University of Otago
Te Whare Wānanga o Otāgo
NEW ZEALAND

Higher Education Development Centre
**Student Learning Development**
*Whaowhia Te Kete Mātauraka*

# An Introduction to your Research Journey at Otago

**Student Learning DevelopmentUniversity of Otago**

**This booklet is an introduction to some of the skills and strategies that will help you successfully complete your studies at Otago.**

# What goes into Successfully Completing your Thesis?

1. Discipline-based work/clinical/professional practice
2. The journey or process of putting together a thesis (and the skills necessary to achieve this)
   - Planning your thesis
   - Organising and writing chapters
   - Publishing your thesis
   - Making the most of the Library
   - Managing your information
   - Developing your abilities to research
3. Administrative tasks
4. Effective project management:  Managing yourself, your research, your workload and your supervisors.

# Helping you on the Journey: The Postgraduate Community at Otago

There are many different centres, agencies, services and people at Otago that make up the  postgraduate community…It is exciting and varied and is becoming increasingly supportive and  vibrant!

You may use many or one of these services to help make your journey a successful one:

- Student Learning Development
- Graduate Research School
- Cracking the Start Up Code/Cracking the Finishing Code (PhD)
- Workshops for Doctoral students which are useful at all stages of your PhD journey
- Mastering your Thesis (Masters)
- Workshops for Master's students
- Postgraduate Month
- ITS: Courses and Help Desk
- Disability Information and Support
- Maori Centre
- Pacific Island Centre
- International Student Services
- Chaplains
- OUSA
- Libraries
- Abbey College
- Peer support groups
- Higher Education Development Centre

The Student Learning Development (SLD) works with students and offers many workshops and a drop-in service, whilst the Higher Education Development Development (HEDC) works in partnership with staff and students to promote, support, and enhance teaching and learning. Generally, HEDC works mainly with staff, however some HEDC workshops and courses are open to postgraduates too.
The Graduate Research School (GRS) which also offers workshops and advice on your postgraduate research.

## What Services does the SLD provide for Research Students?

The SLD provides learning support free of charge to all enrolled students.

### Individual consultations
Free and confidential individual appointments to:
- discuss any study related concerns
- receive practical guidance

### Postgraduate workshop series
- Reviewing literature and writing a review
- Preparing a research proposal
- Planning a thesis
- Writing a thesis
- Publishing
- Supervision
- Oral presentations

August research month – courses designed specifically for postgraduate students undertaking research.

### Resources and contacts
- hedc.studentlearning@otago.ac.nz
- www.otago.ac.nz/sld
- (03) 479 8801

## A Member of a Community

### Creating a peer support network
Research into the postgraduate journey suggests the benefits of belonging to a research community include:
- a greater likelihood of completing the degree
- completing the degree in good time

- making the journey more enjoyable and less stressful

Conrad, L. (2006) Countering isolation – joining the research community. In C. Denholm and T. Evans (Eds.) Doctorates Downunder: keys to successful doctoral study in Australia and New Zealand. Acer Press: Camberwell, Victoria, pp. 34-41.

## *Some groups share…*

Research topics/questions, successes, problems, questions, issues, reflections, discoveries (scholarships, websites, workshops…), struggles, some writing/an outline, proof reading…

While some groups focus on academic issues, others are more social, and some are a mix of the two. Many peer support groups exist across campus. If you are interested in joining one of these groups or starting your own group, or attending workshops, then please feel free to contact the S. You can download a brochure from our website or come in and see us.

