



The University of Sydney



**NORTHERN RIVERS**  
University Department of Rural Health

**School of Public Health, Faculty of Medicine**

**A/Prof Deborah Schofield**





## A/Prof Deborah Schofield,

(NRUDRH, Faculty of Medicine, University of Sydney, Lismore  
02 6620 2601; [deborahsch@nrahs.nsw.gov.au](mailto:deborahsch@nrahs.nsw.gov.au))

# Essentials of writing for your thesis: practical tips

*1st Northern Rivers Postgraduate Students' Symposium  
"Collection of thoughts in Byron Bay"  
7, December 2006, Byron Bay*



# Starting out - Choosing a topic

- What is your big research question?
- Can you write it clearly in one sentence and justify it with 2 more.
- Is it original? (Aus, Internat)
- How does it advance knowledge?



## What is a thesis?

An original piece of research that you can defend – it is your (first) contribution to your field



## Starting out – Have you picked the right question

- Is it best answered by you and your unique skills?
- Can you sustain your interest for 3 – 6 years?
- Do you have the skills you need?
- Do you need any additional training?
- Can you survive if your supervisor doesn't? (Eg Prin supervisor)



# Starting out – Is a PhD right for you?

- Are you a finisher?
- Do you prefer to work independently?
- Do you meet deadlines?
- Do you need instant gratification?
- Are you a “jack of all trades”?



## In a nutshell

“Completing a PhD requires 3 years of hard work and at least six months (if your lucky) of letting it rule your life”

Dr Geoff Morgan



## In a nutshell

“I hadn't realised how much it would involve when you do **everything** yourself. I am used to working on projects where different people take on different roles and to be the admin person, data entry person, grant writer, data collector, etc etc is really quite hard. Try and remember to factor in some funds for some of these roles...?”

Ms Lisa Barnett



## In a nutshell

“You need patience and perseverance to see the PhD through.”

Mr Arul Earnest



# Starting out – Is a PhD right for you?

- Can you focus?
- Do you like detail?
- Can you see yourself as being a national/international expert in your field?



## In a nutshell

“Everyone initially wants their PhD to change the world and be all encompassing, but that to succeed they need to find, and focus on, the minimum core that is needed for them to get the degree.”

Professor John Beard



# Starting out – Is a PhD right for you? (2)

- Why are you doing it?
  - career, personal satisfaction, intellectual passion
- Can you afford it?
- What are your other commitments?
  - family, work, leisure
  - what are you prepared/able to give up?



## Will you finish?

- 53% PhD students: Commence 1992, complete by 1999 (18% still studying, 27% drop out, 2% other course),
- overall completion rates 65%
- few students completed their studies in the expected time – 36% PhD within 4 years FTE  
Completion rates generally higher for F/T
- Completion rates generally decline as age increases (except 25-29 yo)

Martin Y et al 2001. Postgraduate Completion Rates, Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs. <http://www.dest.gov.au/archive/highered/occpaper/01d/01d.pdf>



## In a nutshell

“My advice is, Don't Do It!”

Ms Nola Tamaska



## Reasons for dropping out

Chronicle of Higher Education the leading newspaper about college, reported that:

*mismatches between advisers and students are a primary reason for students quitting doctoral programs*

*Franck M. 2005 FOUR MORE YEARS?! UC Davis Magazine Vol. 22, No. 3, Spring 2005. <http://www-ucdmag.ucdavis.edu/sp05/parents.html>*



## Starting out – best piece of advice

“ This isn't your life's work. It is just the start of your academic career” .



## Starting out - Choosing a supervisor

- They will be your partner for 3 – 6 years
- Do they know the area?
- Are they interested in your topic?
- Do they have the time?
- Do you know anyone who has worked/studied with them?



# Getting going – setting out your thesis

- Look at your supervisor's
- Look at others in the library – good ones
- Read your university guidelines



## Getting going – setting out your thesis (2)

- Get an overview before you get too far
  - Write up your thesis (sub) heading
  - Write up early
  - Get a sense of the balance needed
  - Look for gaps/or areas where you have too much
  - Get feedback early



# Getting going – Making sure of your topic

- Do a thorough literature review
- Include grey literature (it often has more methodological detail and peer-reviewed literature often glosses over methods and how problems were solved due to word length restrictions)
- Make sure your thesis is original
- Look for areas to refine



## Getting going – Stay current

- Keep up with current literature – google and journal alerts
- Use and extend your network so material “comes across your desk”



# In a nutshell

“Invest in Endnote”

Mr Richard Summerhayes



# Working efficiently and effectively

- Stay on the topic
- Is it critical to your research question? (keep interesting bits separate)
- Avoid rabbit holes
- Your thesis may be the least directed longest term project you ever do
  - Set yourself deadlines to keep on track
  - See your thesis as entirely your responsibility



# Getting going – what about the data

- Can it answer your question - privacy?
- Is it available to you?
- Can it be collected in time?
- Do you have enough data for significant results?
- Do you have a fall-back position
- There is ALWAYS another way  
(Eg privacy)



# Making the most of your thesis

- Plan on publications
- Choose your journal/s
- Think about thesis by publication



## Finishing up

- Polish your thesis and reread afresh
  - Good presentation inspires confidence
  - Don't assume examiners know everything already – tell the story and prove YOU know it
- Anticipate examiners comments
  - anticipate who your examiners will be
  - Influence where appropriate
    - \* don't choose someone who despises your supervisor
    - \* Choose someone experienced – reasonable expectations (eg pub serv no PhD)



## Finishing up (2)

- Treat examiners comments with respect
  - “just do it” –don’t waste time quibbling
  - good practice for peer reviewed publication (Eg Canada)
  - give straight forward defence if nec (Eg Canada)



## What others say

Google - PhD advice

Nola's Rothman papers



# END

