

Twenty Tips for Senior Thesis Writers (and other writers, too)

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1. Begin* with something unresolved, some question about which you are truly curious. Make clear to yourself and your readers the unresolved question that you set out to resolve. This is your **governing question**, the question that directs the structure of the piece.

Keep your eye on your governing question. You might want to put that question somewhere where you will see it every time you sit down to work -- e.g., on a piece of paper you attach to your computer, your bulletin board, or the wall. This will serve as your lighthouse, your beacon on the horizon that helps you stay on course. You need not be bound to the original form of this question; you may need to revise it or supersede it several times as you move along. Keep a record of how your governing question evolves.

*Although it is important to "begin" your focused exploration with a governing question and to make that question clear early on in your thesis, you need not -- in fact, probably can not -- begin the entire research and writing process with a question. It takes a lot of work -- reading, talking with people, thinking -- to generate and focus your governing question.

2. Show your readers what leads you to pose your question in the first place. Your governing question derives from **competing observations**, i.e., observations that appear to you to be in tension with one another and to indicate an apparent puzzle, problem, discrepancy, oversight, mystery, contradiction, or surprise. In the introduction to your piece, let your readers know how what you observe leads you to ask the question you ask.

3. Identify your subordinate questions. Just as the thesis as a whole is a response to a governing question, each chapter, each section, and each paragraph of the thesis is a response to a subordinate question. Subordinate questions are the questions you will need to address or resolve on the way to addressing your governing question.

Make clear to yourself and your readers the subordinate questions to which each chapter is a response. When you are having difficulty developing an idea or structuring your piece, make a **question outline**, i.e., an outline in the form of questions. Write out the questions to which each paragraph is a response; questions tend to beget more questions and to form a natural pecking order and nesting order.

4. Freewrite. Write brief, uncensored pieces to loosen your mind (like stretches before running) and to let yourself follow the playful, associative, non-linear logic of your mind. Often we don't follow that associative logic very far because we dismiss it early on as entirely illogical and useless. While it is true that in our **final product** ideas need to be in the form of **linear logic** so that others can follow our

thinking, we need to draw upon our **associative logic** in the **creative process**. Associative logic is the logic of dreams, of those times when our mind is free to wander (e.g., just before we fall asleep, in the shower, while we're driving), and of those generative, free-flowing conversations that lead us seemingly - yet not entirely -- far afield from where we started. If we follow our mind's wanderings and associations far enough, they often lead to something creative and useful. Freewriting -- without thinking about whether what we are saying is elegant or grammatical or concise or logical -- promotes the generation of ideas and of creative connections between ideas. Think of freewriting as **soil, not seed**. Soil is the muck that nurtures a germinating idea rather than the perfect seeds that become the actual sentences and paragraphs of the final product.

5. Do focused, or prompted, freewriting. Sometimes freewriting works better with a focus and/or a running start. Consider using the following questions and sentence stems as prompts for your freewriting. Complete the sentence and continue writing from there.

1. When I started this course/paper/project, the thing that really interested me was . . .
2. What makes it hard to engage with what I'm doing is that . . .
3. Of all the stuff I'm doing these days, what really interests me is . . .
4. The questions I find myself thinking about these days are questions like . . .
5. If I had to put my paper into the form of a single question, it would be . . .
6. The observations I make that lead me to pose that question are . . .
7. I want to know . . .
8. I want to figure out how . . .
9. I have a hunch that . . .
10. I wish I could say in my paper that . . .
11. I doubt I can say in my paper that . . .
12. If things were as neat and tidy as I'd like them to be, . . .
13. I'm stuck. I'm stuck because I can't figure out . . .
14. [A letter to a friend or to your reader] Dear ____, I'm trying to write this piece about _____. And do you know what? . . .
15. What stands out to me about all the stuff I've been reading is this idea that . . .
16. Dialogue between me and the experts (this exercise comes from writing teacher Eileen Farrell):

This author/professor/theorist/expert says . . .
And/but I say . . .

He or she also says . . .
And/but I say . . .

17. What I've been reading makes me wonder . . .
18. I'm learning that . . .
19. What makes my question hard to reckon with or difficult to resolve is that . . .
20. One way in which I could attempt to reckon with those difficulties is . . .
21. If I could say what I really want to say, . . .
22. If I could approach this project in the way I really want to, . . .
23. If I could write about the question that really interests me, . . .

6. Work in 15-minute stretches. We tend to approach big jobs by thinking we need big amounts of time. We say to ourselves, "I need to write this paper. It's 1:00 now. I'm free until dinner at 6:00. That's five hours. I should get a lot done." But in fact, we barely make a dent. We brush our teeth, do our laundry, water our plants, pay a few bills, straighten our room, make a list of errands, hang out with our friends, chat on the phone. But we spend very little time on task (the task of writing). That's because few of us can work for five solid hours on one thing, especially something as difficult and anxiety-provoking as writing.

