dream, mind map, explore, and even “play” with ideas around what you might want to do for your thesis – this can be fun and exciting!
 2. As you start to narrow in on a topic, think about the scope of the project, your interest level, and its feasibility. What will be your main research question?
 3. Brainstorm about what research you will need to conduct to best answer your research question (e.g., qualitative, quantitative, historical, lab work).
 4. Consult existing literature to ensure your project will contribute new knowledge to the field.
 5. Try a small, preliminary research study to check the feasibility of the project.
-

(2) Preparing the thesis proposal

The thesis proposal is a contract between yourself and your committee to whom you have pitched a feasible and defensible project that can be completed in a reasonable amount of time.

Levine offers the following checklist for selecting a defensible project. Consider your familiarity with the research area, the steps to conduct your research, your ability to go through each step, and your motivation with the project.

Levine's Checklist for selecting a defensible project



I am familiar with other research that has been conducted in areas related to my project.



I have a clear understanding of the steps that I will use in conducting my research.



I feel that I have the ability to get through each of the steps necessary to complete my research project.



I know that I am motivated and have the drive to get through all of the steps in the research project.

View ["Levine's Checklist" text description](#)

Although conventions differ from program to program, generally speaking, a proposal should include:

1. Title
2. Literature review
3. Statement of problem/argument
4. Set of questions that will guide research

5. Background information
6. Research methodology
7. Table of contents for the proposed thesis (depending on the department's preferences)
8. Timeline for completing remaining degree requirements (depending on the department's preferences)

Thesis proposal writing suggestions:

- Reach out to other students in your department and ask if they would share their proposals so you can see what a successful proposal looks like in your field. When possible, try to read the proposals of other students who have worked with your supervisor and/or committee members.
 - Talk to your supervisor. Often, they have a specific format or style that they want to see. They may also be willing to look at drafts and give feedback.
-

(3) Formatting the thesis

1. Review McMaster University's [Guide for the Preparation of Master's and Doctoral Theses](#) [downloadable PDF].
 2. There are very specific requirements for the thesis format. Beginning with a properly formatted document can save many headaches at the end of the process.
 3. The document linked above gives instructions for formatting Master's theses, as well as standard and sandwich doctoral theses.
-

(4) Writing the thesis

Though some departments now offer nontraditional thesis formats, in general, you will write a traditional thesis or a sandwich thesis.

Monograph thesis

A standard thesis is a single, book-like monograph that contains interlinking chapters. It also usually includes an introduction, literature review, methodology, the research findings, and a conclusion, clearly identifying the contribution to knowledge. Generally, a typical master's level thesis is not more than 150 pages and the doctoral thesis is around 300 pages.

Sandwich thesis (thesis by publication)

A thesis by publication is a collection of related papers, generally either accepted or submitted for publication in research journals. The papers are linked by theoretical or practical connections that frame the research. The thesis can contain any number of papers, but most thesis committees require between three and seven.

Most traditional theses at McMaster are composed of the following elements:

1. Title
2. Abstract(s)
3. Literature review
 - See the [“Writing a Literature Review”](#) section for more information on writing this part.
4. Research problem/questions
5. Methodology
6. Research findings
7. Evidence to support research findings
8. Conclusions and implications/suggestions for further research

[MacSphere](https://macsphere.mcmaster.ca/) [https://macsphere.mcmaster.ca/] is McMaster University's internal repository for organizing and providing access to the research being done at McMaster. MacSphere can be an invaluable tool for thesis writers, as you can access the theses of successful students from your program (and across campus). Looking at the work of others may help you with crafting specific chapters or sections, formatting, and assessing some of your supervisor or department's “hidden” expectations.

If you are writing a sandwich thesis and are unsure of what this project might look like

in your department, check MacSphere for some examples. MacSphere can also provide a comforting reminder that other students have gone before you, and have made it through!

How long will my thesis be?

As a general rule, it is suggested that doctoral students limit their theses to a maximum of three hundred (300) pages of text, while Master's theses should be less than 200 pages.

"I did a sandwich thesis, and did not know that every paper within needed its own separate introduction until very near the end of my writing process. I feel like there were also some formatting details I was unaware of that made getting the thesis in shape to submit more work at the end than it needed to be. In light of this, I would recommend paying attention to the "McMaster Guide for the Preparation of Master's and Doctoral Theses" early on in the process, just to know what to expect. I also found submitting my thesis in chunks to my supervisor and committee members to be helpful, as I could get edits and work on these a little at a time along the way, working and re-working each paper many times before the end."

PhD Sociology Graduate

Did you know?

While the right and bottom margins should be 2.5cm, the top and left margins should be 3.8cm. This shrinks the number of words per page and can result in a much longer thesis than expected. Set your margins before you begin to avoid any future headaches.

Notes

1. S. Joseph Levine, *Writing and Presenting your Thesis or Dissertation*, 2nd Edition (LearnerAssociates.net, 2009), 1.

II. Defending and Submitting the Thesis

(I) The thesis defense

1. Review the [degree completion review process](https://gs.mcmaster.ca/current-students/completing-your-degree/) [https://gs.mcmaster.ca/current-students/completing-your-degree/] for your specific degree. This will provide information on how to initiate the thesis defense process on Mosaic.
2. Once you have initiated the defense process, your supervisor, committee members, and/or department will submit nominees for external examiners.
3. After initiating the defense, you will receive an email confirming you were successful. Allow some time for Mosaic to send you this email. If you don't receive it by the morning of the next day email gthesis@mcmaster.ca for help. Your committee and supervisors must also approve the date and thesis. The thesis will then be sent to the chosen external examiner.
4. You will receive a report from the external examiner before your defense date.
5. At the defense, a chair will guide the proceedings. Usually, the doctoral candidate will have 15 to 20 minutes to outline the major findings and implications of their thesis research, followed by a round of questions from the external, then the committee, and then a second round of questions. When all are satisfied, the student will leave the room and the committee and examiner will deliberate.

Did you know?

You may invite guests to observe your defense proceedings – even guests from outside of academia. You have worked hard and should have your community there to celebrate with you. Depending on the set-up of the room in which you defend, guests should sit at the back or around the sides of the room. The front (or main defense table in the formal thesis defense room) is reserved for the chair of the defense, your supervisor and committee members, the external, and yourself.

