

Advice for Writers of IPH Theses

Adapted from an informal presentation by Erika Deal and Dennis Sweeney

We talked a lot about platitudes when we first dispensed this advice, like i.e. that's what all these are. Nonetheless, platitudes get repeated over and over because often they are somewhat accurate and help people out a bit. If one takes them in stride, with a sense of self adequate enough to discard the less useful pieces, but a sense of trust enough to adopt what seems to be more resonant, one might be able to lighten the load of the thesis process and produce a better piece than he or she ever had expected. We hope that this can help that be done. Good luck!

1. Plan for the thesis to be a part of your life, not a highly stressful additional thing.

Firstly this means: make plans before the Fall semester such that you will have a reasonable amount of time each day, or each week, to work solely on researching, outlining, writing, and editing. If it means dropping commitments, that makes sense, because writing a thesis is a commitment. If it means mentally preparing yourself for more hours in the library than you usually spend, you will thank yourself for having done so. Logistically plan so you can have the two hours (or however much) each day that you will need to complete the project, instead of those hours being found in the middle of the night, or at the end of the week, when an unrevised daily schedule hasn't allowed for it.

Secondly, this means: when the time comes, during Fall semester, to really fully begin, work with discipline and regularity. Inevitably, other commitments will still want to trump the sustained project, but if you work an hour or two most days, even the crazy ones (which are all of them), you should be satisfied with your progress over a long period of time.

2. You'll never be able to read all you think you need to read.

Reading everything ever written is what graduate school is for. Right now, focus on attaining a decent understanding of the broad field and then a better handle on a narrow group of sources, and then start writing as soon as you feel even marginally prepared to do so. The reading should be directed toward the point at which you start writing—i.e., “I will read and research until this point in the year, and then I will begin writing, no matter where I am, though of course I will try to stagger that reading so that I read what I want before that time,” instead of, “I will read this, this, and this, and only then will I start my thesis.”

For both of us, reading like crazy over the summer helped in this a lot, because once the school year came we already felt like we had a pretty good grasp on things.

Furthermore, once you start writing, you can direct your reading more specifically to the problems at hand or the gaps in your knowledge that you discover along the way. Rather than drudge through books that look generally useful, you can target specific chapters and paragraphs that can answer questions that arise and thus save yourself considerable time and effort in the long run while not bogging yourself down with a lot of information that you *think* might be important, maybe, when you start writing, depending on...(etc.)

3. Theses, at core, have two elements: a problem with the critical take on something, and textual solution to that problem.

A grain of salt on this, of course, because a lot of your work will have a very complex construction. But with varying splittings and organizations of these two elements throughout the thesis, such a division can be found to be true. One of us did a first chapter establishing the critical shortcomings in a field, and in subsequent chapters looked at primary texts to solve those shortcomings and provide a better answer to the question the critical texts were trying to solve. One of us explored critical shortcomings alongside primary document evidence throughout the entirety of the thesis. Although these two methods appear quite different, at their core they maintained the same problem-solution approach.

If you think of your thesis in these terms, they will serve as a helpful guide for the purpose of your research. You're looking for a problem, a question to be answered, that has not been adequately addressed or answered or that has been addressed or answered incorrectly. Not that your entire approach to criticism should itself be critical, though. For the most part, you will be standing on the shoulders of the folks you are reading. But it might be your tweaking of their theories that brings out the most truth in them.

Your writing can also benefit from this approach: by keeping in mind this basic problem-solution structure, you can avoid long descriptive or theoretical detours and excessive dependence on the (as many despairingly but mistakenly believe, infinitely superior and therefore unsurpassable or un-tweakable) work of others.

4. On showing your work to others, there are also two elements: what you want to do, and what you have to do in order to make your work valuable and good.

Showing your work to others, whether to classmates or faculty members, is always quite trying. It often feels as though comments trying to address the second point

above (the work's quality, its rigorousness, its critical helpfulness) are often taken as addressing the first (the viability of the idea at the work's core and of the person doing the work). I.e., people often take criticism somewhat personally, and for good reason because we are all very invested in our projects.

