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GRADBritain

A magazine for and by postgraduate researchers in the United Kingdom

End of another year, a time to reflect...

Liza Filby, Editor-in-Chief (University of Warwick)
gradbritain@vitae.ac.uk

Another academic year comes to an end, you've worked hard and are feeling ready for the long-awaited summer recess. So sit back, click 'download pdf' and enjoy the latest edition of GRADBritain. This term's issue is crammed with invaluable advice and reflections on the PhD experience from those that have been there and done that. We have a double-page article from publishing consultant Josie Dixon who gives us her top tips on turning that PhD into a book. We also have a thought-provoking piece by Gareth Hughes addressing preconceptions of 'grey graduates' (aka mature PGRs) who make up a significant portion of the PGR community. On a more light-hearted note, we have Christian Roe on the issuing of honorary doctorates, Sarah Sanderson on finishing up and Leanne Hunnings on post-PhD decisions. We also have two articles which address the theme of writing: I recount my recent experience at a writers retreat in the south of France whilst Lorna, our deputy editor, offers some useful advice to all of you who are about to start writing up your research. We also have all the usual suspects: Prof. Thicket gets embroiled in his own expenses scandal, we offer 'Top Ten' reasons why dating a PGR is a bad idea, and finally Dr Flo is back with some words of wisdom for another frustrated and desperate PGR. Happy reading, Liza

P.S. I recently attended the launch of two publications by VITAE outlining the various career paths PGRS have taken, check out the following links: *What do researchers do? First destinations of doctoral graduates by subject* http://www.vitae.ac.uk/CMS/files/upload/Vitae-WDRD-by-subject-Jun-09.pdf and *What do researchers do? First destinations of doctoral graduates* http://www.vitae.ac.uk/CMS/files/upload/Vitae-WDRD-career-profiles-Jun-09.pdf

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Stuff that might interest you...

Vitae career stories on the Vitae website: http://www.vitae.ac.uk/1341/Career-stories.html

These career stories aim to demonstrate how the story tellers have applied their doctoral training in a wide range of personal and professional contexts. This is a useful and motivating resource for PGRs thinking about their post PGR careers.

Pondering on the PhD

Christian Roe (University of Surrey) reassesses the purpose of assessment...

A fortnight ago I had my final supervision of the summer term- my last meeting of my first year. It went well, my supervisor congratulated me on how I had coped with the transition from Masters to PhD and the enthusiasm and dedication I had shown in my initial year. All good I thought, pat on the back for me! 'Oh, just before you go', my supervisor added rather casually as I was leaving his office, 'the department requires that you write an assessment of your yearly progress- about four pages outlining what you have done this past year should do it.'

My first reaction to this news was defensive. I appreciated that my department needs to know what I have been doing in order to justify my academic existence and their financial investment in me, but I slightly resented what I saw as this 'checking up' process. Both my motivation and work schedule have been relentless since I started the PhD. Indeed I consider myself to be a sacrificial lamb on the altar of academia, wholly determined to give my mind, body and soul to my PhD! OK, slight exaggeration- but the point is that I haven't been a slacker these past nine months and was slightly miffed by the fact that I would now have to take time out of my schedule to prove it!

My second reaction was concern. How could I possibly chronicle hours and hours of research time in the library, which had yielded very little in the way of actual results or arguments. The PhD is a process of trial and error where the whole point is the final product. What for example could possibly be gained from detailing my various trips to the newspaper library in Colindale? These trips (three weeks in total) had been necessary to 'close down' possible avenues of research but they had generated very little actual material for the PhD.

The problem was that I wasn't actually thinking about the purpose of this exercise or how I might benefit from it. The yearly review process is not a checking up exercise, nor is it something which should be done without thought or reflection. The yearly assessment allows you to consider your progress and help you plan for the next year ahead.

Apart from my initial reluctance, I actually found the process incredibly rewarding. I started off by producing a 'done' list, followed by a 'to do' list, including a strategic plan on which conferences I wished to present at and plans for publishing an article. Reflecting on my year's work made me realise how much I had already achieved and reignited my enthusiasm for my subject.

So take time to ponder on what you have done, what you wish you had done and what you could have improved on over the past year. The second year is notoriously difficult so the better prepared you are for it, the more likely you will overcome any obstacles that get in your way.

