

# Advice for Writing a Thesis

By: Two Students Who Successfully Defended

Be intentional and careful about choosing your topic. Make sure it's something with which you are passionate enough to spend a year.

Build off of previous course research if you think you've found a possible thesis topic so you have a chance to organize your thoughts and work out links early on.

Have a clear idea of where your sources are located; closer is better. Apply for the Schilling Fund to cover/reimburse travel and fees. If an archive is too far away to which to travel, most libraries can scan and send any documents.

Do as much archival research during the preceding spring and summer as you can. Doing so enables you to hit the ground running with writing as soon as classes began.

Don't be afraid to challenge popular scholarship and methodologies. Seek to bring something new to the table.

Don't be afraid of not proving your theories right the first time. Rework things. Be purposeful in your research and application of your findings/analysis. Follow the evidence.

Don't try to read every secondary source cover to cover. Only the really important ones.

Try to do a little something for your thesis each day. For me these included reading a chapter from a book and writing notes; drafting a couple sentences for a paragraph; organizing my research binders, etc.

Print out as many of your primary/archival sources as you can and create a binder. Organize it by subject and archive. Write the citation on the top of each page for easy reference later on. (This isn't a mandatory piece of advice, but having physical document worked really well for me; plus, I put everything in neat document sleeves, used tabs, and put a cover page on my binder).

Most of my heavy writing took place between 10pm and 2am, but not always. I did not subscribe to the disciplined write-at-this-time-every day mantra; the creative juices don't flow that way. At least not for me. But if scheduling writing time works for you, do that.

Have dedicated notepads/books for any thesis related scribbles. Over the course of the year I filled three notebooks and three legal pads.

When you're stuck in the writing process, take pen to paper and brain dump until the thoughts start flowing.

Embrace every opportunity to articulate your thesis and current research subtopics

aloud, whether it be to a friend, in a conference or competition, your advisor, family member, etc. Even voice record on your phone; it can be helpful to hear the words.

*Less serious but equally beneficial advice:*

In addition to saving your work in multiple places, keep organized folders on your computer for each chapter. Even create certain documents for quick reference: “Thesis/Chapter Articulations,” “Annotated Historiography,” “Working Bibliography,” etc.

If you work well to music, but find some good albums and playlists to help you through the intense writing sessions. I listened to a lot of my favorite albums in instrumental; and cafe jazz (thanks Kyle).

If you're one to have anxiety and imposter-syndrome-freak-outs, let it happen. Find a good place on your floor from which to lie and stare at the ceiling. But just for a little while. Then get up.

Find someone besides your advisor with whom you can talk about your thesis, your issues, and your writing; someone accessible to be a support system outside of your advisor.

Also, this final piece of advice is vital: every now and then, especially when you're having a tough writing day, combine the latest versions of all your work (intro, chapters, bibliographies, etc.) into a Word document just so you can have the satisfaction of seeing the page count. This matters so that you can see you're actually producing something.

Researching and writing a Master's thesis is a very rewarding process, but it's not for the faint of heart or undisciplined. Yes, some days will be harder than others, but writing the thesis does not feel so much like work when you've found a topic worth waking up for every day.