Especially if you are having difficulty getting started or staying with writing, try to work for very small stretches of time. Most of us can do anything for fifteen minutes. Work for fifteen, break for five is not a bad guideline. You may be surprised at how much you can get done in fifteen focused minutes. It is much better to work for fifteen minutes and get something done, however small, than to keep thinking for five hours that you should be working and be so daunted or scared that you get nothing done and then feel discouraged, demoralized, and guilty.

7. Employ the SOS strategy: specific, observable steps. (The phrase "specific, observable steps" comes from Jane Burka and Lenora Yuen, authors of Procrastination: Why You Do It, What To Do about It.) Think in terms of specific, fifteen-minute tasks that you can picture yourself doing and completing. "I am going to take fifteen minutes to write down a list of a questions that my thesis will need to address"; "I am going to take an inventory of all the things I can say, all the things I wish I could say but don't know if I have the evidence to support, and all of the hunches I have"; and "I am going to write a memo to myself about what makes my question a hard one to answer" are examples of such tasks. "I'm going to work on my thesis for five hours between lunch and dinner" is an example of a plan that is neither specific nor observable: with such a vague intention, there is nothing specific you can picture yourself starting, doing, and finishing.

8. Use the So/And Even So Exercise. Whenever you find yourself saying "I have only fifteen minutes, *so* I can't do anything productive," try saying, "I have only fifteen minutes, *and even so* . . . I could make a

phone call/jot a few notes about what questions I might address in this paper/skim the beginning and end of this chapter to identify the question the writer's addressing."

The So/And Even So Exercise can also work when you are feeling tired, sad, lonely, scared, discouraged, overwhelmed. It is my version of an exercise that comes from a friend who used to coach beginning adult runners. He told them they didn't need to run every scheduled running day but that they just needed to suit up -- put on their running clothes and running shoes -- every running day. If they said to themselves, "I'm tired/busy/sad/lonely/, **so** I can't run today," he asked them to say, "I'm tired/busy/sad/lonely, **and even so**, I could suit up." The idea is that if you put yourself in a position to work, you often find that you can -- and even want to -- do some work.

When you find yourself saying things like "I'm sleepy, so I can't work on this"; "I haven't called my best friend in a week, so I can't work on this"; "I have rehearsal in half an hour, so I can't work on this"; "I really want to see a movie, so I can't work on this"; "I'm scared I'm going to fail, so I can't work on this," try replacing the "so" with "and even so": ". . . and even so, I could work for fifteen minutes on tracing the line of thinking that leads me to pose my questions"; "I could brainstorm for fifteen minutes about questions I might want to address in my paper"; "I could skim this chapter to see if I can get the governing question that the writer sets out to address"; "I could read for fifteen minutes to see how this author defines this tricky term."

9. Save often. Just as you need to save often when you're working on a computer, you need to **save often** (in your brain) when you're reading and studying. The way to save your thoughts is to jot them down. Otherwise your ideas may get deleted, especially if you have a power surge (get caught up in another idea) or a crash (fall asleep). (Interestingly, the [Macintosh Users' Guide](#) makes this save-frequently analogy in the other direction. A section called "Save Your Work," reads, "Since work that exists only in memory is lost when you shut down the computer, you need to save your work so you can come back to it later. If you don't save your work, it disappears -- like thoughts that are lost unless you write them down.")

Believe that some notes are better than no notes. As you read or listen, **jot down even brief notes** about what is standing out to you, puzzling you, or bothering you. These need not be extensive or grammatically correct or stylistically elegant notes. Their purpose is two-fold: to help you do something active with the material to make it your own and to leave you with enough of a record of your reading and thinking that you can recall it later.

Write notes to yourself. One way of saving often is to keep a thesis **journal or memos folder** on your computer. Use your thesis journal or memos folder for freewriting (prompted or unprompted) (see #5 and #6 above). Also use your journal or folder to write your notes in the form of brief memos to yourself about your latest **response** to, or **further questions** about, or **musings** on a particular question. If your word-processing program allows you to keep two windows open, keep a memo window open whenever you are writing at your computer (no matter what you're working on). This **double-window approach** allows you to catch those fleeting thoughts that fly through your mind in the middle of whatever else you're doing.

Create two thesis journals or folders: one on your computer (i.e., a folder for memos -- see above) as well as one for hand-written entries (i.e., a notebook, big envelope, manila folder, or big piece of paper on the wall) to record thesis thoughts that come to you in moments when you're not at the computer. Great ideas don't always come at appropriate or convenient times, so you have to log them in as they arrive. You may do some of your most creative thinking in the spaces in between your official work sessions and end up jotting some of your best ideas on cocktail napkins, the backs of old envelopes, scraps of paper,

and receipts. Just make sure you have one place or "bin" where you keep them all together. Some people keep one such bin for the introduction, another for the conclusion, one for each chapter, and one miscellaneous file for what writing teacher Larry Weinstein calls "gems without a setting."

