

Writing – A Survival Guide

Nicolette Priaulx and Sally Sheldon

In this brief handout, we aim to provide some brief guidance and insights which draw on our own experience of writing PhDs and some of the books which discuss this issue. It should be kept in mind throughout that people approach writing in different ways and there is no one right way to do it. Finding your own writing style and working methods are part of the experience of writing a PhD, and your supervisor is there to help with any problems you may have and should always be your first port of call. At the point you begin to write, we are assuming that you will have a thesis question, a central argument that you wish to make, and a basic outline for your thesis – settling on these things is consequently not covered in this session and handout.

WRITING IN THE REAL WORLD

Unfortunately for us all, writing does not occur within a vacuum – completed undisturbed and locked away from the realities of life with nothing else happening. If only we could map out things that way then progress could be made at a steady rate of X thousand words per day, across a period of Y and then the thesis would be complete, ready for submission by Z date! Hoozah!



Now there is nothing wrong with being ambitious, having a plan and working towards a solid deadline – these are all to be encouraged! But **don't be surprised or feel too gloomy when real life interferes – plan for that too.** This sounds like a rather obvious comment, but one of the reasons why people might have such a hard time may be to do with having unrealistic expectations as to what can be achieved and losing sight of the other non-delegable tasks and demands upon their time.

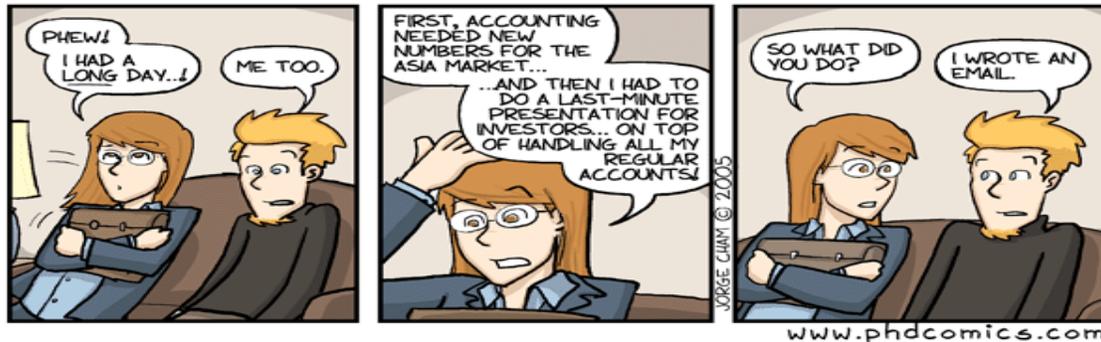
And of course, there may be a series of things that you *need* to think about alongside writing your PhD. Realistically, most of us do not come from such wealthy backgrounds so that we can afford to sit back and focus completely on the PhD/MPhil. Funding may be about to dry up, the ATM machine may be less forthcoming than it was a year or so ago, and these issues inevitably make the issue of looking beyond the thesis critically necessary. For some, the thesis is your means of entry into an academic career – and the final stage of the thesis marks the need to start exploring different institutions, job openings, research projects etc. In line with this, you may be anxious to start getting publications out and appearing at conferences in order to enhance your chances of securing a position such as a lectureship or post-doctoral fellowship. There used to be a time when supervisors would actively discourage students from seeking to publish during their MPhil/PhD, seeing this more as a distraction and something that could happen post-MPhil/PhD, but in an increasingly demanding academic market, with inflated expectations of what achievements lecturers should have under their belts, this position is very difficult to sustain.

Alongside this, there is the other side to the real world of writing a thesis – the here and now life – one huge thumping distraction! Partners and children may seem more attention seeking than ever before, family members may seem more demanding of your time, close friends go through life crises, electrical items (or bits of your house) might start falling apart and banks might start writing vile letters. And for those of you who already have working responsibilities beyond the PhD, all the demands upon your time may become extremely frustrating, upsetting even. It may feel, at this point, that life is conspiring against you – but it's not – that is just how life is. There is no "ivory tower", so in thinking about the writing process, emotionally prepare yourself for the fact that you

are unlikely to enjoy the luxury of having a period which is completely clear of distractions and take account of this in planning and setting yourself deadlines.