Top ten:

Reasons not to date a PGR

1. Poverty: don't expect a PGR to buy the first round- even on a first date.
2. They have spent too much time in the library/lab and thus are blessed with a slightly pallid/sickly complexion.
3. Diverted attentions: many hold lustful fantasies about their supervisor or one of their undergraduates.
4. They will try and explain their research to you as a 'non-specialist audience'- but will give up mid-sentence, with 'ah, ask me when I'm done.'
5. They won't allow you even within an inch of their laptop.
6. Deadlines: they ignore you for at least a week beforehand and are restless, stressed and permanently in a state of 'pre-deadline coma'.
7. They are never 'off-duty' and will let you know it, you nine-to-fiver.
8. Ability to commit: PGR's cannot think beyond the PhD submission date.
9. Whilst it maybe cool to be dating a PGR, it is less cool to be dating an unemployed 'Dr of Philosophy'.
10. PGR's are forced to over-intellectualise everything, which makes breaking up a very long, drawn out and complicated process.

‘Do not go gentle into that good night . . .’

Gareth Hughes (University of Aberystwyth) offers thoughts from an older student

Have you noticed in the corners of the library a lone figure who vaguely resembles your great-uncle or your granny’s best friend? Are you dimly aware of making a seminar presentation to individuals who are older than your supervisors and have an even worse dress sense? Have you ever greeted a shambling geriatric in the department and wondered if this is some sad emeritus professor who has been pensioned off years ago but still refuses to retire gracefully? Your impressions may be misplaced. These people could well be the older researchers who have cocked a snook at retirement plans, babysitting the grandchildren and drooling over SAGA holiday brochures and decided to return to academia.

Dismiss such people at your peril for they may prove to be an added strand to the support network so necessary to the younger researchers who regularly bemoan their difficulties within the pages of this publication. They may be people who have worked in an industry that actually utilised a method devised by your predecessors and know how to utilise ideas in the practical arena. They may have employed postgraduates and know how personnel departments treat applications and CVs. They may even have lived through your specialist period of modern history or politics and, in some small way, have contributed to the events of that era.

If your interest is now aroused, perhaps you will want to know why anyone with a long lifetime of experiences should opt out of the utopian ideal of garden centres, golf clubs and stately homes and choose, instead, the often desolate and sometimes futile world of academic research. This is quite straightforward– all of us regardless of age are naturally curious but some need not only to ask the questions but also to find the answers.

In the case of the ‘pensionable postgraduate’ this quest for answers may be the culmination of a lifetime’s pursuit of a single issue or a continuation of a series of avenues investigated but with never the time to collect the studies together and ponder a critique. Whatever the case you can be sure that these people are very serious about their research and fully committed to achieving its final publication. Their research questions are not cobbled together hurriedly nor are they in preparation for some lucrative post in the future- they are simply in the university for scholarship’s sake.

But for all their worldly wisdom and plethora of experiences, these older researchers are also very nervous and uncertain of themselves. Their undergraduate careers probably ended 30-40 years ago and the universities they now enter are very different to the small, collegiate institutions of their youth. The older researcher will feel bewildered and overwhelmed by modern day academia and will, subsequently feel very isolated. To be perceived as alien by savvy twenty-somethings may bring on a wry smile but will not aid the older person’s attempts to participate fully in the life of the department and to be taken seriously by erstwhile colleagues who are usually (give or take a few years) of the same, far younger generation.

How can the older researcher be made to feel welcome? Could the presence of older researchers really be a true test of an institution’s proud policies on equality- a minority group which are facing the same difficulties as encountered by the first women to enter medical schools or the first person with disabilities to enter higher education?

Research is one of the great levellers in society– the means whereby people from all parts of the world can meet, overcome barriers and co-operate to improve humanity’s somewhat precarious understanding of itself and its effect on the planet. If research does not recognise the artificial boundaries of political geography, it should certainly be in the vanguard to overcome the equally false boundaries of age.

So next time you encounter a ‘grey graduate’ please don’t assume they are lost and have missed the turning to the post office pension counter. Greet them as friends and colleagues – you never know when they might come in useful!

Publish or perish!

Turning your PhD into a publishable book is more of a challenge than ever in today's economic climate. Publishing Consultant Josie Dixon shares the secrets of success..

Does your research belong in the ivory tower or the 'shopping mall?' A recent provocative article in *THE* diagnosed two opposing sets of standards and values at work in academia, and examined what they mean for graduate students today. Peter Barry suggested that the 'Ivory Tower' standard, based on pure intellectual quality (unsullied by notions of dissemination, usage or application) is what is required for the PhD thesis. On the other hand, when it comes to postdoctoral funding, researchers are expected to undergo a rapid change of worldview in favour of the 'Shopping Mall' standard. Here priorities are geared to an extended readership, broader relevance or applications, and ultimately some form of market value. While Barry's own concern is the need for changes in postgraduate supervision to bridge this gap, his sharply etched polarities have a particular resonance when it comes to publishing.