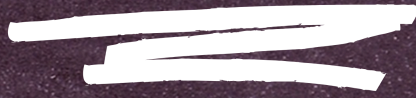
Defense preparation suggestions

The following poster provides six suggestions for preparing for a successful defense. This poster offers valuable guidance for preparing and navigating a thesis defense,

emphasizing the importance of self-confidence, pre-defense preparation, remaining composed during the process, delivering a well-prepared presentation, handling feedback graciously, and managing the flow of the conversation to ensure a successful and productive defense experience.



Defense Preparation Suggestions



Remember: you are the strongest expert in that room in the area of your thesis research.

Before your defense

Try to attend at least one or two defenses before your own. If possible, attend a defense where your supervisor and/or committee members are taking part to observe the types of questions they ask and what you might expect from them in this setting.

Reread, anticipate

Read through your thesis to re-familiarize yourself with its contents and arguments. Try to look at it through the lens of each of your committee members, trying to anticipate what they might ask in light of their own research, theoretical orientation, and area of expertise.

Try to remain calm

The defense can be stressful for students, in part because of the unknown and high-stakes outcomes. Remain calm. Bring a pen and paper to write questions down, and feel free to repeat and rephrase questions back to ensure your understanding and give yourself time to formulate an answer.

The presentation

The 15 to 20 minute presentation at the beginning of your defense should be prepared in advance. Some choose to use a PowerPoint, however you should not rely on your notes (or do so minimally). This is the portion of the proceedings that is most within your ability to control.

Do not be defensive

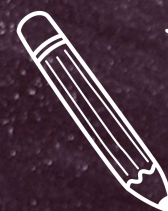
When offered feedback at the defense, do not be defensive. Accept suggestions or say that you will consider them. You can diplomatically and politely "defend" your work without being aggressively defensive.

Keep on task

Sometimes the conversation may drift into areas outside of your own knowledge or expertise. If this happens, politely acknowledge their expertise and suggest that you will take it into consideration. To steer the conversation back into more familiar territory, suggest the conversation be continued after the defense.

Success

Ultimately, the defense turns into a conversation between you and your committee members; it is more than just a question and answer period directed at you. You should feel at ease that everything is going well, and let the dialogue go where it will.



View [“Defense Preparation Suggestions” text description](#)

(2) What happens after the defense?

There are two types of successful defense outcomes:

1. **No changes required.** The thesis needs no further changes. Your supervisor must sign off before final submission.
2. **Minor changes required.** The thesis requires minor changes (typographical errors; minor corrections). The supervisor acts on behalf of the defense committee to ensure that all required changes have been made.

It is unusual for a thesis to come out of the defense process without at least some minor revisions, so expect to have at least a little bit of post-defense work to do.

Celebrate!

Go to the [Phoenix Restaurant](https://www.phoenixmcmaster.com/) [https://www.phoenixmcmaster.com/] on campus after successfully defending and you will be able to drink from “the chalice” and receive a free pitcher of beer in celebration!



Submitting your thesis to MacSphere

Once the final copy of your thesis has been approved, it needs to be submitted to [MacSphere](https://macsphere.mcmaster.ca/) [https://macsphere.mcmaster.ca/]. For your e-thesis to be published via MacSphere, the final version of your thesis should be named using the following file naming convention:

familyname_firstname_middleinitial_finalsubmissionyearmonth_degree

Only upload your thesis and any related appendices. Don't upload your final submission sheet, licences, or anything that isn't your thesis. AND you may request up to a one year embargo on your thesis. Your thesis won't be available to the public until the embargo expires. Request an embargo on your Final Submission sheet. Whether or not you asked for an embargo, your thesis won't be immediately available on MacSphere when you hit Submit. SGS will review your upload and your Final Submission Sheet and will apply an embargo if you asked for one.

The [Final Thesis Submission Sheet](#) [downloadable PDF] must also be signed and submitted to *the School of Graduate Studies*.

Tip: In order to facilitate the administrative process, the thesis coordinator suggests that you submit your e-thesis to MacSphere first, before submitting the submission sheet to the School of Graduate Studies.

Pay attention to the thesis submission due dates listed in the **Sessional Calendar** to avoid submitting late and being charged partial tuition for an additional semester.

For further questions and assistance regarding the thesis defense and submission process, please email gthesis@mcmaster.ca.

12. Keeping your Information and Sources Organized

A thesis relies on a body of evidence collected from research. This evidence can come in many forms, depending on the discipline. Nonetheless, a strong organizational system is integral to keeping information accessible.

One commonly used method for keeping information organized is a Word or Excel document full of notes on sources. Sources, data, and evidence can be catalogued chronologically, thematically, alphabetically, or based on the thesis chapter in which they will be used.

However, there are many more efficient computer programs specifically tailored to help researchers organize and cite data. These include:

- Dropbox Papers
- Trello
- Paperpile
- Zotero
- Evernote
- Scrivener
- Mendeley
- OneNote

The benefits to using a referencing system instead of a series of Word documents or Excel sheets for organizing your literature include:

- Consistency between papers and projects
- Ease of collaboration
- The transferability of your sources and system to future projects

For a detailed evaluation of several of the above referencing software, along with help choosing which one might be best for you, see the McMaster University Library's [Guide to Citation Management Software](https://libguides.mcmaster.ca/cms) [https://libguides.mcmaster.ca/cms].

13. Getting Started with Writing

The purpose of this section is to provide guidance for when and how to begin the writing process, as well as how to write like an academic. It provides suggestions for how to write a literature review, how to write in the academic genre, how to cope with writer's block, and how to write when English is an additional language.

Paul Oliver provides the following advice for writing a thesis:

“There is often a natural tendency to be thinking continually about the final qualification, and to treat the thesis writing simply as a means to that end. This is a pity, because academic writing is a very creative activity. It is an opportunity for you not only to describe your research, but also to reflect on your own intellectual world view. Thesis writing is not merely an instrumental activity, but an opportunity to express your understanding of the world in a fresh and novel way. If you can concentrate on this creative dimension to academic writing you will probably enjoy the process much more.”¹

When to start writing

As soon as possible! Writing, reading, thinking, and analyzing data go hand in hand, and if you are waiting for “inspiration to strike,” until you feel really motivated, or until you know exactly what you want to say, you may never start writing your thesis. As a general rule of thumb, start writing when you have:

1. Collected some/most of your evidence and sources
2. Planned the structure of the thesis carefully, and gotten feedback from your supervisor
3. Discussed all of the above with your supervisor – and do not forget to keep the conversation open during the writing process

Where to start writing

Thesis writing is not necessarily a linear process. You do not have to begin writing with the introduction or with Chapter 1. In fact, many supervisors advise against beginning to write your thesis with the introductory chapter, as the literature you are drawing from, the arguments you are making, and several other aspects that will inform this part of your thesis can change during the researching and writing process.