# Introductions

## *How do I tell someone what I am studying?*
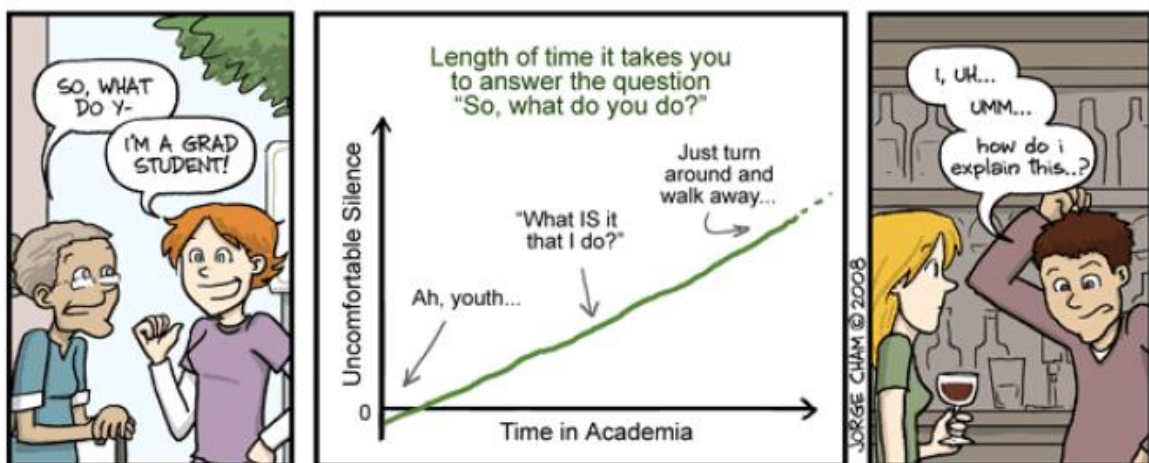


"Piled Higher and Deeper" by Jorge Cham
www.phdcomics.com

If someone asks you "what are you studying?" it can be a very difficult question to answer. It is helpful to have a working title for your study – this is sometimes called a *Cocktail Line* or a *Post-it Line.* If you can fit your working title or research question on to a medium sized Post-it (or something similar) you can keep referring back to it. Stick it up it up next to your computer and it will help to keep your thinking, searching, reading and writing on track.

Your Post-it line will grow and change…but eventually will become more refined.

You might start off saying that you are studying "zoology" but as time goes on this will grow and at times it can feel a bit chaotic and unsettling!… Zoology ⇒ fish ⇒unwell/dying fish ⇒ South Island rivers ⇒ why are the fish dying? ⇒ What else is dying/infected? ⇒ What caused the river to become infected? ⇒ What strategies have been used to help the fish? ⇒ Or clean the river? ⇒ Testing the effectiveness of Strategies A and B in helping Fish A in River A

You might start your Post-it with words such as:

Furthering understanding of/investigating/examining/how/the effectiveness of/testing/the role of/the impact of…

It often helps to talk to people (who are both knowledgeable about your topic and not) about your research. Try and keep your Post-it in mind and keep it short and interesting. Try starting off with "My study is about…".

You will become an expert in explaining your research in no time at all. Why not join one of the many workshops available at the Graduate Research School http://www.otago.ac.nz/research/graduate/otago041922.html or at HEDC or at the Student Learning Development. An array of courses is available including: Writing the Literature Review, the Research Journey or the Expectations of Examiners.

# Getting Started

At the start of your research journey you will probably be required to put together a 'research proposal' for your supervisor(s). This document is an outline of what you intend to do, and may also be part of a funding application process.

### *Why prepare a Research Proposal?*
- Sets boundaries/starting point
- Helps your understanding and that of others
- Answers the "So What…?" question
- Shows writing/presenting ability – informative as well as a bit persuasive
- Shows awareness of key references
- Becomes a handy document to refer back to

### *How is a Research Proposal Assessed?*
Does it indicate to the relevant people that you:
  • will meet the requirements of your degree?
  • within the required length of time?
  • with the resources that you have available?
  • Is the research project realistic?
  • In what way will it contribute to the particular field of research?

# A Thesis Argument

Every thesis is essentially an argument for certain claims. Your thesis *must be connected* by an argument, sometimes referred to as a 'golden thread' – a consistent strand of argument that links all the parts of your thesis.

You will be making several 'claims' within your thesis. For example, you might be claiming the importance of researching your topic, and you will (hopefully) be claiming the importance of your results, as well as the contribution your research is making to the broader field.
Think about the sorts of claims you are going to be making. From this, you can view your thesis as a documented argument that provides evidence for, and supports, your claims.

### *Using your Post-it Throughout your Thesis*
Think of your research question (as you wrote on your Post-it note) and try to make that idea flow throughout your work – this will help the reader by giving your thesis a clear purpose. Your research question Post-it is your focus around which you build your argument.

All theses tend to be highly ordered and critical and they should highlight the fact that they make an original contribution.