The raw material for an academic publication may well start life in the ivory tower, but it won't make even the most marginal economic sense unless it steps over at least part of the way into the 'shopping mall'. This is not about selling out, but about selling enough copies of a scholarly book to avoid making a loss. Publishers' editorial decision-making is underpinned by inevitable compromises to intellectual purity, made in the interests of ensuring a sustainable future for a business which is commercially marginal at best. The finest piece of research in the world is unlikely to find a publisher unless someone wants it. So, the first step is always to ask: who are you writing for? As a recent IBM advert put it, 'Stop selling what you have. Start selling what they need'.

The gap between the two worldviews is by no means unbridgeable: 'market' may be a dirty word in the ivory tower, but readership is not, and provides the ground on which scholarly and commercial values converge. It is very striking that most postgraduates and postdocs clearly find the change of perspective liberating. Asking fundamental questions of their research – such as 'why does it matter?' and 'who needs it?' – may have precipitated the occasional existential crisis (we're not all developing a cure for cancer), but for most it opens the windows onto a new and exciting sense of the ways in which their work may be generative for other scholars and applicable beyond their own specialist niche. Helping to clarify the larger stakes of the project and encouraging researchers to make the bigger claims (and then deliver on them) is a salutary and rewarding process.

Many of the commonest pitfalls in writing that tricky first-book proposal come down to the persistent pull of the ivory tower over the 'shopping mall'. In the ivory tower we can take the importance of our research for granted; in the 'shopping mall' the case has to be made and the product sold, in a tough marketplace. In the ivory tower we can communicate unmediated with fellow specialists; in the shopping mall we can only reach them by successfully convincing all the non-specialist intermediaries in the publishing world, the booktrade and the library-supply business. In the ivory tower there is the luxury of a paid readership – your supervisor and examiners – whose attention is guaranteed; in the 'shopping mall' the reader's attention has to be earned every step of the way, and a paying market is looking for value for money.

In the research community the producers of academic publications are also the consumers, so you can learn a great deal about the 'shopping mall' from your own viewpoint as a consumer. When you are considering buying a scholarly book, what are the 'must-haves' (I need to buy this) as opposed to the 'nice-to-haves' (I'll get it out of the library)? With acquisitions budgets under unprecedented pressure, the same issues are critical to library purchasing decisions: do we need this as part of our core collection, or shall we get it on interlibrary loan? If everyone opts for the latter, the market simply isn't there. The 'must-have' qualities need to be at the fore of a successful book proposal.

While Barry argues for ways to ease the transition between

Publish or perish!

the two worldviews, I think that in the current climate it's impossible to inhabit both at once. So get the PhD under your belt before you enter the shopping mall. Then it will be time to ask yourself: what are the implications, the applications, the benefits of your research (whether empirical, archival, methodological, theoretical)? Where does it lead and what is its value? What are its claims to significance and durability? If at the finishing post of the PhD you're feeling a bit jaded for all this, then wait until you have the necessary distance on your project and can recover the passion that led you to spend years of your life on it. After all, if you aren't still convinced that it matters and excited by what it yields, who else will be?

Josie's top tips for publishing your research:

1. Never send unrevised thesis material to a publisher. The job you were doing for your PhD examiners is very different from the one you will need to do for a publisher, a paying market and an international readership.

2. First impressions count. So make sure you have a strong, clearly informative title, accessible to non-specialists.

3. Make a coherent pitch. Publishers respond best to proposals with a clearly defined readership and market. They tend to be sceptical about claims to straddle several disciplines or different readership levels.

4. Think macro, not micro. All research can be viewed in two dimensions: the micro (relying on its appeal to fellow-specialists in that niche) and the macro (emphasising the wider implications and applications for the discipline as a whole). Publishers will be looking for the latter, since the former is often too narrow to find a viably sized market in book form.

5. Don't settle for filling a gap. It's a cliché to claim that your research fills a gap. I have never found this a very compelling claim, since it carries the unfortunate suggestion of a small niche in the margins between all the more important areas already covered.

6. Be a driver, not a passenger. A common pitfall for first-time authors is to overplay the homage to established figures in their field. This carries the risk of appearing to be a passenger on other people's bandwagons. Concentrate on differentiating yourself from what has gone before.

7. Have confidence in your claims. Beware the tentative discourse of aims and objectives, hopes and intentions. In the publishing world, your hopes won't make much of a selling point, and your readers will expect something more authoritative.

8. What's in it for the reader? It's all too easy to get bound up in your own motivations to publish. Make sure you're always thinking about the needs of your prospective readership.

9. Articulate the pay-off and the benefit. Make clear in your submission to a publisher where your research takes us – what is its contribution, what difference will it make? What will be the applications (scholarly or practical) of your insights and discoveries?