It is generally advised that students begin writing where they are most comfortable in order to gain momentum and confidence. For a sandwich thesis, this may involve focusing on each publishable paper one at a time, and then finishing with the broader introduction and conclusion. Many traditional thesis students begin their writing process with the literature review, as this allows for a grounding of the project in the relevant literature, and this chapter or section will inform future analysis or results chapters. The literature review is also a good starting point because it is a section students can work on while gathering the information needed for subsequent chapters (i.e., awaiting ethics approval or finishing data collection and analysis).

Writing like an academic

Paul Oliver suggests it is helpful to treat academic writing as a genre, like poetry or the novel. As a genre, academic writing is defined by its clarity, objectivity and precision, and use of specialist language and terms, clearly defined for the reader. The goal is to create clear arguments that are supported by solid evidence.² To further highlight Oliver's point, the following infographic provides five suggestions for academic writers, explaining what they should aim for in their writing.



View ["Academic Writing" text description](#)

Tips for writing like an academic

1. Read academic writing in your field and note language that reads as formal and authoritative.
2. Keep a list of specialist words for your discipline.
3. Look up words you are not familiar with to expand your vocabulary.

Notes

1. Paul Oliver, *Writing Your Thesis* (London: SAGE, 2014), 4.
2. Oliver, *Writing Your Thesis*, 20.

14. Writing a Literature Review: Introduction

Often the place where thesis students embark on their writing journey, the literature review is also the section where students can struggle the most.

What is a literature review?

A literature review provides an overview of the relevant work that has been done in a field and can be presented in a separate chapter in a traditional thesis, or as a section near the beginning of each publishable paper in a sandwich thesis.

The introduction chapter of a sandwich thesis may also contain a literature review that is broader in scope than those of the individual papers included.

The review of literature is a significant portion of most academic writing, as it orients both the researcher and the reader to what research has been done in an area to date (so as to avoid “re-inventing the wheel”), and also highlights gaps in current knowledge that the present research will seek to address. Literature reviews also indicate that the researcher is knowledgeable in their field, being an active member and participant in it.¹

According to Kamler and Thomson (2006), there are six key tasks that must be accomplished by a literature review, as illustrated in the following poster.²

6 Key Tasks of a Literature Review

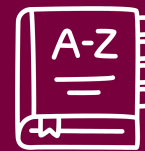
1

Lay out the nature of the field(s), perhaps including relevant historical developments



2

Flag key debates and define terms



3

Establish which studies, ideas, and methods are most relevant to the present day study



4

Demonstrate gaps in the field



5

Justify the relevance/necessity of the present study



6

Why is writing the literature review so often a challenge?

The concept of “the literature review” itself is likely intimidating for graduate students, in part, because of the connotations the different parts of this title evoke when placed together. First, “the” erroneously signifies that your literature review is one standalone thing, as opposed to something that is integrated and referred to throughout the entire thesis or article. A literature review should not simply be a separate piece completed at the beginning of the research/writing process and then only marginally edited at the end.

Second, the statement “the literature” also carries a potentially intimidating air about it. Literature signifies something of high culture and pretentious importance – impossible to attain, broad in scope, and just frustratingly out of reach.

Finally, “review” gives off the assumption that the reviewer is in the position of a passive audience member who looks on from the outside at all that is going on in the “literature” – not much activity or agency in this positioning.

Types of literature reviews

According to Arlene Fink (2014) in “Conducting Research Literature Reviews”, a literature review surveys books, scholarly articles, and any other sources relevant to a particular issue, area of research, or theory, and by doing so, provides a description, summary, and critical evaluation of these works in relation to the research problem being investigated. Literature reviews are designed to provide an overview of sources you have explored while researching a particular topic and to demonstrate to your readers how your research fits within a larger field of study.

The following table provides a comparison of the types of literature reviews you may encounter as a graduate student.³

Table 1: Types of literature reviews based on research approach

Research Approach	Literature Review	Mapping/ Scoping Review	Meta Analysis	Systematic Review
Search Strategy	Can be comprehensive	Determined by constraints (e.g., time; scope)	Exhaustive and comprehensive	Exhaustive and comprehensive
Synthesis Strategy	Narrative	Tables and narrative	Tables and narrative	Narrative and tables
Methodological Approach	Can include quality assessment	No quality assessment	Necessarily includes quality assessment as a criterion for inclusion	Necessarily includes quality assessment as a criterion for inclusion
Analysis	Can be thematic, chronological, or conceptual	Addresses quality/quantity of evidence; there is a need for further research	Numerical appraisal of effects to allow inferences	What is known; what (clinical) recommendations might be inferred

Notes

1. Christine B. Feak and John M. Swales, *Telling a Research Story: Writing a Literature Review* (Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 2009).
2. Barbara Kamler and Pat Thomson, *Helping Doctoral Students Write: Pedagogies for Supervision* (London: Routledge, 2006).
3. Maria Grant and Andrew Booth, "A typology of reviews: An analysis of 14 review types and associated methodologies," *Health Information and Libraries Journal* 26.2 (2009): 91-108.

15. Writing a Literature Review: Overcoming Challenges

Literature reviews are often the source of a lot of anxiety for graduate students – they can seem overwhelming, and the expectations for what should be accomplished can be ambiguous. The concept of “the literature review” itself is likely intimidating for graduate students, in part, because of the connotations the different parts of this title evoke when placed together. First, “the” erroneously signifies that your literature review is one standalone thing, as opposed to something that is integrated and referred to throughout the entire thesis or article. A literature review should not simply be a separate piece completed at the beginning of the research/writing process and then only marginally edited at the end.

Second, the statement “the literature” also carries a potentially intimidating air about it. Literature signifies something of high culture and pretentious importance – impossible to attain, broad in scope, and just frustratingly out of reach.

Finally, “review” gives off the assumption that the reviewer is in the position of a passive audience member who looks on from the outside at all that is going on in the “literature” – not much activity or agency in this positioning.

In accomplishing this task, grad students are often warned against simply “summarizing” a series of books and articles, but what it means to interact and bring together literatures in a “critical” manner is sometimes not well instructed.