### *What is an Original Contribution?*
Think of yourself as an emerging scholar joining the academic community in your particular research field. How you make your original contribution might be by doing the following:

1. Carrying out empirical work not done before;
2. Continuing work that was previously designated original;
3. Developing new evidence in relation to an old issue;
4. Interpreting known material in a new way;
5. Developing a synthesis that is new to the field;
6. Carrying out original work designed by a supervisor;

7.  Providing a single original technique, observation, or result in an otherwise unoriginal but competent piece of research;
8.  Applying a particular technique to a new subject;
9.  Developing a new methodology to look at an existing research problem;
10. Developing a cross-disciplinary approach to a disciplinary problem;
11. Showing originality in testing someone else's idea;
12. Exploring areas that people in the discipline have not looked at before;
13. Adding to knowledge in a way that has not been done before. (Adapted from Phillips and Pugh, 2000, p. 63)

While it can be quite scary to think that your work has to contribute something new and original to your field, when you look closely at what this actually means it starts to seem much more achievable. It may be, for example, that your work is using a different methodology to what is considered normal in your field or you may be doing an essentially unoriginal study but on a different population, or perhaps you are undertaking an interdisciplinary study on an issue previously examined through the lens of only one discipline.

It is important to highlight any original contributions of your thesis – many people see them as a 'finding' or a 'result' of the study. Importantly, they illustrate your contribution to the field of research.
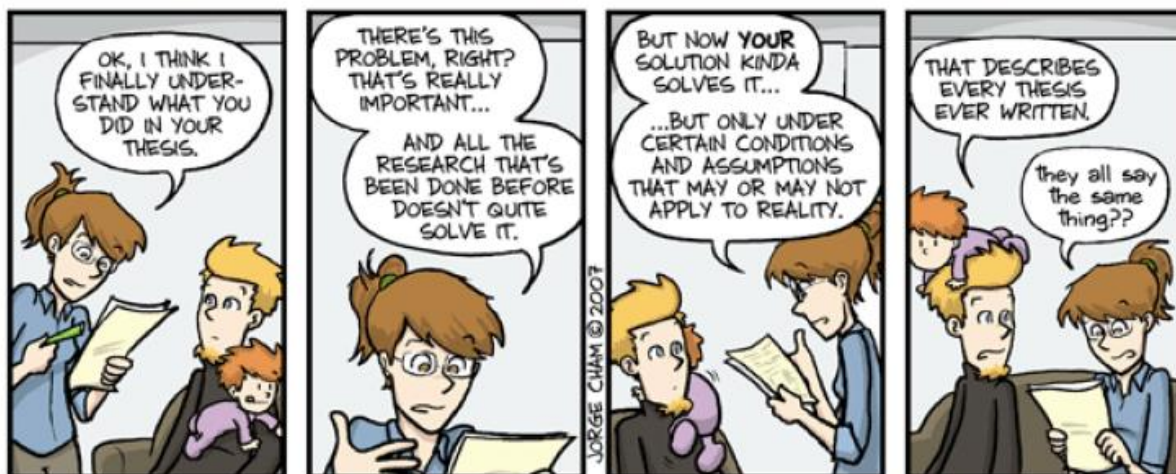


"Piled Higher and Deeper" by Jorge Cham
www.phdcomics.com

# Starting to Organise your Thesis

There is a lot of variety in what a thesis can look like. Even when disciplinary differences and the traditional chapter format are taken into account, there is still room for you to add some of your own individual flair and style. In order to do justice to your Post-it note research question, think about the structure your thesis should have.

However you end up structuring your thesis, it will have the following components:

## *Introduction*
The question/statement – *your* purpose in writing the thesis.
Your research question, sub-questions, the theoretical framework/model/study you used to research it.
A preliminary summary of what you found out.
An outline of your chapters.

## *Literature Review*
Tell the reader what is currently known about the question.
What questions would someone have about your research (big picture issues)?
How have other researchers have tackled this issue?  Relate this information back to your research question.
Show where your research fits in with the literature and how it adds to the field.  Once you have established a gap within the literature, you are then able to argue what is unique about your research or what sort of contribution your research will make. If you need some help with the literature review visit our *"Literature Review"* booklet online – www.slc.otago.ac.nz

## *Methodology / Method / Framework / Model*
What was your method or mode of research?
Tell the reader what *you* did to try and help answer the question or further understanding of an area.
Did you develop a new framework? This is where you can show the reader how your framework or model works and how you intend to use if for your research relating to the research question.

## *Results / Findings / Case Study*
Tell the reader what *you* found out about the question.
Provide any limitations to your findings or results.

*Discussion / Analysis*
Tell the reader what *you* found and how it relates to what was already known.
How has your research answered your research question?
How have your findings contributed to the research field?