10. Think international. The UK is only a small part of academic publishers' market. It's essential to consider the international appeal of your research, especially in the US.

Josie Dixon runs publishing workshops for final-year PhD students and postdocs across the UK and internationally (see Vitae's Database of Trainers & Developers for details). She was formerly Academic Publishing Director at Palgrave Macmillan and Senior Commissioning Editor at CUP.

“And the doctorate is awarded to...’

Johnny Bower (University of Glasgow) on the dubious practice of bestowing honorary doctorates

In April 2009, Arizona State University refused to award an honorary doctorate to U.S. President Barack Obama because of his ‘lack of adequate qualifying achievements.’ Lack of qualifying achievements? Is Arizona State University really saying that President Obama’s curriculum vitae isn’t up to scratch? A quick look at his C.V lists some pretty remarkable achievements, most notably the small matter of being the first African American President of the United States of America.

Yet this episode got me thinking about the whole practice of bestowing honorary doctorates on the great and the good. I can see the logic of issuing honorary *degrees*- a picture of Sir Paul McCartney donned in the university’s robes receiving the obligatory scroll from the chancellor is an excellent PR exercise and an attractive image for that all-important glossy university prospectus- but why *doctorates*? Sure there are mutual benefits: for the university, prestige and publicity is to be gained by associating itself with a public figure. For the (un)worthy recipient, such honour flatters their inflated ego and sense of self-importance. Why do universities feel the need to award honorary doctorates to individuals who have no connection with the university whatsoever? Is this practice ever legitimate, or is it simply a shameless PR exercise and abuse of university’s patronage? And, more to the point, doesn’t this process undermine the hard slog that we as PGR’s have to go through to achieve that all-elusive ‘Dr’ title?

Admittedly, I am not adverse to the awarding of honorary doctorates to such luminaries as Harold Pinter, Nelson Mandela and Kermit the Frog. The latter having been awarded an honorary doctorate of amphibious letters by Long Island University in 1996! But I am not entirely comfortable in the knowledge that when I achieve my doctorate I shall be ranked alongside individuals of such skill, courage and character as Tim Allen, Tom Selleck and Terry Wogan. Indeed a quick internet search of those that have received honorary doctorates reveals how random and questionable this process is. Here are my top five list of ‘worthy’ recipients:

Dr Sting. Yes, the Geordie-tantric sex-star, famed for buying up bits of the rainforest and singing about his fellow countrymen drinking tea in the Big Apple.

Dr Mike Tyson. This worthy purveyor of gentlemanly values was duly awarded an honorary doctorate in ‘humane letters’. They must have forgotten his fondness for cannibalism- Mike, to ‘chew someone’s ear off’ ain’t taken literally in the world of letters.

Dr George W Bush. No explanation needed. This is the man who stated: ‘I know the human being and fish can coexist peacefully’.

Dr Vladamir Putin. Former Reagan- spying KGB, kick boxing, anti-democracy hardliner and closet ABBA fan. Well, every hard man needs his soft side.

Dr Steve Tyler. Rubber lipped, pelvic thrusting frontman of over-rated band Aerosmith- Liv Tyler is no recompense for that ‘Armageddon’ soundtrack.

I don’t wish to sound preachy about this, but I do think that the awarding of such honours does undermine the serious hard graft that we PGR’s have to go through to achieve a PhD. The only criteria for receiving a doctorate should be the writing of a thesis, that is, an original piece of research which expands our knowledge of the world. The granting of honorary doctorates, should be viewed alongside other vulgar forms of patronage which unfortunately seems to pervade all our public institutions. Britain, (along with America), is supposed to be a land of meritocracy, and yet, in the sphere of education, where this principle should reign supreme, universities seem to be falling victim to plutocracy, cronyism and celebrity culture.

The break up...

Sarah Sanderson (Royal Holloway) shares her thoughts on how to approach the final months of the doctorate.

I openly admit that I am scared about submitting my PhD. Fearful of subjecting my work to scrutiny and of producing a *final* 100,000-word document that will adequately reflect three years work and answer my research questions. I am also haunted by the idea that I will not make the deadline or that I won't ever finish the bloody thing. Then there is the feeling of dread when I consider what I am going to do afterwards- yes, the nightmare of being unemployed with three degrees.

I feel like someone caught in the last dying days of a relationship who knows it must finish, but can't end it, or has any clue what they will do without it. The initial love and enthusiasm, which allowed my thesis to blossom, has dissipated, only to be replaced with resentment and outright hatred. We bicker all the time, my thesis and I. Sometimes it refuses to open up, and often doesn't make sense/understand me, frequently I find myself giving it the silent treatment or just walking out in frustration. We have ceased to have anything in common, with me preferring a night out with the girls rather than in with the thesis. Attraction has been replaced with indifference, verging on repulsion. I am trapped in an unfulfilling relationship and I just need to end it.