Researchers may wonder:

- Where do I start?
- What do I include vs. exclude?
- How do I insert myself into the literature review?
- Do I have anything to contribute?
- How do I organize large bodies of literature?
- How do I negotiate power relations and complexities?
- Who do I engage with vs. ignore?

Complete the following reflection exercise to think about how you perceive literature reviews.

Note: this activity is accessible via the web version of this OER but not via the PDF version. The questions posed are:

- 1. When you think of doing a literature review, what is it like for you? What image or metaphor comes to mind?*
- 2. How is the literature represented? What image or metaphor comes to mind?*
- 3. What is the researcher doing? What image or metaphor comes to mind?*
- 4. How powerfully is the researcher represented? What image or metaphor comes to mind?*



An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:

<https://ecampusontario.pressbooks.pub/macgradthesistoolkit/?p=48#h5p-1>

When Kamler and Thomson asked graduate students the questions in the above reflection activity, students produced some interesting responses. Graduate students conceptualized the literature as “a chaotic whirlpool,” “an ocean full of sharks”, or a “stormy ocean.” Likewise, students conceptualized the researcher as “trying to swim with concrete blocks on my feet,” “tossed between currents in the sea, all pulling in different directions”, or “trying to persuade an octopus into a glass.”¹

Do any of these sound like your own reflections? All of these metaphors speak to a common feeling of being lost, overwhelmed, drowning, and powerless. The obstacle is large and unruly, and the researcher is active, struggling, plugging along, and doing what needs to be done in the face of this huge task.

Notes

1. Barbara Kamler and Pat Thomson, *Helping Doctoral Students Write: Pedagogies for Supervision* (London: Routledge, 2006).

16. Reconceptualizing the Task of Writing a Literature Review

The dinner party metaphor

Kamler and Thomson present a way of thinking about the literature review that some graduate students have found helpful.¹ They suggest that it can be useful to think about the literature review as if you are hosting a dinner party. This metaphor works for several reasons:

1. A dinner party occurs in your home and, likewise, the literature review should be grounded in familiar territory (i.e., pertaining to your research question/area – your “intellectual home”).
2. You get to choose who to invite when hosting a dinner party and, likewise, you have agency as a scholar in choosing which scholars you would like to engage in conversation in your literature review. You do not have room for everyone at your table, so you need to make decisions about which individuals or areas occupy what seats, and which may stand on the fringes or not make the cut.
3. Just like you select the menu and serve the food at a dinner party, you also present the main course in your literature review. As the host, you get to make space for your guests to talk about their work, but always in relation to *your* work – the food your guests chew and digest at *your* table.

The benefit of this metaphor is that it emphasizes the agency you have as the host of your own party – you are not a passive bystander reviewer. You cannot invite everyone, because they would not all fit around your table. As conversations and relationships develop, you can decide who to invite back later.



“Critical thinking” and the literature review

One of the struggles a lot of novice (and even seasoned) scholars face is the development of critical thinking and critically reviewing the literature. Again, this seems to be a catchword thrown around in academia that is not always thoughtfully laid out or defined.

What critical thinking is not

Critical thinking is not simply looking for and pointing out what is wrong in someone else’s work (i.e., critiquing it), neither is it simply providing a disjointed summary of one source after the next.

Thinking back to the dinner party metaphor, if, as in the first case, the host of the party

invited all of their guests over simply to criticize them, ridicule them, and prevent them from talking back to each other, that would not be a very nice party.

On the other hand, if the host allowed each guest only their one time slot to stand up and say a speech, one after the other, and then sit down, that would be boring and unengaging.

Instead, you want your literature review to involve the facilitation of a *conversation* between the texts/areas of interest you have invited to the table and, if relevant, highlighting the significance of bringing together texts or areas that have not talked to each other before.

What critical thinking is

Being critical is not just about praising or critiquing the work of others; rather, it involves several judgements along the way while writing the review, including:

- Which scholarship/scholars to invite to the table
- What aspects of their work to stress and which to downplay or ignore
- Paying attention to the underlying assumptions of a text, its methodology, and findings
- Being respectful and taking an *appreciative* stance
- Key question: What does this text contribute?

In critically appraising a text, Wagner suggests looking for “blank spots,” and being able to differentiate these from the “blind spots” of a particular methodology or theory.²

A **blind spot** refers to something a particular theory or methodology does not do. Survey methodology, for example, can provide a broad snapshot of something that is going on, but what it cannot do is provide in-depth reasons about people’s motivations or why the answers they gave are what they are. This is the survey method’s blind spot. A research project cannot be harshly critiqued for its blind spots – or not doing what it simply did not set out to do.

A **blank spot**, on the other hand, refers to something that a particular research project could have done, but did not. If there were important questions missing on this survey, for example or if there was a flaw in the analysis of the data, this would be a blank spot that should be addressed in the reviewer’s critique.

When looking for blind spots and blank spots in your critical appraisal of a piece of research, remember to avoid critiquing a project too harshly for not doing what it did not set out to do.

Critical questions to ask about individual texts:

- What is the argument?
 - What kind/aspect of your topic is spoken about in this article?
 - From what position?
 - Using what evidence?
 - What claims are made?
 - How adequate are these (blank spots and blind spots)?
 - Does other literature build upon this work? Is it building upon other literatures?
-

Using evaluative language

When reviewing a large body of literature, remember that not all ideas, articles, or books will be on the same level of importance or of equal value to a field. Being able to identify the value of the contribution of an idea is another signifier of critical thinking/appraisal.

You can signify that a large number of scholars seem to agree on something with statements like, “This seems to be a pervasive view” or “The research consistently states...”

Statements like “There appears to be no concurrence” or “The literature is divided...,” on the other hand, signal to the reader that there are a variety of different opinions or findings about an area and no consensus has been reached.

Finally, statements like “I/this research will argue,” “Groundbreaking studies like...,” and “Most significantly, the literature...” provide positional value statements and signify where you stand in relation to the field, as well as what ideas/articles are flagged as being the most pivotal to pay attention to.

Notes

1. Kamler and Tompson, *Helping Doctoral Students*.
2. Jon Wagner, "Ignorance in educational research: Or, how can you not know that?" *Educational Researcher* 22.5 (1993): 15-23.

17. Overcoming Writer's Block

"I honestly think the hardest part for me is actually just sitting down to start writing. I can sit at the computer staring for hours before anything useful comes out. My best way around this is, when I have a block or need to start, is to write it out by hand. There is something visceral and creative in the way the brain functions when handwriting versus typing. This has worked for me every time, and I usually come up with some of my best points by hand."