*Conclusion / Further Research*
Sum it all up for the reader – answer the questions raised at the beginning. Highlight key findings – what does the thesis contribute to the existing literature?
What are the limitations of the study?
What further questions has your research raised?

Go to www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk for a useful resource with many examples of the "nuts and bolts" of the sorts of phrases that make up academic writing. The sections on Stating the Purpose, Focus and Aim and Research Questions and Hypotheses will be particularly helpful.

# Using Literature in your Study

Literature plays a very important part in your study

Using existing literature to set up the study or frame the problem:
Introduction
A literature review chapter
A methodology/method chapter

No need to reference existing literature:
Results section (if separate)

How your results/findings relate to the existing literature:
Finishing off – Discussion/Conclusion

You will probably need to look at literature from several areas:
- background literature
- topic literature
- methodology literature
- method literature

# What is a Literature Review?

It can help to think about what information somebody would need to understand and know *before* they get to the detail of your results, and what your results mean and contribute. A literature review sets up the study for the reader.  Then, later in the discussion, you will talk about how *your* findings relate to this existing literature.
A literature review is important because it:
1.    opens up the field to you – shows you what is out there
2.    helps to give you the knowledge and confidence to limit your review/study - it shows you where to put up fences!

Keeping an eye on your Post-it (topic/question/goal) will help the literature review process and encourage more *targeted* searching, reading, writing and management.

A literature review is not merely a collection of who said what, and when. It is very important that you are able to write *critically* in your literature review.  You are making the case for your research, illustrating both the gaps in the literature and how your research fits within the research field.

# Writing Critically

You need to critically analyse the relevant literature in a discussion based on your thesis/question/purpose.

An uncritical analysis of literature tends to focus on describing separate papers/studies, as in "Study A found…Study B found…In Study C, they found…"

Here is an example of writing with limited linkages or critical discussion, where the literature review consists merely of descriptive summaries:

Purpose of section: = the reported benefits of postgraduate peer support networks

According to a study conducted by Woollen (2008) postgraduate students benefit from being part of a peer support network. Over 85% of the students surveyed by Woollen in the 1990's reported positive outcomes from their interactions with their peers…

According to Hope (2001) there are many benefits to distance students

belonging to a peer support group…

One study surveyed 2000 students in North Carolina and discovered that most demographic groups benefited from being part of a peer support network (Bloggs,2006)…it is thought to have impacted on the retention rates of those students surveyed…

Curry (2008) discusses the benefits for universities in having their students in peer support groups…

Wheeler (2001) found that mature students…

According to Apple (2006) not all distance students benefit from being members of a peer support group…

Jones (2008) conducted a study involving eight Australian universities and over 2000 participants. Data was collected using in-depth interviews and participant observation over a period of three years. Data was analysed by many leading Australasian experts in the field and the main finding was that…

Clark (2005) reported that…

Have another look at your Post-it and look for *linkages* and *connections* between the papers/studies, and present the writing in the form of a critical discussion. For example, you could:

Start with an overall idea or topic sentence, discussion or example using Study A and Study C, and then contrast them with Study B;

Start with an overall idea or topic sentence, discussion or example using Study A and Study C, and link with similarities to Study D.

Here is an example of planning for critical writing in a literature review:

Purpose of section:  the reported benefits of postgraduate peer support networks

### *First Main Point of Section*
Reported benefits of postgraduates belonging to a peer support network

FIRST SUBPOINT
Benefits for students
General introductory paragraph – general stats from Woollen (2008)

a) Student feelings of belonging and sense of community
Clark (2005)
Hope (2001)
Both studies considered only students living in residential colleges

b) Academic benefits
Woollen (2008)
Wheeler (2001)

Most existing studies consider only students perceptions of any academic benefits

c) Benefits for distance students?
Some dispute
Hope (2001)
Apple (2006) – questions this?

SECOND SUBPOINT Reported benefits for universities if their postgraduate students belong to peer support networks

Well summed up by Curry (2008)

a) Studies on impact of peer support on retention rates
Bloggs (2006)
Jones (2008)
No existing New Zealand data – this is good because I want to do this!

b) Studies on benefits/flow on to staff working as supervisors
Bloggs (2006)
Summer (2005) – only staff with a positive experience of their own time as a student in a peer support group supported the concept

# How to Start a Literature Review

- Have your Post-it or a working title – "my study is about…"
- Identify some keywords/phrases
- Ask some 'first questions'

1. What is your central problem or question?
2. Why is this important and worth studying?
3. How will knowing more about this make a contribution and impact?
4. What is the best way to find out what you want to know?
5. What is the most effective research design?