I'm not alone in feeling like this, many of my peers in the finishing stages also feel strangulated by their thesis. So what can be done to alleviate the frustration, growing detachment and downright boredom that prevails during the last few months of a doctorate?

So my initial excitement has waned and the end is in sight. I must come to terms with the fact that the interesting part of the PhD is over and that it is time for the boring bit- the editing, clarifying and perfecting part. But first, I should congratulate myself on getting this far, I have shown a tremendous level of dedication already, and should feel positive about the fact that I am now in the home straight. I need to accept that the next few months will be a different experience from the last two and a bit years- the exhilaration and inspiration that comes with investigative research has gone, and must be replaced with persistence and a dogged resolve to get the thing done.

Nor is it a very good idea for me to be worrying about too many things at once. Yes, it is a good idea to take a pro-active (rather than fearful) approach to one's post-doctorate career but I shouldn't let this distract me from finishing. It is a fact that PGRs are better equipped to apply for postdocs, jobs and consider career options once the thesis is out of the way. However I am too fearful to wait until after submission, so have decided to approach it as a welcome break from the PhD rather than something new to worry about. But I must be strategic about it and not let it dominate my work schedule or mind. So I have chosen to designate one day a week as 'career day'- a day for Google-searches, filling out application forms and updating my CV.

I must also not allow the next couple of months to slip away and remember that long-distance runners speed up rather than slow down as they approach the finishing line. The end of the PhD requires as much organisation and dedication as the start. So I plan to compile a timetable for the next three months which will factor in chapter revisions, bibliography and checking facts and figures. The footnotes, I have been told, are the most important thing in a thesis and not something done the night before submission. Moreover, I must not underestimate the time and effort that goes into editing the text. Editing is as much a skill as writing- hey, some PGRs make a career out of it! This planning for the final months will hopefully ensure that it won't drag on and on into the next academic year.

Finally, I have come to accept that my thesis will not be the definitive or last word on my subject but will be a contribution to an on-going debate. After two and a half years working on your research project, it is hard not to feel possessive and precious about it- it was this passion which inspired the first two years. But as I enter the final stages, I have come to accept that it is time to let go, that it will not be absolutely perfect and that I will not be able to read or say everything on my subject.

After due consideration, I now feel less fearful about submission, ready to end it and move on, but also appreciative of the time thesis and I spent together. Like any relationship, the thesis has been a mixture of the good and the not-so-good, but all in all I can safely say it has been the most rewarding and fulfilling experience of my life, and has equipped me with skills and dedication which I can apply to a range of careers and other aspects of my life- now, if only I could deploy the same attitude to men!

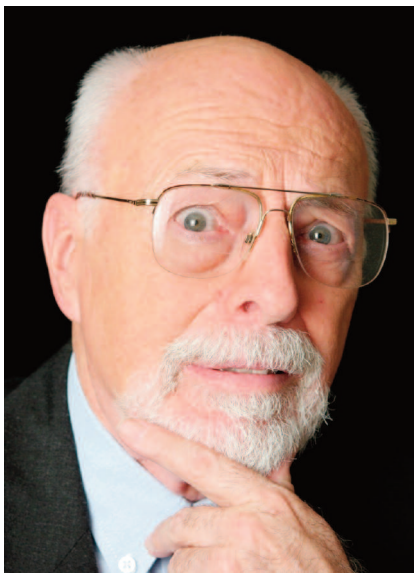
Expensive tastes by Prof. Geoffrey Thicket

Today was my last teaching day of this academic year. But it started with a rather humiliating 'little chat' with the Vice Chancellor and his henchmen. The Government expenses scandal has had a truly horrible effect on my standard of living this term. Having followed the news, the powers that be at the University decided to look into our own expense claims, and unfortunately they found a few, erm …..'irregularities'.

I am certain that I can't possibly be 'the VERY worst culprit', as the Vice Chancellor put it at our meeting this morning. There are a few things that in order to do my job properly, I simply can't do without. For many other professors their necessities might include notepads, a laptop computer, a book or two– that sort of thing. I really can't see why my reasonable claim for whiskey, slippers, a duck-island, a pocket watch and the occasional chauffeur-driven car can't be considered in the same way. The whiskey and tobacco are necessary substances to clear my mind for work, and when I'm tired after a hard day it would almost be dangerous to drive myself home!

I do take on board that the new Green velvet-covered Chaise longue I ordered for my study was not exactly the 'basic office furniture' mentioned in the college guidelines. It WAS rather more expensive than an office chair – but it's far more useful – I can sleep on it, read on it, and even conduct tutorials on it when I want to create a more informal setting for my (female) students.