PhD, 3rd year

One struggle most students will have during the writing process is writer's block, defined as "the condition of being unable to think of what to write or how to proceed with writing." This section provides helpful solutions for when students hit a block and are unable to write.

"We all often feel like we are pulling teeth, even those writers whose prose ends up being the most natural and fluid. The right words and sentences just do not come pouring out like ticker tape most of the time... Almost all good writing begins with terrible first efforts. You need to start somewhere. Start by getting something – anything – down on paper."

Ann Lamott, *Bird by Bird*, 1995, pp. 22, 25

How to overcome writer's block

It is not uncommon to experience writer's block while working on your thesis. If you find yourself stuck, don't panic – there are a number of strategies you can employ to help you overcome writer's block and get back on track with your writing.

What to do when writer's block strikes



Try to eliminate distractions



Really focus on the writing process. Use an app to block out Internet distractions and work intensively with frequent breaks.

Keep your brain fuelled



Stay hydrated and eat when you are hungry.

Find your ideal writing environment



In what conditions do you work best? If you write better in complete silence, find a quiet space to work. If you prefer background noise, listen to music or work at a coffee shop.

Use less formal written methods to brainstorm ideas



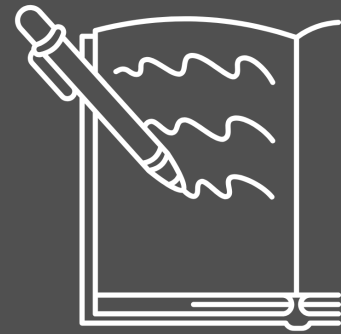
Post-it notes, a flow chart on bristol board, writing bullet points, drawing mind maps, or even pictures can help you to centre yourself on your topic.

View ["What to do when writer's block strikes" image description](#)

Create a writing routine

Another helpful strategy is to create a writing routine. Creating a writing routine helps improve productivity and writing quality by providing structure and consistency to your writing process. Repeat the same steps each time you begin to write.

Create a writing routine



If the routine fails

If the routine doesn't help, or you find your energy lags in the middle of the day, change your pace, move to a different location, try a different style of music or background noise, change your posture, or even change your font size.



Just write

The first few sentences or paragraphs may not be good, relevant, or included in the final draft, but will help you get into the writing mindset and get ideas flowing. Set a timer for 5 minutes and try not to take the pen off the page - or your fingers off the keys - in that time.



Avoid stubbornness and perfectionism

Accept that the first draft will not be perfect and will require revisions. If you are stuck on a particular phrase or sentence, try erasing it completely and starting over with a different approach.



Develop a support system

Once you have given your suggestions, review the author's changes. Reach out to friends, peers, and others who can help you through difficulties. Peers will understand the process and can give

View [“Create a writing routine” text description](#)

18. English as an Additional Language

English is a daunting language with many eccentricities and can be difficult to learn. Learning a language fluently takes an incredible amount of time and effort, so make sure to seek out all available help to make this process easier.

At McMaster, the [McMaster Office for the Development of English Language Learners \(MODEL\)](https://meld.humanities.mcmaster.ca/model/) [https://meld.humanities.mcmaster.ca/model/] is a program that exists to help both undergraduate and graduate students who are English language learners. They offer consultations, workshops, and English-language training from certified professionals, which may be useful to you as you write your thesis.

Tips for writing when English is an additional language

Review the following poster, which provides eight suggestions for English language learners who are looking for ways to support their thesis writing.

Tips for writing when English is an additional language

1

Read English

Read intensively in English on your topic and familiarize yourself with the specific language of your field. Reading English fiction can also help strengthen your creativity in language choice. You can also watch English films, TV shows, and documentaries with subtitles.

Find on-campus resources

Familiarize yourself with the on-campus and off-campus resources available for learning and strengthening English writing skills.

2

3

Practice frequently

Write smaller pieces of writing and have Google Translate read them to you. Listen for awkward sounding phrases and fix them.

Use a grammar checker

Find a grammar checking software that tells you the specific grammatical issues in your writing. Many English language learners use Grammarly to help identify common grammatical errors in their Word documents, as well as in emails and other written content

4

5

Get help online

Look for YouTube videos, online help guides, or even Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), which can help you become comfortable with more complex grammatical structures.

Talk to your supervisor

6

View [*"Tips for writing when English is an additional language" text description*](#)

19. Further Reading on Writing

Glasman-Deal, Hilary. *Science Research Writing for Non-Native Speakers of English*. LCP, 2009.

Lamott, Anne. *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*. New York: Anchor Books, 1994.

Machi, Lawrence A. and Brenda T. McEvoy. *The Literature Review: Six Steps to Success*. London: Corwin, 2016.

Turabian, Kate L. *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations, Eighth Edition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013.

Zinsser, William. *On Writing Well: The Classic Guide to Writing Nonfiction*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2016.

20. Editing

This section offers suggestions for how to effectively edit your thesis. Editing is a key part of the writing process, which is often neglected.

William Zinsser advises that “Rewriting is the essence of writing.”¹

There are two forms of editing

1. **Substantive editing** of content, where the arguments, evidence, logic, structure, and organization of the piece of writing are assessed. This macro-editing should come first in the editing process.
2. **Copy editing** of grammar, word choices, repetition, and so on. Once all major substantive reworking is done, copy editing ensures the writing is clear, concise, and grammatically sound.

Tips for substantive editing

1. Once you have finished writing a chapter, paper, or section, take a break. Avoid starting to edit a piece of writing you have just completed.
2. Make a list of the top three overarching arguments in the chapter, section, or thesis.
3. Create a reverse outline. Take the piece of writing and reduce it to the essential argument of each paragraph or section. Write out the argument of each paragraph and edit for the structure and presentation of your ideas.
 - Do these ideas and arguments flow logically?
 - Has the reader been given the previous knowledge they need to understand subsequent concepts/assertions?
 - Could the ideas be better structured to make a more convincing argument?
4. Go paragraph by paragraph and check that each argument is well supported with evidence.
5. If possible, have someone unfamiliar with your topic read your writing to see

where you may need to explain jargon or concepts more clearly. As a general rule of thumb, your thesis should be able to be understood by the “knowledgeable, but uninformed” reader – like an upper year undergraduate student in your program.

