How to Avoid the "One More Book" Syndrome
…and really write your thesis

How easy it is to keep researching and never write! Sometimes it seems that even those with the best ideas fall prey to the "one more book" syndrome. The need to read "one more book," or to wait for "one more article" to arrive through interlibrary loan is just one way of practicing avoidance.

Another popular way to practice avoidance is to shun all research, since it seems so overwhelming, and pretend you can write your thesis in a vacuum.   The "I'm just writing" syndrome is equally dangerous, in my opinion, because at some point you will need to engage in the critical conversation—better to do it early than to find out your idea is untenable after you've written 75 pages of it.

Here's how to avoid such pitfalls:

1. **Get organized.** According to time-management specialists, the number one reason people don't get their projects completed on-time is that our "to-do list" is overwhelming. Break large projects into manageable parts—it will force you to think through the entire process for getting your project completed. Better yet, by figuring out how to get through each step in that process, you'll have a map for how to get from the amorphous "I want to complete my thesis" stage to defending it in front of your colleagues and professors!

2. **Avoid getting stuck.** Use organizational methods for research and writing, but don't get caught substituting that for writing! The visual principles for organizing should be useful, but not a substitute for actually getting on with the writing process. Do use stickies, a laptop, file cards, xeroxes, audio recordings, etc., to help you find and retrieve information quickly. You may have the cleanest house, the most organized notes, the most alphabetized bookshelf of anyone you know, but none of that matters if your thesis isn't finished.

3. **Do heavy thinking.** It is extremely important that you think through your thesis and argument before you begin writing. Contrary to what you may fervently hope for, a thesis does not write itself while you sleep…nor does it magically channel through your fingertips while you stare at a blank screen. Ask yourself questions about your topic; write down as many different answers as you can find. Reread your primary texts. Once you have developed a working abstract of your thesis (problem, solution/methodology, significance), and it is compelling, you are ready to write. Not one minute before.

4. **Writing is a process.** We have to remember what we know about writing: it is a process and we need to do multiple drafts, prewriting, and serious revision, just as much as our students! The best writing has time for reflection built into the process. Use your thesis-advisor to read over drafts, use your peers to argue scenario out, use your mom / dad for figuring out how to distill jargon into something meaningful. By thinking of this as a process we remove much of the pressure to produce the perfect sentence, paragraph, or page, as we sit in front of the computer.

5. **Routines matter.** Any routine can be a good one—so long as you stick to it. Find one that helps you get quickly back into the mental space of the argument. Some people re-read the last few pages they wrote before starting that day's writing. Others drink 2 cups

of coffee and write their first two sentences while in the shower. Others spread each book out around themselves like a shrine. Still others read a particularly inspiring passage / page from a favorite critic first.

6. **Model behavior.** Modeling the behavior you want to achieve is actually a good way to get into a routine. If your goal is disciplined writing, discipline yourself in such a way to achieve that. It sounds counter-intuitive, but treat yourself as if you were a client or student from whom you were trying to get results. Try an ascetic model based on deprivations as incentive (treat yourself to the basics only *after* you've accomplished goals), or a reward-based model (treat yourself *as* you do the tough work). Use shaming techniques (use the threat of public shame to coerce disciplined writing), or community models (misery loves company, buddies help!). Be careful of this last one, though, as community can become a distraction *from* the writing rather than an excuse to do it.

7. **Strive for consistency.** Consistency is extremely important in any writing, but even more so in a thesis. Pick a style and format for your thesis and do not deviate. If you use headers or quotations to break up each chapter, do so consistently. If you italicize titles of movies, do so throughout. Choose footnotes *or* endnotes, Chicago style *or* MLA— never both. To help you stay consistent throughout, and to avoid a lot of last-minute editing, check out this Thesis Template from PSU: http://cac.psu.edu/psuthesi/ . It uses MS Word and all you have to do is open it up and type inside the template, ensuring the document is consistent and stylistically correct, with the same margins, same headers, same spacing etc. Buy a good grammar and style manual; then use it!

8. **Make your project scalable.** It is a good idea to keep scalability in mind throughout the whole process. In the beginning, start with a topic which is interesting, but unwieldy. As you narrow it, mold it, and control it, the topic becomes a thesis elegant enough to do your work—regardless how large the project grows. Thus, a really good thesis works to structure an 80-page document or a 380-page one. It might be a good idea to keep a few ideas out, or even include a plan for an extra chapter in your notes, so you can write it later. As you write, you may decide to scale back on one element or elaborate on another you hadn't anticipated. If you have a scalable thesis, you can let the argument evolve into something interesting and useful.

As long as you *do* write, you'll be fine. But you must write; and to write, you must have an argument, and to have an argument, you must identify a problem, and to identify a problem, you must have read carefully and thought though the text first.