To avoid doing so, and to get the most out of people's advice, it is helpful to make the division above: what people are generally recommending are ways to mold the format, organization, and method of your original idea into a more successful project and a more successful document. Your original idea, on the other hand—the motivation driving you to work on the project, your belief that a certain thing is the case—is for the most part unassailable. People are usually just trying to tell you how to make that fundamental idea look better in the eyes of the reader, a task that occupies the majority of one's time during the thesis-writing process. It is surprising how long it takes to realize that the sole purpose of writing is for it to be read.

The other part of this is that others, because they have more distance from your project than you, are usually right. Especially professors. One doesn't want to admit it, but with a little retrospect you'll probably find this too—that you are surprised how astute others' criticisms turned out to be.

On the other side of this, when workshopping others' writing, address the format, organization, and method of their idea rather than the idea itself. Work to make their work the best it can be, rather than trying to make their work your work.

a.) Corollary to #4: You will often, in the course of showing drafts to others, find yourself inundated with ideas and material that you should read, mention, or include in some capacity. Don't let this frighten you. Instead, note everything, decide how important a given suggestion is to the problem at hand (because, after all, you are the final judge in this capacity), and act accordingly. Also remember that footnotes are absolutely your best friends and will cover you in most situations, and that if you reject a suggestion that comes up more than twice, you may want to reconsider whether you're really right or just being stubborn.

5. Your relationships with fellow students, with your advisor, and with IPH in general are key to how the process feels and how stressful it becomes.

There are two things to note here. First, IPH is a wonderful support system if you cultivate your relationships there accordingly. Very few students at the undergraduate level have the immensely helpful resource of several other students who are familiar with their project, writing style, and goals, and with the particular situations that sometimes arise in IPH. It is easy to get wrapped up in your own

work and feel frustrated that no one can quite understand what you're trying to do, or that you simply cannot communicate your interests and arguments as well as you would like, but if you keep communication open with each other, it can be incredibly helpful in terms of both technical and moral support. Similarly, keep communication open about the mechanics of the project and deadlines with your advisor and IPH faculty. Every class seems to have slightly different needs in this regard, but do insist on clear instructions and deadlines when you feel you need them, and understand that sometimes different problems are perhaps just not anticipated until you bring them up (we ran into this from time to time as the first larger IPH class, which had to adopt somewhat different rules from the smaller classes that preceded us).

Second, the relationship with the advisor. Try to come as soon as possible to a clear agreement on a working relationship that seems appropriate for both, i.e. deadlines, frequency of meeting, expectations for drafts and research. If you communicate well about these fairly straightforward things, you will be able to use the advising relationship to better advantage and (hopefully) avoid frustrations on both ends. Also remember: your advisor is there to advise, but not to be ignored when he or she doesn't "get" it nor to be taken at face value as right about everything.

6. *Don't worry about it. Or, well, only worry about it so much.*

Because there is always something to worry about, and if you weren't writing the thesis you would just be anticipating your next paper or whatever other big event is coming up. Let the stress of the thesis envelop you in a healthy way, because whether you're going to graduate school or not, stress will always be there. The thesis is a very personal thing, but it is neither the final valuation of you as a human being nor the most stressful or important endeavor that you will embark upon in your lifetime (one hopes). It may be the biggest thing you've done so far, but that should be more a point of pride than a cause for stress. You know this, of course, but it can be easy to forget to treat the project with due perspective and to let the stress get out of control.

Additionally, at the end of the game, it is not the final product that you will be most proud of. Instead, you will be most proud of the immense amount of work you put into the thing. So if you are working hard all along, and you can look back on the experience of actually doing the thing and be proud of the time and effort and thought you put in, you should be in good shape. The final product is the light at the end of the tunnel, but the light is only so nice because the tunnel was so arduous. It's the trek itself that you'll look back on most.