You might not know all the answers to these questions at the beginning, but try and keep them in mind as you reflect and progress.
- Search for sources

## *What are the Characteristics of a Reliable Source?*
- Published
- Well known experts
- Contains references
- International
- Official body/government
- Peer-reviewed academic journal (high quality journal)
- Accessibility

Note: there are times when it is OK to use references that do not meet these criteria such as documentaries, or blogs written by prestigious authors. Consult your supervisor as to the appropriateness of the use of the source.

## *Starting Points – Finding Sources*
- Ask your supervisor for some titles of key works in your field
- Read a general text to get an overview and identify key words
- Find a good review article
- Use the reference lists of the key sources from above
- Look at the theses/research papers of your supervisor and other academics working in your area
- Talk to people in your area, and especially other students through a peer support network or departmental activities
- Become familiar with the Library website – and get to know a particular librarian

# Start Reading



"Piled Higher and Deeper" by Jorge Cham
www.phdcomics.com

- At first, your reading will probably involve a lot of skimming of important sections
- Plan your reading – what do you need from this source? Have a look at your Post-It (question/title/plan) before you start reading – doing this should help make your reading more efficient and critical so that it fits with the argument or purpose of your thesis.
- Do you hope to use this reading to help illustrate or support a certain point you want to make?
- Is it a similar study to yours and you are wanting to highlight any differences/answer any questions raised?

- Is it a similar but much older study that you want to simply use to reference in your methodology introduction?

- Move to 'focused', more in-depth reading and note-making. Ensure you differentiate between:

1. Paraphrasing (author's ideas but in your own words)
2. Quotes (copying down the exact words of the author – remember the page number!)
3. Your own thoughts and ideas (eg. they did not consider the socio-cultural background…why not?)

Doing this will help to ensure all sources are appropriately acknowledged (referenced), thus avoiding unintentional plagiarism.

- Many people divide their page into three sections to clearly differentiate between the types of notes.

- Record all bibliographic details using an appropriate citation style (use Endnote or similar). The Library and ITS run Endnote courses.

- Assemble your sources/notes and try to organise them, thinking of your Post-it.  How do they help support/answer/direct your questions?

- Think about how you are going to organise your thoughts and notes.  Some people find it helpful to make a visual representation, such as a concept map.

### *Organisational Strategies for Managing your Reading*
- Chronological
- General to specific (or vice versa)
- Relative importance
- Relationships or cause and effect
- Theories or themes
- Varying perspectives
- Varying spatial scales (eg from local to regional to national to global, or vice versa, and from internal to external)
- Arguments and counter-arguments (or positions and objections)
- Similarities and differences

(Source: Manalo & Trafford, 2004)

## Start Writing: write regularly and often

### *How do you Write and Who are you Writing for?*
There are three different stages of writing for a thesis:

1.  Pre-draft writing where you write for yourself to clarify and refine your ideas;
2.  Drafting for an audience - this means your examiners in the case of thesis students;
3.  Editing for clarity and grace. Consider your own style and consider that of your supervisor.
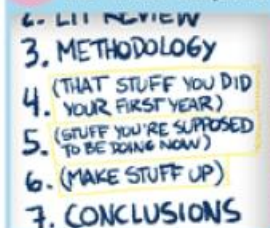
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## Starting to Write a Section

*Aim: Structure your Paragraphs to Support your Argument*



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### *Developing a Paragraph*

A paragraph has three basic parts:

1. The topic sentence – it should introduce one idea, or a part of an idea
2. Supporting sentences – they should explain, develop and give evidence for the idea
3. Concluding sentences – signal the end of this particular idea. They may summarise the main points and/or form a bridge to the next paragraph (concluding sentences for body paragraphs are not always necessary)

### *Common Problems with Paragraphs*

- More than one idea is introduced and developed
- The idea of the paragraph is not clearly expressed
- The idea is not sufficiently developed or explained
- The idea is not adequately supported by evidence

When you are writing try first to reference an idea/trend/thought…
For example: In recent years the popularity of free-range eggs has increased dramatically, although there is some dispute as to the reasons behind this trend (Jones 2008). Many believe that the rise in popularity is due to… (Andrews 2006; Hinds 2008 and Smith 2007), while others believe it is largely a result of a change in public opinion …(Bloggs 2007; Adams 2009). According to…

### *Checking the Internal Consistency of a Paragraph*

- Is there a key idea/point?
- Is the supporting evidence in a logical order?
- Is the argument clear?
- Is anything missing?
- How does this paragraph link with the previous and following paragraphs?
- Do you have a clear introducing and concluding a section or a chapter.