The departmental finances have also been under scrutiny. I have been told (in a not very professional shouty voice by the



Vice Chancellor) that the English department usually compares quite favourably with expensive departments like Geography or Chemistry. But this year (by coincidence the exact period in which I have been temporary head of the department) we have somehow managed to spend more than any other department in the University.

I have tried (no one seems very sympathetic) to explain that the weekend field trip I organised to Paris with five of my undergraduate female students was a very suitable way of spending that generous research grant. The champagne and restaurant bills I put on expenses were all necessary in order for them to truly appreciate the sheer decadence of 19th Century Paris and its influence on literature. How better to understand the Parisian Flâneur than by becoming one?

A very unhelpful professor in a different department (I think she was jealous) commented that our little trip didn't really fit in with the 'exploration of 20th Century Australian Poetry' brief that was supposed to be adhered to. But I'm sure a visit to Australia would have been well over our budget.

Oh well, I suppose I'll have to be more frugal from now on, so it's back to rollies and supermarket own-brand booze. . .

Anyway, I should imagine everyone will have forgotten this tiny scandal by the time we come back from the long vacation. I have a treat planned for myself this summer–a 3-month moss hunting and identification trip to the Outer Hebrides. My wife and I had almost come to a truce, but when I told her I'd booked this fascinating holiday she threw me out of the house again. I don't see what she's fussing about – what could be more enjoyable than 4 weeks camping on the peat bogs looking for rare mosses?

The best thing is that with a little tweaking I think I could write off the whole holiday as a 'research' trip to investigate the development of Gaelic story-telling techniques. I may as well make a claim for my tent too...

Prof. Geoffrey Thicket,

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(with help from Kiri Bloom)

Solitary confinement

GRADBritain editor, Liza Filby (University of Warwick) recounts her experience at a writer's retreat...

I got up at 6.30 am this morning, went for a run round the valley, collected my water from the natural spring near-by and was at my desk working by 7.30 am. By lunchtime I had written 1000 words- not just any words, but a clear, concise, coherent 1000 words. At the end of my working day, 12 am, I had written a further 1000 words, excluding footnotes. Now before you think I am some mad-PhD writing machine, let me add a little context: I am on a writer's retreat in the South of France.

La Muse, was founded by Kerry and John Fanning eight years ago, as a place for writers to get away from the hustle 'n' bustle of life and to focus on their writing. Last September, feeling bogged down by the library routine and needing a break from the relentless distractions of the academic calendar- seminars, teaching and socialising- I decided to sign up for a month at La Muse.

First off, the place is absolutely stunning as the picture of the view from my bedroom window (see above) testifies. The house, a former monastery, has been beautifully decorated inside with each room fully equipped with the essentials; a comfortable chair, desk and Wi-Fi. The village, located in a breathtakingly beautiful valley, is idyllically French. There is a bread and meat truck which comes once a week but in terms of contact with the outside work-that's it! The house operates on a 'silent hours' policy between 9-5pm which means that there is little noise or distraction for most of the day- a perfect environment for writing.

It took me about a week to settle into my routine, but once I had, I was amazed at my productivity rate. Starting work at 7.30 am as opposed to the usual 11am at the British Library made a huge difference. Removed from such distractions such as coffee-breaks, travelling on the tube and feeding my cats, also meant that I was able to fully immerse myself in my work. The only responsibility I had each day was to feed myself and wash up, which allowed my mind to be completely focused on my work.

After four productive weeks I had written two chapters of my thesis, over 30,000 words. I also found I had a real sense of focus and renewed clarity of thought about my project. By concentrating on my writing, I also discovered my 'authorial voice'. When doing a PhD it is so easy to feel overwhelmed by the material, yet a thesis is precisely about getting to grips with the research and putting your stamp on it. The temptation to read new material and explore new avenues can also disrupt your flow. Yet at the retreat, away from books, articles and archives, I was able to distance myself from what other people had said and properly think about what I wanted to say. After a month's stay, I had achieved all I wanted work-wise and also felt fully refreshed and revitalised.

A month's trip to La Muse-factoring in accommodation, food (it is self-catering) and flight- cost me about the same amount as a fortnight's holiday in a resort. Room prices vary depending on size and the time at which you book but the important thing is to think about it as a worthwhile investment. What I produced a month in France would have taken me three months to do at home. My time at La Muse has meant that I am now on target for finishing my thesis within the allocated time so my trip will probably end up saving me money long-term.