Much more could be written around issues pertaining to “writing in the real world” - **but the key to dealing with these difficulties is *planning*, keeping those around you aware of the task that you are undertaking and what is required, and above all, being focused.**

PROJECT MANAGEMENT, TIME-MANAGEMENT AND PEOPLE MANAGEMENT



Much of the foregoing has placed emphasis on planning – knowing where you are up to in the process and what you need to do is critical. Pat Cryer’s book *The Research Student’s Guide to Success* (Buckingham: OUP, 2000) has a useful section devoted to “planning ahead” which identifies some of the benefits of having, and revising a plan as being:

- Ease anxiety by externalizing your planning so that it need not be constantly occupying your mind;
- Provide a focus in discussion with supervisors and others;
- Provide a sense of security that you are on track;
- Prevent you from spending too long on only vaguely relevant activities just because you enjoy them;
- Allow you to enjoy taking time off with a clear conscience;
- Provide a basis for reflection so that you can plan more realistically in future.

(Cryer, 2000: p. 106)

Alongside this a plan helps you in managing and tracking your time. Are you starting to fall behind? **If you find yourself querying at the end of the day “where has the time gone? What have I actually achieved?” then it is time to take action** – for this suggests that other tasks are being prioritised over the thesis too often.

It may be useful to share your plan with your supervisor, and ask her/him to record the dates when you will be expected to provide your work in progress. Discuss what should happen if the planned chapter fails to materialise: do you want your supervisor to chase you immediately? This approach creates pressure on you to prioritise your doctoral work over other commitments and also to make sure that you are actually writing, rather than just reading and making notes. If you are continually missing deadlines, this should also prompt a discussion with your supervisor about what is going wrong and allow you to address any problems which are thus revealed.

Keeping a journal of activities that you have undertaken during the course of the day can also be a useful way of identifying what steps you might take to restructure your day/approach to this project.

For example, at the beginning of the day do you find yourself looking at (and responding to) emails? That can, as we all know, consume vast amounts of time and before we know it, half the day has gone! Instead, try to consider emails as more of a treat – start your day with writing/reviewing your work from the prior day/week – and pick up your emails later in the day (or only on alternate days). And don't keep your e-mails open in another window while you are trying to write – the temptation to switch screens to see if a message has appeared will be too great. Or do you find that you are being constantly interrupted by people knocking on your office door? Think of ways to manage the people around you so that you can get a decent period of time to spend on your research (putting a note on your door, being open/forthright with people about the task you are working on and the time you need uninterrupted etc); otherwise, you might explore whether there is another place that you can work where you are less likely to be interrupted.

The most difficult interruptions to manage dwell within the home – family. If you undertake the majority of your work at home, you'll probably have encountered interruptions from family members already! If the interruptions you are experiencing are fairly trivial but frequent, then this would suggest the need to manage the problem. Pat Cryer's (2000: 122) book suggest ways of navigating this problem, by negotiating an 'informal contract' with family members etc about time commitments, their implications and the period of time you anticipate the contract to last; going through your diary with family members at the weekends to plan out the time that you'll spend with them (which reinforces the time you can spend writing); and/or reinforcing that you are doing a "job" by 'role-playing' - "I'm off to the office now" and a formal "hi honey, I'm home!". But central to all of those tips is the need to enlist the help of others to give you the space you need to get on with your project – so while negotiating an informal contract sounds a bit odd, if those around you don't have a good appreciation of the time you need, and the space you need to do the task (and its importance to you/them) chat to them!

One of the books that deals with the subject of interruptions at length (and well) has already been given a fair bit of promotion so far: Joan Bolker's *Writing your Dissertation in Fifteen Minutes a Day* – her book provides excellent advice across the board and importantly, is rooted in the real world.

FALLING OUT OF LOVE WITH YOUR THESIS AND TREATING IT LIKE A JOB

Anyone who writes seriously over any period of time is likely to experience times when writing is difficult, when you feel like you're slogging through molasses, when even you are bored by what you writing, or, even worse, when you just can't write at all. ... The temptation is to give it up and do something else: go to the movies, go to the beach, go on vacation, or move to the other side of the continent. Sometimes one of these strategies helps... But sometimes running away from your writing is exactly the wrong fix for the problem, unless you want to give up your writing project altogether. (Tempting as this may seem at times, don't give in to this course of action unless you've considered it *very* carefully, looked at it over time and in different lights, and talked it over with rational people who have your best interests at heart) (Bolker, 1998: 93).