### *Some General Bits and Pieces about Postgraduate Writing*

- Become familiar with academic words and phrases by using this handy website:  www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk
- Look at theses from your discipline/area
- Look at writing guidelines from relevant journals
- Keep a research diary or notebook
- Talk about your ideas – to others as well as yourself!
- Turn things over as quickly and efficiently as possible with your

supervisor(s) - set deadlines if necessary
- Keep your Post-it – research proposal/questions/working title – in front of you
- Carefully record references
- Organise and label work - write notes of what you have done/where you are up to
- Get feedback on your writing, making sure you ask what you want feedback on e.g. clarity, structure etc.
- Sign up to one of the Libraries workshops on how to use *EndNote* referencing system

## *Writing Analysis*

Thoroughly check your work
- Always proofread your work from a hard copy, not the computer screen.
- Allow time for a "fresh eye".
- Read your work out loud.
- Ask other people for help!

## *Proofreading*
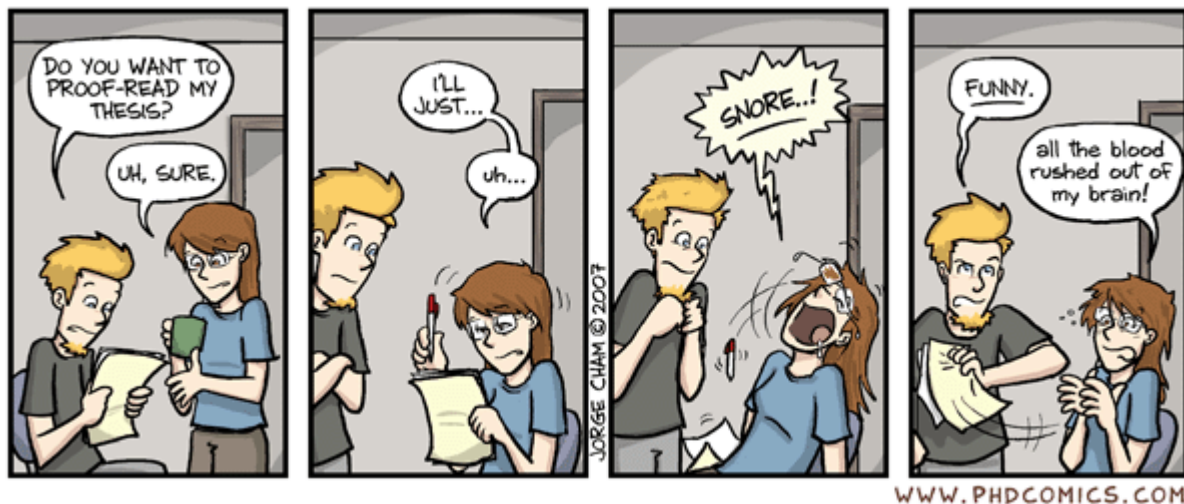


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- Spelling
- Layout
- Consistent headings
- Punctuation
- Reference checks

Proofreading can be done by a variety of people, including you, peers,

family, and professional agencies. Give people bits at a time (a chapter) so you have ongoing feedback.

## *Revising at the Chapter Level*
Check the following in each chapter:
- Does the introduction prepare the reader for what is contained in the chapter?
- Is the chapter summarised at the end?
- Does the end of the chapter lead the reader to the following one?
- Are the sections in a logical order?

(Manalo and Trafford 2004)

## *Revising at the Whole Thesis Level*
- How well does the introduction prepare the reader for the rest of the thesis? For example, does it include your research question, and sub-questions?  Have you referred to your research question consistently throughout the thesis as a means of reminding the reader what you are looking at?
- Are the purposes and rationale of the thesis clear from the start?
- Have you clearly stipulated the aim of your thesis in the introduction?  Have you clearly set out the gaps in the literature within your research field? Have you sufficiently identified your methodology or framework as a means to answer the question?
- Does the methodology/method have enough detail for replication?
- Does the conclusion reiterate the significance of the research and its findings, bring the argument to a close and leave the reader with some relevant issues to think about?
- Have the research questions been answered?
- Do the introduction, body and conclusion match up?
- Does the thesis flow in a logical manner from a reader's point of view?
- Are all aspects of the thesis well-argued and relevant?