6. Sometimes, it is easier to use the track changes and comments functions to suggest changes on your first re-read as you self-edit. This can allow you to go back through a second or third time and think more intensively about how to implement those changes. Flagging something as “confusing”, “unclear”, or “needs more explanation” allows you to return to it later without interrupting the editing process. Making notes to yourself in the document as you edit can be a useful way to keep track of changes that need to be made.

Tips for copy editing

1. Take your time, and leave yourself lots of time to edit – editing should be the lengthiest part of the writing process. It can also be the most tedious and difficult, so create small goals and build rewards and breaks into your editing process.
 2. Change the format of the document so it looks unfamiliar. Switch the font, make the font bigger, or change the background colour. Such changes will allow you to more easily see typos, misspellings, word omissions, and other things that may otherwise go unnoticed. Consider editing your document in PDF form for one pass-through. You may notice things you were not picking up on before.
 3. Create a checklist of your common grammar mistakes, and do a pass through of your writing looking for each one in turn. This may be time consuming, as you will read through the document several times, but it is the best way to catch the majority of your errors. See the checklist below as a place to get started.
-

Edit together! Set up an editing group

Having others read your work allows them to see typos you have gone blind to, and to check that your explanations are clear. Editing others’ work is also a good way to learn what mistakes to look for in your own. Consider forming a small group with students who are at a similar stage in the writing process.

Copy editing checklist

Using a copy editing checklist can be helpful because it ensures a thorough and systematic review of written content, which reduces errors and improves the overall quality of your work. Use a copy editing checklist such as the one below during the editing stage of your thesis.



Copy Editing

- Passive voice
- Tense changes
- Varied sentence structures
- Repetitive language
- Wordiness
- Comma splice errors
- Contractions
- Personal pronouns
- Colloquial language
- Other:

View [“Copy Editing” text description](#)

Notes

1. William Zinsser, *On Writing Well* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 4.

21. Further Reading on Editing

Cheney, Theodore A. Rees. *Getting the Words Right: How to Revise, Edit & Rewrite*. Cincinnati: Writer's Digest Books, 1983.

Editors' Association of Canada. *Editing Canadian English*. Toronto: Macfarlane Walter & Ross, 2000.

PART III

STAYING WELL WHILE WRITING



“Lately, I’ve felt overwhelmed by the pressures of thesis work and home and work commitments. I’m not sure how to balance everything.”

“I need help with creating spaces where I can focus.”

“I feel alone in graduate school. I had this amazing support network in undergrad, but everyone has moved away.”

Does this sound like you?

Use this section for tips on:

- Seeking and creating work-life balance
- Maintaining wellness: understanding the 5 domains of health
- Building communities: within and outside of your department
- Resources on and off-campus for writing and general wellness supports

Note that all links will open in a new window or tab.

22. Seeking Work-Life Balance

The concept of “work-life balance” is about creating the ideal split between your work commitments and other roles outside of work. For a graduate student, this may involve balancing your academic and teaching responsibilities, such as working on your thesis, with social, cultural, religious, and other commitments.

Techniques to achieve “balance”

- Keep work at work. Create healthy boundaries between your work commitments and extracurricular and home life. Actively separating your work and home life, such as walking home from work or turning off your email/electronic devices at home is key. Even though it might be possible, you do not *need* to be available 24/7.
- Make choices that bring you a sense of fulfillment. Learn to say “no” to commitments that are not aligned with your future directions.
- At the start or end of each day, make a list of core priorities for the day (e.g., 2 to 3 manageable tasks) and set aside enough time to complete the tasks. Even if other tasks come up, you will have achieved part of your to-do list.

“Having a dog, I was forced to go for a walk and play with her everyday, which was amazing. Living with my partner now, he does a very good job at pulling me away for dinner, and little things that let me come up for air.”

Anthropology, 3rd year, PhD

“While I was a thesis in lab I wouldn’t say I had a great work-life balance while writing. At times my work-life balance was okay. I would suggest the following:

1. *Maintain consistent wake and sleep times*
2. *Do some physical activity everyday (at least 30 minutes)*
3. *Talk to someone daily even if it is just to complain about the writing process; it’s comforting to know that everybody struggles with this to some degree*
4. *Don’t feel the need to physically be present in the workspace/lab if you are just writing. Inform your supervisor that you will be writing from home, library, coffee shop, etc. Be in an*

environment that makes you most productive

5. *Work hard and play hard. Take at least one day off a week if possible. Play sports, read, sleep – whatever rejuvenates you.”*





Chemistry, 2019


23. Domains of Health

There are six aspects, or “domains”, of maintaining personal wellbeing that pertain to students: social, intellectual, emotional, mindfulness & spiritual, physical, and occupational¹, the first five of which are applicable for graduate students. Maintaining health in each of these domains can help sustain work-life balance.

The following table lists these five domains of health and offers suggestions for ways to encourage and maintain wellness in each area. Looking at the table, consider which domains you are currently tending to and which may perhaps need more attention.

Table 2: Domains of health definitions and examples

Domain	Examples
<p data-bbox="165 250 360 282">Social Domain</p>  <p data-bbox="496 315 847 533">This domain highlights creating and maintaining healthy relationships with your family, friends, colleagues, and other members of your social circle.</p>	<ul data-bbox="906 271 1426 613" style="list-style-type: none"> • Plan regular events with friends and family, whether it be board games, hiking or walking trails, or sharing a meal. • Get involved in clubs and sports organizations on campus. • Have honest conversations about what “healthy” relationships look like to you and how you can best give and receive support during your degree.
<p data-bbox="165 685 432 716">Intellectual Domain</p>  <p data-bbox="496 748 852 902">This domain highlights engaging in creative and mentally stimulating tasks to expand your knowledge and skills.</p>	<ul data-bbox="906 781 1398 965" style="list-style-type: none"> • Engage with learning about research or recent world events outside of your discipline through friends or reading the news. • Take up a mentally stimulating hobby.
<p data-bbox="165 1090 571 1122">Mindfulness-Spiritual Domain</p>  <p data-bbox="496 1155 823 1310">This domain highlights connecting with your inner self, values and beliefs, and any spiritual relationships you have.</p>	<ul data-bbox="906 1173 1430 1391" style="list-style-type: none"> • Find space and time to experience quiet moments of thought or guided mindfulness. • Spend time reconnecting with nature or spaces that bring you joy. • Take part in religious activities if you belong to a religion.
<p data-bbox="165 1496 389 1527">Physical Domain</p>  <p data-bbox="496 1561 847 1778">This domain highlights the importance of maintaining physical wellness through diet and nutrition, exercise, sleep, and preventative healthcare practices.</p>	<ul data-bbox="906 1561 1422 1812" style="list-style-type: none"> • Get at least 6 to 8 hours of sleep each night. • Consider incorporating exercise into your day-to-day activities. For example, go on lunch hour walks with friends and colleagues. • Eat lots of fruits and vegetables and drink plenty of water.