At the beginning of the MPhil/PhD process, more likely than not you are utterly infatuated with your thesis. All those exciting possibilities that lie ahead! A dream relationship indeed – you mark out the boundaries of your relationship, determine its content, when you want to pay the relationship some attention, the level of your investment and so on. And to some extent you might even think that your supervisor is rather like a relationship counsellor, someone who is there to make sure that you are investing enough into the relationship to make it work! But – to push the relationship analogy a little more – the thesis relationship also has its highs and lows. Theses demand a lot of your time – they are needy and completely dependent partners – they will take as much of your time as you

choose to spend upon them – and if you decide to go off and have some fun, that lazy pile of paper will just sit around and do nothing until you return.

It is not unusual for people to experience negative emotions towards their theses during the later phases (or even before!). This might involve occasional fatigue/flagging, feeling stressed and overwhelmed, or just simply fed up and wanting to move onto the next project (or life!). Indeed some people feel terribly guilty when they are not sitting at their desk plugging away. However rather than thinking of it as a dependent, needy partner who (rather than bringing you constant joy) is sapping the life-blood out of you, **instead think of the thesis more in terms of being a *project – a job – part of a programme of research which will continue beyond the life of the MPhil/PhD.*** That is what it is, at the end of the day: work. While many jobs can be exciting and extremely fulfilling, it is difficult to identify *any* job that doesn't have boring and frustrating elements to them and the sad truth is that these simply need to get done. So the best advice is to think of the thesis more as a job, which needs planning, development and importantly completion, like any other kind of work. Thinking about the thesis in this way will also allow you the opportunity to take some much-needed guilt-free time away from the thesis. Learn to take breaks too! Nevertheless, even if you can conceptualise your thesis as a project it is still difficult to avoid occasional dips in enthusiasm.

Thesis fatigue/Flagging: **if you find yourself becoming bored or losing interest in the work, this needs some analysis as to why.** Hopefully you'll still find the project as a whole worthwhile, but it may be particular *tasks* which are causing you to immerse yourself in constant email activity or other distraction techniques. Is it the particular section you are working on that you find dull and unchallenging? Perhaps the prospect of revisiting that last chapter for revision purposes is driving you to landscape your friend's garden? Or are you just finding a particular aspect of the work hard-going/challenging? Some thesis tasks are incredibly dull, but do need doing. But if you find that the task in hand is so soul-destroying as to overshadow the entire project, you should be open with your supervisor about this and see if it is possible to work on alternative tasks for a period to provide you with fresh enthusiasm.

Feeling stressed and overwhelmed: likewise, if you are feeling overwhelmed by your project, it is important to work out why that is the case (and your supervisor should be able to help here). Is the problem that you have insufficient time to devote to the thesis alongside your other commitments? Are you happy with the way that you have constructed your project, or does it now seem too big to complete? Talking to your supervisor at an early stage should help you to identify why you are feeling overwhelmed. If it is your own ability to complete a sustained piece of research which is giving you cause for doubt, then it might help to know that most (if not all) of us doubt our own abilities as researchers at times. **Remember that the University which has admitted you to do a research degree would not have done so without believing that you would be able to complete it.**

Wanting to move onto the next project/life: this is an entirely normal, even healthy, reaction to spending a lengthy period of time on one project. The trick is to harness it as motivation for finishing the thesis, so that you can move on with the qualification under your belt.

Becoming disorganised: **it is incredibly important to be organised in your research, not least because the habits which you establish now are likely to stay with you over the rest of your life.** Think critically about the way you work – how best to organise your notes? And how to keep track of all those references? Don't leave yourself in the position of having to reread an entire book

simply to find the page reference which you forgot to record three years ago. It makes sense to talk to your supervisor about how s/he organises research material, and possibly to a librarian or IT expert who can advise you on the best bibliographic software.



"Ah! But all this talk of submission and pah! "writing" up! I can't even write the blooming words on paper! Every time I sit in front of the [blank] screen, conscious as I am of how little time there is left to get this thing finished, I just dry up! The first sentence just doesn't look right. The paragraphs don't flow! This section is just crap! Oh, I'll never get this blooming thesis written!"

Image by Rob Nuijten at <http://www.torito.nl/art/>

WRITER'S BLOCK

What can we say about it? Er... Awful if you get it. Try writing anything – random gibberish; or scribble why you can't say what you want to – just to get you writing something, and then steer the flow back to the thread of your thesis (Marshall and Block, 2004: 97).