I wholeheartedly recommend the retreat experience to PGRs. When doing a PhD it is easy to get caught up in the research and methodology, and not put enough effort into communicating all this effectively. Writing is a skill which needs nurturing like any other, and one that requires complete concentration and sustained effort- something which is much easier to achieve away from the distractions of everyday life. La Muse provided this and I would definitely recommend it to anyone wishing to get writing!....oh, and did I mention the fabulous weather?!

www.lamuseinn.com

Dear Dr Flo...

I started a full-time PhD in biological sciences about 18 months ago. Prior to my PhD I had worked in a pharmaceutical company for 2 years. I had a really good social life, lots of friends and had what felt like a good balance between work, exercise and socialising. Since I started my PhD however this has all gone to pot. I am working very long hours in the lab to get the results that my supervisor deems necessary for the project; I don't know where to begin in terms of writing up the thesis and am terrified of leaving it all to the very end. My supervisor wants me to get two publications out of the research but I can't possibly see how I can manage to do all that, finish the lab research and complete the thesis. I don't feel that there is much guidance on the standard I need to work to. I've had to give up my entire social life for my PhD and my family are worried about my physical health. I am concerned about cracking under the strain. Can you help?
Exhausted and Desperate

Dear Exhausted and Desperate,

Your lament of having given up your entire social life for your doctorate is not unusual. Many students accept it as part of the process and you may well find that your supervisor holds a similar view. This does not mean, however, that this is an ideal or indeed healthy way of obtaining a doctorate and pursuing a research career.

Firstly, and most obviously, you clearly have problems with your work-life balance and time management, which you can control. I would recommend that in the first instance you keep a 'time log' over 2 or 3 days which details every activity that you have undertaken, how long it took and whether it was planned or not. This will give you a much clearer picture of where your time is going and how productively you are spending it. Also use your time log to review your days, to work out whether you need to take more breaks and allow time for exercising and socialising.

It is well-documented that we work better with regular, short breaks and time spent well away from our work. A lot of the higher education culture thrives on 'presenteeism', where people feel they have to prove that they are working by answering emails at all times of the day and night and at weekends. In reality this proves nothing about the quality of work being done or the productivity of the person involved. Try to focus on quality of work and not quantity of hours spent in the lab.

Your institution will almost certainly organise time and workload management training courses which I would advise you to seek out. Otherwise, useful and free time management advice and tools can be found at www.businessballs.com and Stephen Covey's world-famous book *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* is also a very helpful read.

Secondly, you have expressed concerns over the level that you should be working at and I suspect that this is key in fuelling the panic that underlies your concerns about writing up the thesis and publishing papers. I would advise you to arrange a meeting with your supervisor which takes the format of a more formal annual review meeting of the kind that you were probably used to in the pharmaceutical industry. You will need to do some preparation for this meeting by reviewing your results in line with what you have identified as key objectives over the past 18 months and outlining where you think you should be going during your remaining time. You will then need to ask for feedback on your performance from your supervisor and discuss timings for the remaining objectives which include a discussion on what can be achieved in the time available. This meeting should give you a better perspective on the level you need to attain and what you need to focus on over the coming months.

Also, it is worth bearing in mind that you are probably reading lots of journal articles which are international in their standard and written by people with many more years of experience than you have. If you are trying to benchmark yourself against this standard for your doctorate then you are missing the point that your thesis is a research-training qualification and at this stage you are an apprentice and not an expert. Try to focus on being 'good enough' rather than perfect. Attempting perfection in any area of life only ends up being a fool's errand and isn't worth the resulting ill-health.

Good luck!

Do you have a problem that you would like to discuss with Dr Flo? If so, email drflo@vitae.ac.uk

Sometimes it's OK to walk away...

Leanne Hunnings (formerly of Royal Holloway now residing in Madrid) on her post-PhD journey

This time last year I was up to my neck in it. Frantically revising, rewriting and redrafting. I had a submission deadline to hit, and boy was I ever gonna make it. Here is not the place to talk about my misspent thesis-dictated years when my ex-schoolmates were busy bumming round the world learning Korean, rescuing turtles and feeding orphans, but, trust me, it rankled a little. Even more so since I'd become absolutely certain that the last thing I wanted to do after this life-sapping, social-skill zapping, tree-slaughtering thesis was bound and forgotten, laying dusty in the corner of Senate House London library, was to enter academia.

Then it struck me. I didn't have to do this anymore. Light was at the end of a musty book and controversial scholarship-filled tunnel. I had an obligation to my supervisor, to my department and to my funding body to finish a quality thesis, an obligation I felt very keenly. But that was the end of my obligations. I didn't have to sacrifice my life to them. So, I stopped writing. Just for a moment. And I started browsing the internet. I discovered a whole world of alternative employment out there. I made a momentous and horrifying decision. I wasn't going to join the ranks of bedraggled newly-PhD'd frantically surfing jobs.ac.uk once I'd been viva'd. I was – oh yes – going to bog off abroad and teach English for a year until my sanity returned and my life perspective reconfigured itself to the 2000's, I'd been stuck in 5th Century BCE Greece for a fair while.

