

TOUGH IT OUT, MAKE IT HAPPEN

Maintaining your Motivation while Researching and Writing the Master's Thesis

Staying motivated throughout the thesis process – actually getting the thesis written – is the hardest part of the graduate degree. This is why completion rates for graduate degrees are seldom 100 percent; too many students get distracted, lose motivation, or simply lose their way before completing the thesis project. There are several key points at which any graduate student may crash and burn: selecting the topic, conducting the research, and writing. The trick to getting through stages two and three is motivation.

SELECTING YOUR TOPIC

Completing a thesis requires passion. This may be passion for the topic or passion for the outcome. If you lack one or the other of these elements, you can still make it. If you lack both, you are in trouble. Here are some tips for selecting a topic for which you can have one or both types of passion.

- Chose a topic that has relevance to your life and your work
- Look for a topic that ignites your intellectual curiosity
- Find a project that has a usable outcome in terms of research findings and recommendations – an approach that can be used by your agency, a program that can be implemented, or a research direction that may provide a springboard for a larger professional project.

Even with one or more of these elements present, topic selection can go off track for a couple of reasons. You may find there is no published research to support your topic and no clear path for original research (a survey or study). It is possible that no research exists because no one cares. Or perhaps it is simply that no one has looked at this particular research question. Try researching laterally – look at related topics and see what lines can be drawn back to what you want to achieve. If you pull on enough of these lines, something will connect.

Another reason that students go off-track is misidentification. You may be more interested in the secondary or underlying topic than you are in the topic itself. If you find yourself getting bored with your research topic, go back and look at why you selected it in the first place. Pull it apart and examine the different aspects of the research question. Perhaps what really excites you is the theoretical underpinning, rather than the practical application. Or you feel a passion for the outcome, but the theory leaves you cold. In either case, see if you can rephrase your research question to more closely focus on that aspect most interesting to you.

Selecting the right topic and research direction is absolutely critical. As you explore topic areas, subject each to a kind of litmus test with the following questions. Does this topic (or a particular aspect of it) truly interest me? Can I envision living with this topic for the next six months (if not longer)? Will pursuit of this topic enrich my intellectual and professional life?

STAYING MOTIVATED

“Motivation” has become something of a modern-day brass ring – we all reach for it and rarely catch it. Finding the motivation to stick with the thesis project is compounded by demands on our time (work, family, life) and the singularity of the process. Writing a thesis is a lonely process. It can – at various stages – be isolating, boring, frustrating, and seemingly pointless. It also represents a long-term commitment. The thesis cannot be knocked out in a weekend or over the course of a two week vacation.

So you may have to trick yourself into finishing this thing. Not fool yourself – just use whatever tricks work for you. Here are some of the most effective.

1. Establish a Master Plan. Look at your thesis project and its due date. Work back from that due date to establish when certain things have to be finished (the thesis statement, specific research components, the first draft). Select completion dates and put them on the calendar.

2. Create and Maintain a Schedule. This is the single most important “trick” to completing the thesis. It has a number of aspects.

- **Establish a regular schedule.** Identify the time of day you are most likely to be able to work on this project. First thing in the morning, last thing at night, or right after work. Set specific hours, even if it means getting up earlier, staying at the office after work, or going to bed later. Get the support of people around you (spouse, kids, boss) and make it clear that you are trying to accomplish something important.
- **Make your schedule reasonable.** If you think you can work on this project two hours a day, seven days a week, you may be setting yourself up for failure. Start with one-half hour, seven days a week. Or one-half hour five days a week and one hour on Saturday morning. Look for a schedule that will not strain your life.
- **Make it a habit.** Having established a regular schedule, stick to it for at least three weeks. Conventional wisdom (based on research from the 1940s) says that any habit can be established in 21 days. Once you’ve established the habit of working on your thesis, see if you can expand your session times to one hour.
- **Don’t push it.** Even if you are on a roll, try not to go over your allotted time. Instead, take five minutes at the end of each session to jot down a few hot buttons – ideas you are fired up about that will help jump-start your next session.
- **Don’t make bargains with yourself.** Don’t say “I’ll skip it today and work all day Sunday.” This is one of those ruinous paths “paved with good intentions.” If you absolutely cannot work for the scheduled one-half hour, then work for fifteen minutes.

3. Keep it fresh. Most people will get stuck, in either the research or the writing, when they have moved in the same direction for too long a time. When you feel yourself losing steam, or think you have hit a wall, try to shake things up to regain a little perspective.

- **Talk it out.** This works at both the research and the writing stages. Verbalize what you are researching (or writing), as if explaining it to someone else. It doesn't matter if this someone else is the family dog. The act of verbally explaining your research problem, your thesis, or the applicability of the research to your project will help you get back on track.
- **Mix it up.** If you are truly burned out on the research, play with your outline – move things around, rearrange, find some new questions. If you sit down at your desk and simply can't bring yourself to look at the research results, go back to reading the theory behind your research design. In other words, go down another path but keep moving.
- **Recognize creative procrastination.** There are times, particularly when you start to write, when procrastination serves a purpose. You may need to let things simmer for a bit. Get out of your chair, take a walk, play ball with the kids – for fifteen minutes, not the next fifteen days. If you return to work and still feel stuck, go back to talking it out.

4. Overcome the Isolation. As noted earlier, the thesis is a lonely project. Isolation and a sense of “why am I doing this?” are prime de-motivators for many graduate students.

- **Find a thesis buddy.** Connect with someone else in your class. Agree to talk regularly about your projects – perhaps twice a week for fifteen minutes. Be absolutely honest with this person when talking about what you have or haven't accomplished that week. Set goals and share them with each other.
- **Find a thesis coach.** The coaching business has grown in the past ten years. There are many people available, often via the internet, who will work as your coach (Google “thesis coach” or check Craig's List). A good thesis coach will communicate with you on a regular basis, assist in designing a research plan, help identify what's holding you back, and suggest solutions for overcoming any obstacles you may be facing.
- **Celebrate your accomplishments.** Identify completion milestones and establish rewards. It sounds silly, but we all like to be rewarded for a job well done. When you reach a completion point – as established on that Master Plan – reward yourself (and perhaps your child, spouse, or friend for putting up with all this). The reward might be as simple as going out to dinner and a movie, or as special as a weekend getaway. Maybe you've always wanted to go skydiving. Just make sure the reward has meaning and attach a specific reward to each milestone.

A Final Note: Researching and writing a thesis is an often painful, but ultimately rewarding, process. It is not an insurmountable task. But it is hard. Most importantly, the point of the thesis is to demonstrate *your* mastery of homeland security as an academic field of study. Design it, schedule it, and stick to it.