You have a plan for your thesis and a sense of what you want to write, but your brain is in distress – words are just not falling onto paper! This condition -writer's block - may well arise because of flagging, feeling over-whelmed and so on. This section looks at ways of overcoming the block and getting back on track.

Random gibberish aside, Marshall and Block (2004) have a point – in such circumstances, just write *anything*. Arguably the "block" that arises is simply the editor in you trying to interfere with the writing process ("that sentence doesn't look right", "the paragraph expresses the point I'm trying to make badly"). Write something/anything to get rid of that daunting blank screen; write in the most general terms what you basically wanted to express, how you think it fits in and why it needs to be there – and don't get so caught up on *how* you are communicating it. You can come back and polish the language later. Your supervisor/external examiners do not have a device monitoring your keystrokes so that they can see *how* you are writing at every stage of your thesis – they just see the final product. We all experience problems in writing – and often (it's an occupational hazard). **The key here is to dispense with the rule books, forget your desire to have beautifully structured prose on the page and just write!**

A 'severe' strategy suggested by Joan Bolker (1998) to really desperate cases of writer's block is to limit your writing time drastically – hence the title of her book, *Writing your Dissertation in Fifteen Minutes a Day*. She suggests that picking a length of time, even as little as ten minutes a day (something which you are certain you can manage), will get you back into the writing process. The aim is not to continue in this fashion, as it will take you a *very* long time to finish your thesis, but rather to get you 'back to a place where it's once again comfortable and, most important, possible to write' (p. 94). Other ways of tackling writer's block that Bolker suggests are also pretty useful – while we won't recount all of her (numerous) helpful suggestions here, another way of tackling writer's block is writing in a different form – perhaps writing an email to yourself, an imaginary character or to your supervisor. You don't need actually to send it, but writing something in a form that you are comfortable with, will ease you back into the writing process. It may be that the subject of your email is a brief report of what your last written work explored – and you can use this as a

platform for thinking about what you next need to do (Bolker, 1998: 95). Again, at the heart of all these suggestions is learning to ‘free-write’ and liberating your approach from the constraints of formal writing and allowing your creative juices to flow once again.

Failing that, **the other option is temporarily to distract yourself with ‘healthy’ distractions** – so as Marshall and Block suggest, getting your bibliography up to date, reading the submission guidance or undertaking research on your internal/external examiners – these are tasks which need to be done at some point and will contribute to the submission so you’ll feel less guilty at the end of the working day. You’ve done something that counts.

If you do find yourself confronting writer’s block, or indeed find yourself increasingly using ‘unhealthy’ distraction techniques as a means of dealing with this, a very nice distraction technique to undertake is reading a section about writer’s block! And here we would strongly recommend Joan Bolker’s book – not only will this give you the comfort of knowing that you are not the only person in the world who experiences writer’s block, but it does provide really good advice to train yourself out of this and deep into a “writing addiction” frenzy. And Bolker’s book deals with the issue of writer’s block amongst a series of other matters relating to the thesis process as a whole - and her tips will serve you well beyond the MPhil/PhD too.



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THE END STAGES OF WRITING: WRITING UP, GETTING TO THE “DRAFT THESIS” STAGE AND BEYOND (CONVERTING “WHAT YOU HAVE” INTO THE FINAL TEXT)

I got to the third year and thought, hell – a few of my peers had working drafts of every chapter. Although I took refuge in the fact that others hadn’t yet reached that stage either, I still felt massively behind. I had a few chapters which were, bar for a few checks, finished in my mind – but that didn’t allay my sense of panic. After much faffing around, I finally got stuck in. Ten months later I had submitted my thesis, and twelve months later had successfully defended my thesis in the viva. Two years later, some of my peers hadn’t yet submitted. [Identity withheld]

Reading some “how to” books might leave you with the impression that you are massively *behind* when you reach your final year unless you have a full draft of every chapter in the bag (a “draft thesis”) which now need refining and perhaps a little rethinking to maintain internal consistency. Or the other impression that you might be left with is that you haven’t really entered the ‘near submission/writing up’ stage *unless* you have that draft thesis. But, not everyone falls into the draft in the bag category; **we all work at different speeds and in different ways; our thought processes differ**. As ideal as the “draft thesis” might sound, some of us arrive in the “writing up” period with several ‘good’ and perhaps largely completed chapters under the belt, but with further chapters *to write*, some of which may require planning and active/intensive research – just as intensive as earlier on in the thesis process. So don’t beat yourself up if you haven’t got a complete draft; if you are feeling a little insecure (or behind) by virtue of your ‘draft in bag’ peers, keep in mind that the word “draft” is totally general and does not provide any real indication of how much revision is required

(some drafts require very little in the way of revision, others require quite significant amendment). Instead of looking at where your peers are, just focus on what *you* need to do.