Domain	Examples
<p data-bbox="164 226 416 255">Emotional Domain</p>  <p data-bbox="496 293 839 483">This domain highlights awareness of – and connection to – positive and negative feelings and your approach to managing stressors.</p>	<ul data-bbox="906 309 1385 528" style="list-style-type: none"> • Find experiences that “de-stress” you and make that part of your regular self-care schedule. • Seek support from friends and peers or professional help. • Maintain a positive attitude and accept mistakes as they arise.

Everyone is different in their approach to health and in their abilities to pursue wellness in each area – there is no “one size fits all” to this exercise. The key to the domains of health is to reflect on your present health habits and consider which areas you feel are at optimal “health” and which areas may need more attention.

Notes

1. Hettler, B. (1976). The six dimensions of wellness. Retrieved from <http://www.hettler.com/sixdimen.htm>

24. Supporting Mental Health in Graduate School

Mental health is comprised of your emotional, psychological, and social well-being, which often determines how we interact with other people, how we handle stress, and how we make decisions – all of which are integral components of your graduate school experience.

We all experience changes in our mental well-being during graduate school (e.g., changes in mood; challenges with managing the many areas of stress in your life). Seeking out help is a normal part of managing changes to our mental health, either as a proactive measure or in response to an event in your life. Some students seek help from friends, family, or peers, while others seek professional counselling supports on campus or in the community.



At McMaster, there are mental health supports for students who are looking for structured counselling support, supports from peers and groups, or online/self-help resources. You can review a full list of the services and resources offered by [McMaster's Student Wellness Centre](https://wellness.mcmaster.ca/resources/) [https://wellness.mcmaster.ca/resources/] to learn more.

A common starting point for students is to seek support through Counselling at the Student Wellness Centre, where they will explore options for support on-campus, which could include further counselling support through the Student Wellness Centre, counselling support in the community, connections to wellness skills programming, or connections to other resources. You can learn more by reviewing the [Counselling page](https://wellness.mcmaster.ca/services/counselling/) [https://wellness.mcmaster.ca/services/counselling/] of the Student Wellness Centre website.

If you are looking for off-campus supports, there is a graduate-specific 24/7

counselling services phone line called “Empower Me”. The phone number is 1-844-741-6389.

You Are Not Alone: A Graduate Student’s Experience with Mental Health

“In the second year of my PhD, while reading for my second comprehensive exam, I was diagnosed with a Generalized Anxiety Disorder and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder – the symptoms of which I had been experiencing for a while without seeking help or being able to put a name to what was going on. I had been struggling that semester, not just because of school, but writing my comp exam certainly became a secondary stressor for me, as I felt unable to focus or absorb material at that time. I was spending a lot of time and energy learning to take care of my mental wellness in that season and feared failing my comprehensive exam, and not being able to make it through the reading list on time. In conversation with my supervisor, who was very understanding, I took a step back from reading for a month and read at a slower pace. Previously being a very type-A, “able to handle anything” personality, I certainly experienced impostor syndrome at this time – wondering if my love of learning and passion for research would come back. I completed my comprehensive exam on time that semester, but worked to a modified schedule and learned to adjust my expectations of myself on days where less work could be done. I also learned that it is possible to re-define success – the “ideal type” of the graduate student who spends late hours in the lab or the office working 24/7 is not me. I need more time, a slower pace, and to set boundaries to be able to take care of myself and have a full life with other components besides grad school/ academics. Part of reaching this positive space has involved changing my thinking about what it means to be successful in graduate school, working closely with my supervisor to maintain the boundaries I need, and having other people and activities in my life that are not part of the academic community, but that are equally as important to me. With several years under my belt now, I feel very empowered in managing my mental wellness while also succeeding to work in an academic environment. Some of that comes from advocating for external support and boundaries, but a lot of it is actually an internal acceptance and even contentment with my own strengths and limitations.”

25. Building Communities of Support

The term “community of support” refers to a group of people who are brought together by common interests, values, and/or beliefs who support one another with common goals.¹ For many graduate students, finding a community of support is key to their success – both with their research and in their personal lives. Peers in your department, or members of a shared interest group – like an ultimate frisbee team or cooking group – can provide much needed social and emotional support and can often normalize common fears and anxieties of being a graduate student (e.g., “imposter syndrome”). Here are some ways you can bring together communities of support within or outside of McMaster.

Building communities within McMaster

- Take part in or create opportunities for shared experiences with individuals in your department or lab group. This might include lunches, hiking/walking breaks, social events, and/or sports leagues.
- Join a group mindfulness or peer-to-peer discussion forum with other graduate students. Learn more by reviewing McMaster’s [guide on mindfulness](https://hslmcmaster.libguides.com/c.php?g=306766&p=2045013) [https://hslmcmaster.libguides.com/c.php?g=306766&p=2045013].
- Set up a weekly writing club in your department.
- Attend regular graduate events run through the Graduate Student Association or other graduate bodies (e.g., trivia night at the Phoenix or International Student Board Game Nights). The School of Graduate Studies Student Life team puts on free social events for graduate students throughout the year, like ice skating in the winter. Keep an eye on your inbox for the mailer announcing these events; sign up and encourage a group from your lab or department to come.
- Do you have children? Consider joining the GradParents Network, joining the GradMoms Circle, and attending the Graduate Student Family Picnic.
- Participate in a [Thesis Writing Bootcamp](https://gs.mcmaster.ca/thesis-bootcamp/) [https://gs.mcmaster.ca/thesis-bootcamp/].



Building communities outside of McMaster

- Join a social or cultural group that caters to your interests. For example, join a rock climbing gym or pottery class, volunteer with a long-term care facility, or learn a new skill like gardening or cooking
- Meet new people by actively attending free events in the Hamilton community, such as Art Crawls, Studio events, or by taking hikes or walk through the local trails. Review [Tourism Hamilton's Events Calendar](https://tourismhamilton.com/events-calendar) [https://tourismhamilton.com/events-calendar] to learn more.