(Manalo and Trafford 2004)

# Publishing and your Thesis
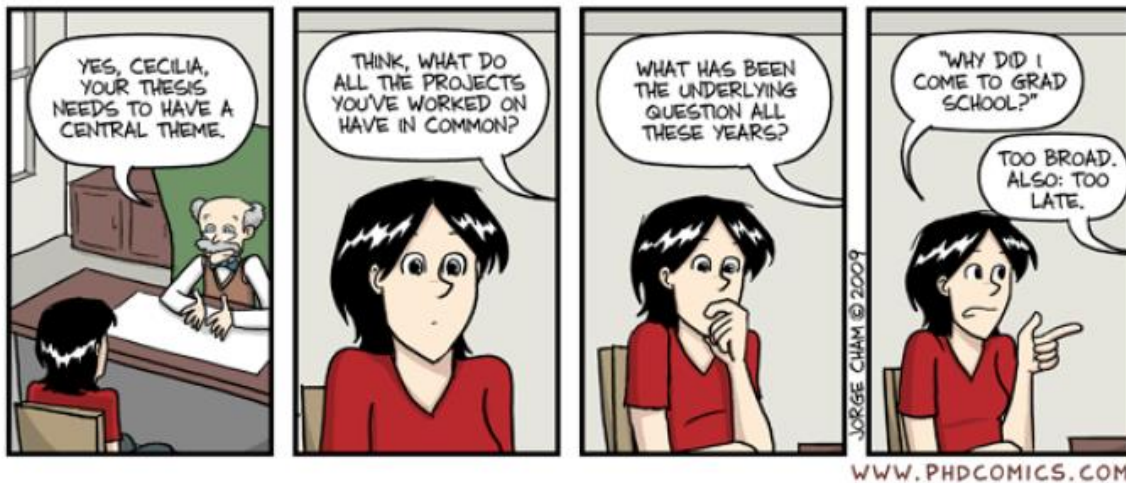


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## *Why Publish?*

- Otago "strongly encourages" the publication of papers during postgraduate study and this can aid with the development of reputation/career advancement.  Publications also contribute to the University's research effort.
- Publishing is a chance for you to tell people what you are doing and contribute to your field of research whilst undertaking your research journey. Plus, it is a great way to get some feedback/peer review/quality assurance/self fulfilment. Similarly, it is a means by which you can marshal your ideas, as well as undergo a quality check by your peers.  Publishing with a peer-reviewed journal, for example, ensures feedback, as well as illustrating to the examiner that you are recognised by your peers.
- Examiners tend to favourably view theses that have chapters or parts which have been published.  It indicates that the work has been accepted within the academic community and satisfies the core examination component asked by Examiners: "is this work publishable?"
- Material to consider publishing:
    - Data-driven papers
    - Method papers
    - Consciousness-raising papers
    - Agenda-setting papers
    - Review papers
    - Position papers
    - Theoretical papers

Where to publish is dependent on many aspects of your research: below is a non-exhaustive list of places you might publish your work, but remember to consult your supervisor in the early stages of your intended publication:

- Conference proceedings
- Book chapters
- Refereed journals (single or double blind peer-reviewed)
- Citation-indexed journals
- Open access journals

Finally, it is important to have a plan before you undertake a publication project:

- Identify the framework or argument you will focus on
- If possible, present your framework/argument at department seminars or conferences in order to attain feedback which you can incorporate into the written version intended for publication
- Target a journal by taking into account its ranking and the publishing time frame/deadlines – be sure to allocate yourself sufficient time
- Read the author's guidelines
- Identify structural patterns of articles in the journal
- Organise sections, revise sections and rewrite sections

### *The Relationship Between your Thesis and your Publications*

- Turn your thesis into a book
- Turn a thesis chapter into a paper (later on or early enough to reference yourself) (Appendix?)
- Turn a paper into a chapter
- "The Sinclair Case" is a good example of papers turned into chapters. If you publish a paper and incorporate it as a chapter into your PhD, then you need to ensure that the thesis "as a whole presents a coherent and integrated account of the research". This may be a strategy you might wish to discuss with your supervisor (Refer to University of Otago Memo 2006).