Whatever breed of thesis writer you are, your specific task during writing up is to convert *what you have* into the *final text* – you should allow yourself and your supervisor the time necessary to review the “thesis” in as complete a form as possible in order to assess what further revisions are necessary to bring it up to the standard required for submission. And there may be quite significant revisions required – perhaps because there are some inconsistencies between the chapters, some chapters which fail to fulfil promises from earlier ones and so on. But **the aim should be to get to the position where you can sit down and lay out all of your chapters and view the thesis as a whole so that you can take stock** of what needs revising, what needs adding/cutting to convert what you have now into a coherent work which is ready for submission.

THE IMPORTANCE OF KNOWING HOW, WHEN AND WHY TO STOP

Your research, intellectual inquiry and life’s work are all part of a continuous process, in which your thesis will be just one milestone along the way – albeit a very important one. It may well be the cornerstone of your academic career. But your career has room for lots of milestone works, and it is not essential that all are fitted into your thesis (Marshall and Green, 2004: 111).

A key part of the writing process is recognising the nature of the task, and importantly, identifying what you need to do to *stop*. This means that you need to take stock of what work *needs* to be done in order to transform what you have got into the finished thesis. Most theses could, with more time, be improved upon, be better written and so on – but there is a danger, in approaching the task with perfection in mind, that it will just simply never get finished – for improvements can always be made.

If you do want to get your MPhil/PhD and see those grand letters after your name, and start flaunting your expertise on the academic scene, the best advice at this stage is to consider the thesis as part of your research training, as part of an on-going programme of research. Your thesis is likely to express issues, findings and commitments which are critically important, but finishing the thesis does not mean leaving any of these behind. Quite simply, **getting the MPhil/PhD completed will allow you the opportunity and space to continue working on and refining these and articulating your ideas to a much broader audience** (e.g. conferences, publications, and perhaps a book). And being realistic, unless you publish in some other form, the important ideas expressed in your MPhil/PhD are likely to attract a rather limited audience (parents, internal/external examiners, your supervisors and perhaps a few researchers/postgraduate students). So, as Marshall and Green suggest (2004: 111) the thesis ‘should not be regarded as your ‘magnum opus’ – or a repository of all your life’s work’. If you choose to continue with an academic career, the thesis may well become a book manuscript, or a series of articles could emerge from this – in both cases, you’ll probably find that once again you’ll be revisiting the “writing up” process all over again!

Remember that your supervisor is there to offer advice on whether your work meets the required level. His/her expertise is the most important resource that you have, and you should make full use of it.

NEARLY READY TO SUBMIT: THE EASY STUFF?

If you have a tendency towards list-writing, you may well end up writing a simple task-list which details what needs to be done prior to submission. An example of one student’s list which was compiled days prior to submission looked like this:

1. *Final Proof-read for typographical errors; Intro C1 C2 C3 C4 C5 C6 Conc.*
2. *Check presentation in line with submission regulations;*
3. *Check referencing: Intro C1 C2 C3 C4 C5 C6 Conc.*
4. *Write Case/Statute List: Intro C1 C2 C3 C4 C5 C6 Conc.*
5. *Compile Bibliography: Intro C1 C2 C3 C4 C5 C6 Conc.*
6. *Write abstract/ acknowledgements/ Contents List*
7. *Paginate thesis and reflect in contents*
8. *Find a binder; ask someone for cash to pay for binding*
9. *Back-up final thesis and print thesis x 3*
10. *Get thesis copies bound and submit!*

Now what do you think is wrong with the above list? That student needed weeks to recover post-submission! Just to name a few problems this student encountered: she had to abandon printing at 3 a.m. on Sunday morning when the printer cartridge gave up, she needed to beg someone to bind her thesis copies on a Sunday (and pay them quite handsomely in beer credits as a result), and a speedy reading of the final thesis itself readily illustrates that further proof-reading was desperately needed (e.g. the words “arse” and “arses” instead of “arise(s)” are to be found at regular intervals throughout the thesis). Allow yourself *plenty* of time for these kinds of tasks!