Suddenly, just like that, the resentment vanished. I began to see my redrafting as a time period with an end in sight. I even managed to reignite my admiration and passion for the subject. I became proud of what I was writing, of the small difference I was making, and of the homage I was paying to an extinct world. For one more month, more or less, I was free to play in fantasy land, fighting battles between orthodox views and neo-feminism, exacting mental gymnastic displays between marxism and psychoanalysis. Just like that, I wrote, re-wrote and submitted. I then passed my viva successfully, banged out the odd minor correction, and then submitted permanently. I'd done it.

Within one month I was qualified to teach English, fully rejuvenated and with the sparkle back in my life. I had a full-time English teaching job in Madrid and my new life had really begun. That was six months ago and I've never been happier. I've never been poorer either, don't get me wrong, the EFL path is not paved with gold. In fact, I had no idea it was possible to survive on such a crappy wage. But I'm actually sublimely happy. I promised myself the year away and then to think about an academia career. I've since realised that I'm now in the incredibly privileged position of having a

job I look forward to going to in the morning, that I'm never bored in, and that I feel fulfilled and excited about. I'm not swapping it for the world, and no, I can't see any imminent return to academia but this wasn't necessarily a foregone conclusion. I could quite as easily have hated it, and returned with my tail between my legs. But what is crucial, critical, vital is that now I KNOW. Yes, it's a gamble to take time away from academia, and if you love what you're doing, you'd be crazy to consider it. But, if you're without ties, if you're feeling burnt out, if you're feeling like your life has become meaningless and your work flat and lifeless, then just remember this: there are other options out there. Don't close doors that you might want open in the future, (I'm still contributing articles) but just let people know you need space. You need "you time". You need to do something different for a while. It's totally acceptable. For me, it was the best thing I've done in my life, and at the moment I can't see me ever going back. For others, it will be the thing that makes you absolutely certain that academia is the path for you.

A Rough Guide... from pieces to thesis

Lorna Taylor: Deputy Editor
King's College, London, gradbritain@vitae.ac.uk

Writing up can be a long, frustrating slog. For the majority of us who do not enjoy writing, it is something we dread. So here a few tips on how to make the process a little less painful.

Change your mind-set

Writing up does not have to be a arduous and negative experience. Indeed it is the moment when your thesis comes together and can be the most rewarding part of the whole process.

If the fear of writing is preventing you from writing- a common experience, then get back to basics: why is it you have been travelling the country seeing patients from John O'Groats to Lands End? Why have you been peering into a microscope every bank holiday of this year so far? Your work has a purpose, you've done the work and now it is time to create a document that persuades the reader of its validity and gets you your doctorate.

When should you start writing?

At the beginning of your PhD! Doing this gives you a chance to develop your writing skills and helps you to stay motivated and focused. Wherever you are in the course of your PhD, start writing now...

An outline

There are a few tricks to taming the thesis beast and planning is one of them. Draw up a thesis outline of your chapter headings and sub-headings. Once you have a list of chapters and a list of things to be reported or explained, you have struck a great blow against writer's block and the 'getting started' fear. Now when you sit down to type, your aim is no longer a thesis-it is just to write a paragraph or section about one of your subheadings.

A timetable

Sit down and make a timetable for writing and draft submission. This structures your time and provides intermediate targets. If you merely aim 'to have the whole thing done by some distant date', you can deceive yourself and procrastinate. Deadlines focus your attention.

Writers' block

Writing is a slow process. Don't expect it to flow immediately. This kind of mistaken belief can rob you of your confidence which, in turn, further puts you off writing and compounds the cycle of writers' block.

Try to combat this by writing something, anything, whenever you sit down to write. It would be nice if clear, precise prose leapt easily from the keyboard, but it usually does not. Most of us find it easier, however, to improve something that is already written than to produce text from nothing. So create a rough draft for your eyes only and clean it up at a later stage.

Feedback

Try to get a peer to read over your writing and provide the valuable outsider's perspective. Once this is done and you have made corrections make sure your supervisor sees what you have produced so they can guide you from the start.

Positivity

It is important let the ego go and try not be upset if a chapter returns covered in tracked changes and comments. Your supervisor wants your thesis to be as good as possible, because their reputation as well as yours is on the line. Academic writing is a difficult art, and it takes a while to perfect. Above all, be positive!

The end bit...

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