### *Questions to Consider:*

- Has your supervisor discussed publishing?
- What amount of publishing from your thesis is considered acceptable/fantastic in your field?
- What have you been told about being a sole or joint author in a publication?
- Do you know what journals to target in your field?
- Have you heard about the Postgraduate Publishing Bursary?

## *'Selling' your Ideas*

At some point throughout your time at Otago you may have to "sell" your ideas and be persuasive as well as informative. This may be for a grant application, a research proposal, an ethics application, an oral presentation, a "defence" or a "three minute thesis" competition.

## *Tips for Effective Oral Presentations During Postgraduate Study (Based on Denholm 2006)*

- Get the exact date and time for your presentation as early as possible
- Become familiar with the environment and the audience
- Allow time at the beginning for the basics (title, content boundaries, research questions, etc)
- Practise – especially using the technology
- Slow down your speech, pause, lift head
- Talk to everyone (even at question time)
- Spend about a quarter of your preparation time on preparing responses to possible questions
- Respect each question
- Check the question if unclear
- It is OK to say "I don't know…while we have considered that it has not been a focus here because…my initial reaction to your question is …this is what the current literature tends to be saying about this…
- Make sure you are comfortable, enthusiastic and professional
- Silent self talk eg. "I am well prepared"
- Humour?
- Try not be nervous about being nervous!

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# Getting there…By Setting Lots of Small Goals and Deadlines

- Set yourself small achievable goals that you can meet (these might form a part of a larger time plan).
- Working to deadlines can be very motivating for some people – for example think of meetings with supervisors as deadlines.
- Work hard to meet your goal and then reward yourself when you meet it.

The goals do not need to be big and scary, and whilst it is a good idea to share your goals with others, do not fall into the trap of comparing your goals with those of others! Your supervisor may encourage you to set a time plan for your thesis and many people find this very helpful. You can use a longer time plan to help set small goals too. Allow time in your goal setting for 'extra' tasks such as administration, holidays, workshops, and research seminars.
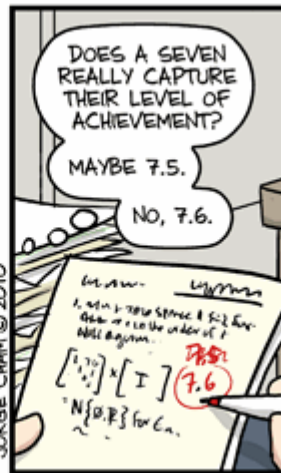
For example:

- This week I am going to sort out my filing system/tidy my room/find a desk
- This week I am going to give some written work to my supervisor
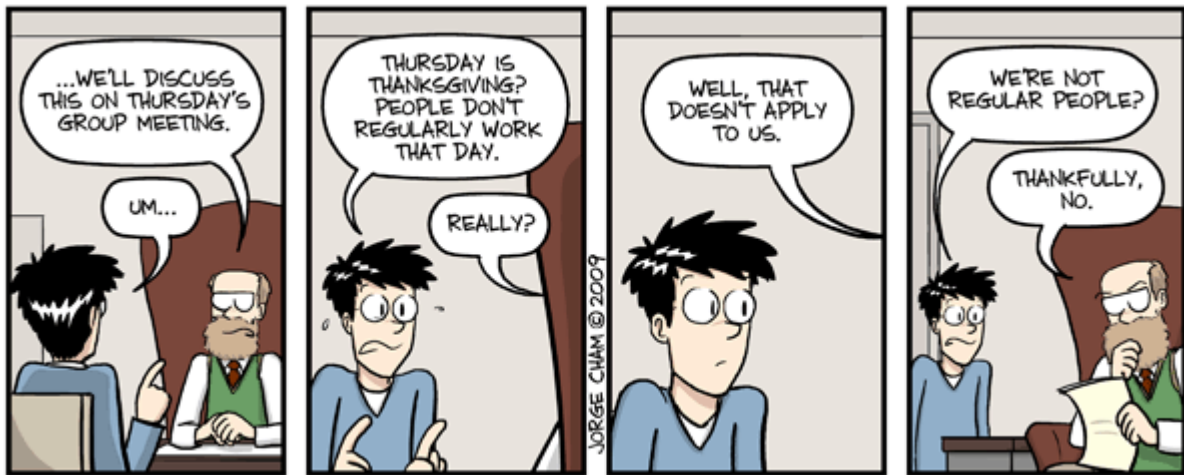- This week I am going to put together a plan for starting to write about "A"

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