

What Makes a Good PhD?

Notes taken at the Student Learning Centre PhD Network, 15 August 2001

Based on panel discussion. Panellists were: Helena Catt (Political Studies), John Hosking (Computer Science), Julie Park (Anthropology), Michael Townsend (Education).

In Preparation

Don't be afraid to take extra courses if you need to gain extra knowledge e.g. brush up on statistics or a topic area in which you feel your knowledge is weak. Do this through your department/faculty or Student Learning Centre as appropriate.

Put time in at the beginning rather than at the end.

Establish a good supervisory relationship (see later).

Topic Choice/Research Question

Choose a topic that you find interesting and explain to the reader *why* the topic is interesting. An interesting topic will also help you keep going.

Your PhD is about *one* thing, not *lots* of things.

A PhD does not need to be the answer to everything or *the* answer – a good PhD may raise more questions than it answers. The questions that you raise are the issues that later researchers will look at (or you can look at later in your academic career!).

Your PhD is generally not the end of your academic life. It will be an important contribution to knowledge, but you're likely to contribute more later.

When choosing a topic, look for the 'light' amongst other research. A good piece of advice is to pick a research article that really grabbed you during your Master's or other postgraduate study. Read this several times and afterwards say "I want to do X from this". In the topic formation stage, it's much better to read one or two articles intensively than read as much as you can.

Supervision

Your supervisor is your best friend! ☺

Your relationship with your supervisor needs to be right for you, your topic as well as your supervisors.

Keep in mind that your supervisor will be able to view the bigger picture, they will have a good idea as to whether your topic is manageable, pitfalls you may encounter along the way, what the oral exam will be like etc. Listen to them!

Try to go to your supervisor with possible *solutions* rather than *problems* – show some initiative.

Generally, supervisors hate to see first drafts – try to have a reasonable go at it before giving them a copy to read. Supervisors are not there to sort your writing out for you – that's your job!

Your Narrative

Consider how the narrative occurs in your discipline e.g. does your discipline give the reader the answer and then explain how you arrived at this answer, or does it guide the reader through the process of finding the answer? Within this, consider if you feel comfortable using this narrative.

Think about why you have chosen the structure you have – can your thesis be structured better?

Be Kind to Your Reader

A PhD is NOT a mystery novel! 😊

Set the scene for your reader, position them and then guide them through your thesis. A good PhD will tell a story. Make good use of 'signposts' – tell the reader where you are going to go, summarise afterwards, and have appropriate links throughout.

On the Literature Review

Consider the placement of your literature review. Should this be a chapter at the beginning of your thesis or is it better to have an 'invisible literature review' which discusses your literature throughout the thesis.

The literature review should be balanced with the remainder of the thesis e.g. it generally should not take up two-thirds of an empirical thesis.

Keep in mind that the literature review is not *your* ideas or new information. Therefore, try to hit the reader with something new well before page 50 of your thesis!

A good PhD will indicate to the reader that the student *knows* the literature.

The literature review that you first write is not the one that will be included in your final product. The version of your literature review that is finally included needs to be very *focused*. Some supervisors recommend writing this after you have written your results, this will help your focus.

The Context & Your Contribution

Understand your context well and indicate that you are aware of it.

Make it clear to the reader *what* you are contributing.

Your contribution needs to be unique, and show originality.

How will you make your contribution original? Try to find your piece of the jigsaw – try something new (perhaps a new methodology), make new links, borrow something from another field, or try something in a new context.

Concluding

Be critical and reflect on your work. Take some time out from your PhD before final revisions – go visit a beach without your notes and really think about it.

Acknowledge the limitations of your PhD.

Your final chapter should elevate the tone of your PhD – leave the reader in a positive frame of mind. Consider questions such as ‘Why did I do this?’, ‘How will this change the world?’.

Conciseness & Confidence

Don’t use ‘woolly’ terms or um and ah over what you are trying to say – get to the point!

Make strong sentences and don’t use conjecture.

A PhD is not about how much you can write – don’t generate words just for the sake of it.

How long should a PhD be? How long is a piece of string?

Be Concrete

A PhD is often about developing an abstract idea and making it concrete. A good way to help make this idea concrete is to use examples to illustrate throughout.

Other Pearls of Wisdom

Set up collegial networks. These could be inside or outside your department, with other academic staff, other postgraduate students (Master’s or PhD) or professionals in your field of study. You may like to set up a formal reading, writing or support group. Visit the Student Learning Centre website for information regarding this.

When it comes to your oral exam keep in mind that *you* are the expert – be confident!

Make sure that you have a strong methodology and have collected your data appropriately.

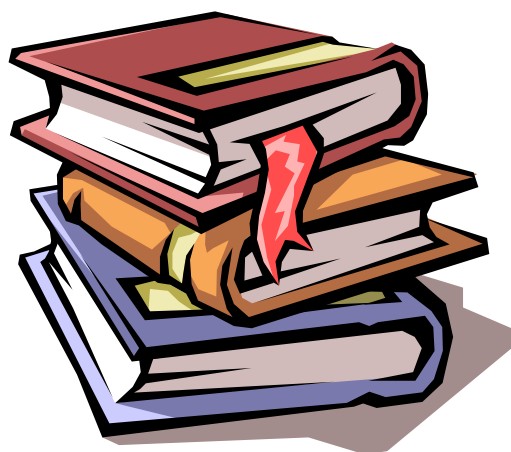
There will be highs and lows throughout your PhD. When you hit a low, keep in mind that a high is on its way. Talk to your supervisor if you feel like you need extra help – don't be afraid to ask for it either! If you create good support networks around yourself then you can approach them for assistance.

Read other PhDs in your discipline to get a feel for what is expected.

Publish as you go. This is a really way to not only get writing, but also get experience with the peer review process. Also, having one or two parts of your thesis published, stands you in good stead later on.

Re-read important research articles later down the track – your perspective of them may well have altered.

Keep in mind that if you're disagreeing with others in the field, you may also be disagreeing with your external examiners!



For further information regarding the PhD Network, please contact the Student Learning Centre office on 373-7599 ext 8850.