Without pointing out the obvious – there are ways of managing some of these tasks as you progress throughout your registration period; rather than compiling a bibliography manually, you might explore referencing software such as Endnote; Firefox also has a referencing “add on” and if you are a fan of Bill Gates, the 2007 version of Microsoft Office contains referencing software.

PUBLISHING FROM YOUR THESIS

Thinking about a career beyond the thesis, and publishing/dissemination of research is to be encouraged *providing* you account for these things in your overall timetable, and keep in mind that your *thesis* is likely to form the entry point (and prospective academic employers will want to be convinced of the fact that you will complete, or in some cases, are *near* completion). It is worthwhile spending some time thinking about your future career, the merits of publishing articles/disseminating research findings to enhance your academic profile. **Talk to your supervisor about how best to balance these conflicting demands and feel free also to seek the advice of other faculty members**, particularly those who have experience of evaluating CVs in appointments processes.

Articles: In the process of writing, it is worth keeping an eye out for chunks of your thesis which might easily translate into articles, case commentaries and so on. Equally, there may be a new book which you need to read for your doctoral research which might form the focus of a book review, or review article. Book reviews editors are always looking for potential reviewers and are generally delighted to be approached with offers of reviews, so don't be shy.

Talk to your supervisor about what is likely to work well as an article and which journals are likely to be suitable homes for your work. And again, don't be afraid to approach the editors of journals to discuss your idea for an article and how it would be likely to be received. Editors may also be prepared to look at a draft article before entering into the formal refereeing process. Most journals will insist on sending out papers to referees, but an editor should be able to tell you whether an article is suitable for his/her journal in terms of substance matter and theoretical approach. **NB most journals will not consider a paper that is already under consideration elsewhere, so choose the journal to which you will send your paper carefully.**

Book publishing: many theses do not work well as books, but some work very well. All, however, will need substantial revision before being published in this way. Ideally, you should obtain a book contract before investing significant time in revising your thesis for publication in this way.

Obtaining a contract is no mean feat but there should be help in your department (either from your supervisor or other academic faculty) on how to go about this. You should also take full advantage of the fact that two experienced scholars will be reading your work in order to examine it: ask your thesis examiners for any advice they have on how to translate the thesis into a book, or for which chapters might work well as articles (and where to submit them). It makes sense to ask as soon as possible after the viva, while your work is still fresh in their minds.

Some publishers may be wary of PhD manuscripts as being too 'dry' or 'technical' to work as a book (one of us had this experience, in trying to find a home for her thesis book). As such, you may want to tell publishers that you have a 'nearly completed manuscript' rather than a completed PhD.

In all cases, you will need to write a book proposal to send to publishers – and it is perfectly acceptable to send this to several publishers at the same time for their consideration. Your Department should be able to provide copies of earlier successful book proposals to help you write yours. If they can't, then write to other academics who you know to ask if they would be willing to share a book proposal – the worst that can happen is that they will say no, but they are very likely to say yes. Writing a book proposal is a significant undertaking in its own right. You will need to think carefully about your potential market, readership for the book, its competitors in the field, and why your book would make a valuable contribution to the existing literature. You also need to pay careful attention to how you can 'sell' your ideas to a publisher who may not know the field well. Take time to do this properly – badly written, unclear book proposals will not succeed, whatever the merits of your thesis/potential book. Make sure that you get feedback on your proposal from experienced colleagues before you send it off.

FURTHER ADVICE:

Most universities will offer training courses or further information for postgraduate researchers and early career academics on their websites. Make full use of these facilities – an amazing number of researchers fail to take advantage of the courses on offer and then suffer from exactly the problems which the courses aim to pre-empt. If you can't find what you want on your own university's website, have a look at postgraduate pages hosted elsewhere to see if they are open access.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING (Note that there may be later editions of the books listed below)

Joan Bolker, *Writing your Dissertation in Fifteen Minutes a Day* (New York: An Owl Book, 1998)

Pat Cryer, *The Research Student's Guide to Success* (Buckingham, OUP: 2000)

Patrick Dunleavy, *Authoring a PhD* (Hampshire, Palgrave: 2003)

S Marshall and N Green, *Your PhD Companion* (Oxford: How to Books Ltd, 2004)

Estelle Phillips and Derek Pugh, *How to get a PhD* (Buckingham, OUP: 2001)