"Within McMaster, the group of graduate students I began with in my program were involved with inter-murals my first few years. We had "Sociology Grad Student" teams in basketball, indoor and outdoor soccer, floor ball and other sports. Getting involved with these teams (although I was not a

very sporty person) allowed me to connect with other grad students and develop relationships beyond the lab/office. There was a great culture of this in my department – as well as having lunch together and also of reading together at coffee shops while doing courses or studying for comps. This provided a group to talk to academically and personally. If this type of culture doesn't exist in your department, I would suggest giving inter-murals, coffee shop study dates or something else a try to build community. Participating in activities put on by the school of graduate studies also helped, as well as being involved with several SPICES grant groups during my PhD.”

Sociology PhD Graduate



Notes

1. MacQueen KM, McLellan E, Metzger DS, Kegeles S, Strauss RP, Scotti R, Blanchard L, Trotter RT. (2001). What is community? An evidence-based definition for participatory public health.

Am J Public Health. 91: 1929-1938.

26. Final Tips for Graduate Students

If you could tell your first-year graduate self one thing, what would it be? What advice do you have for incoming graduate students?

“Try to take weekends off. It won’t always work, but set out your goal to do non-thesis work on weekends. Recharge, and your work week will be so much better for it.”

Anthropology, 3rd year, PhD

“Advocate for yourself. Good graduate students are hard to come by so you have more leverage than you think. Also if your heart isn’t into it 100% then don’t do it because graduate school is a tough job with long hours and little pay. For incoming graduate students, communicate clearly and consistently with your supervisor. Develop an individual development plan (IDP) with them so you have a better understanding of your career and so that graduate school can add more value to your career goals.”

Chemistry, 2019

“Relax! The fact that you are here means you have earned the RIGHT to be here; you don’t need to kill yourself working so hard to try and prove yourself. You wouldn’t have been accepted if your supervisor did not have at least some confidence in your abilities. Work hard, obviously, but relax a bit too.”



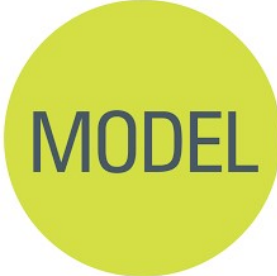



PhD, third year

“You belong here and you have something to contribute, but also don’t base your entire identity around being an academic or graduate student. Who you are should not need to constantly rise and fall based on successes and failures in this arena.”

Sociology PhD Graduate

27. On and Off-Campus Resources

Table 3: McMaster student services

Service	Description
 <hr/> 	<p>School of Graduate Studies [https://gs.mcmaster.ca/]</p> <p>The School of Graduate Studies provides key information on everything from policies around thesis writing and defense to maintaining healthy relationships with your supervisor, to supporting graduate student life. Review these key Graduate Community Resources [https://gs.mcmaster.ca/current-students/resources/] to learn more.</p>
	<p>The McMaster Office for the Development of English Language Learners (MODEL) [https://meld.humanities.mcmaster.ca/model/]</p> <p>MODEL Supports students whose first language is not English. The McMaster Office for the Development of English Language Learners in Thode Library may be of use to graduate students.</p>
	<p>Student Wellness Centre [https://wellness.mcmaster.ca/]</p> <p>The on-campus wellness centre provides counselling, medical, and other wellness services and programs.</p>
 <hr/> 	<p>Student Accessibility Services (SAS) [https://sas.mcmaster.ca/]</p> <p>SAS provides academic supports and accommodations for students with disabilities at McMaster.</p>

Key McMaster University policies

- [Graduate Work Supervision Guidelines for Faculty and Students](https://gs.mcmaster.ca/current-students/resources/graduate-supervision/) [https://gs.mcmaster.ca/current-students/resources/graduate-supervision/]
 - [Guide for the Preparation of Master's and Doctoral Theses](#) [downloadable PDF]
 - [McMaster University Policy for Academic Accommodation of Students with Disabilities](#) [downloadable PDF]
 - [McMaster University Workplace and Environmental Health and Safety Policy](#) [downloadable PDF]
 - [McMaster Graduate Calendar 2023-2024](https://academiccalendars.romcmaster.ca/index.php?catoid=48) [https://academiccalendars.romcmaster.ca/index.php?catoid=48]
-

Spaces to write

- Consider writing in [McMaster library spaces](https://library.mcmaster.ca/spaces) [https://library.mcmaster.ca/spaces]
 - [Graduate Student & Postdoctoral Fellows Study Room](https://library.mcmaster.ca/spaces/grad-room) [https://library.mcmaster.ca/spaces/grad-room] in Mills Library
 - Off campus, consider [local coffee shops](https://www.narcity.com/toronto/15-super-cute-cafes-you-need-to-visit-in-hamilton) [https://www.narcity.com/toronto/15-super-cute-cafes-you-need-to-visit-in-hamilton] or the [Hamilton Public Library](https://www.hpl.ca/) [https://www.hpl.ca/]
-

Encouraging work-life balance

- Exercise at the McMaster gym, [Pulse](https://rec.mcmaster.ca/programs/pulse-fitness-centre) [https://rec.mcmaster.ca/programs/pulse-fitness-centre], at off-campus gyms, or other recreation spaces, such as hiking/walking/biking trails, skating arenas, or swimming pools
 - [Hamilton Parks & Recreation](https://www.hamilton.ca/parks-recreation) [https://www.hamilton.ca/parks-recreation]
 - [Hamilton Adapted and Inclusive Programming](https://www.hamilton.ca/things-do/recreation/programs/adapted-and-inclusive-programming) [https://www.hamilton.ca/things-do/recreation/programs/adapted-and-inclusive-programming]
 - [Royal Botanical Garden Trails](https://www.rbg.ca/onthetrails) [https://www.rbg.ca/onthetrails]

- Explore [Hamilton Waterfalls](https://tourismhamilton.com/hamilton-waterfalls-guide) [https://tourismhamilton.com/hamilton-waterfalls-guide]
- Attend a [School of Graduate Studies event](https://gs.mcmaster.ca/news-and-events/events/) [https://gs.mcmaster.ca/news-and-events/events/]
- Consider attending mindfulness events. Visit the [McMaster Okanagan Office of Health & Well-being](https://okanagan.mcmaster.ca/) [https://okanagan.mcmaster.ca/] to learn more.
- Do what you love! Join a [club or team](https://msumcmaster.ca/clubs/clubs-directory/) [https://msumcmaster.ca/clubs/clubs-directory/]
- Attend [Hamilton events](https://tourismhamilton.com/events-calendar) [https://tourismhamilton.com/events-calendar]