10. Let your reader in on your reasoning. your thinking, your understanding. Let your reader know what you want him or her to take away from or learn from a chapter and from your thesis as a whole. Don't just present data. **Show** your reader how you want him or her to make sense of the data, what you want him or her to see as meaningful about all that data. Show your reader the **inferences** you make, the things you see as you read between the lines.

11. Make a point. Many senior thesis writers tend to rely on summarizing, describing, narrating, and categorizing and never get around to making a point. While an elegant and clarifying summary, or a careful and sensitive description, or a well-chosen and illustrative narrative, or a new and intriguing categorization may be a contribution to your field, chances are you will be expected to develop some sort of argument or point, that is, to use your summary, description, narrative, or categorization in the service of an analytic response to some unresolved question or problem. If you find yourself relying on summaries, descriptions, narratives, and categorization, ask yourself, "What larger question is this in the service of?"

12. Reckon with the complexity of your question. You don't necessarily need to resolve your question completely. Sometimes it is enough to talk clearly about **how and why things are complex** rather than to clear up the complexity.

13. Show the subtleties of your thinking. Many students rely on variations of "and" to connect their ideas: "and"; "in addition"; "also"; "next"; "another example"; "later"; "plus"; "besides"; "yet another thing." It is as though they knit one very long piece with a basic knit-one-purl-one stitch and then decide after it is long enough that they will cast off, add a few tassels, and call it a scarf. That is fine when we are just learning to knit or to write, but to construct complex garments and arguments, we need to make more complex connections between things.

Don't say "and" when you mean to form a more precise connection: "even though"; "seems like, but"; "is insignificant unless we consider"; "is based on the problematic assumption that"; "does not adequately address the question of"; "goes even farther and demonstrates that"; "despite its problems is nonetheless useful for"; "but this definition differs in one critical respect"; "addresses that question but does not address the matter of." An analogy or metaphor can also help you clarify a connection between ideas.

14. Use chapter titles and subheads as important signposts for your reader and as ways of challenging yourself to summarize your thoughts. To name is to know.

15. Let readers of your draft know the questions *you* have about the draft. While you may also want to give your adviser and friends carte blanche to respond to whatever strikes them in your drafts, sometimes specifying some of the questions you have helps you feel less vulnerable to getting feedback. You can ask people to tell you what they see as your governing question, or to name three things they learned in reading your chapter, or to tell you what they liked most and what they had the most trouble with, or to tell you where your argument is weakest and where it is strongest, how the tone works in a particular place, etc.

16. Accept that anxiety and anxiety-management are part of the writing process. Upon the completion of his doctorate, a graduate student commented that 80% of the time and energy involved in writing a dissertation goes to anxiety management. You can't wait until you are not afraid or not anxious to begin writing. You need to find ways to write even when you're anxious. Writing in your thesis journal about your fear or anxiety can be a way of keeping yourself company in your fear, discovering what your fear is about, letting the fear be there without letting it stop you from doing what you need to do. In addition to writing about your fear or stuckness, working in 15-minute stretches, taking frequent breaks, getting regular exercise, meditating, using the SOS strategy, using the So/And Even So Exercise, and talking with people are all ways of managing your anxiety.

17. Take frequent breaks. To sustain your focus and concentration, you need to pace yourself. Pacing requires well-timed breaks. **Take a break before you get to the "breaking point,"** that is, the point at which you are so exhausted that you collapse or so frustrated that you avoid getting back to the task.

Many people say, "But my 'little' breaks inevitably last for hours." You can avoid the potential for dangerously long breaks if you **a) develop a repertoire of refreshing activities; b) experiment with breaks of different sizes; and c) develop a sensitivity to when you need a break and to what kind and what length of break you need at any given point.** Your repertoire of breaks might include talking with a friend, meditating, dancing in your room to a favorite song, reading the mail, making a phone call, getting something to eat or drink, taking a brief nap (notice how long is "just right" for you), reading a novel or a newspaper, doing the dishes, taking a walk, doing some artwork, starting a letter to a friend, getting exercise, or running an errand. **When you take a break, ask yourself what exactly you need right now.** Do you need a change of activity (e.g., to do something physical rather than something sedentary or to work on an art project rather than a problem set)? Do you need a change of environment (e.g., to get some fresh air or to work in a friend's room)? A change of perspective (e.g., to talk with a friend or to see a movie)? Sleep? Company? Nourishment? Distraction? Entertainment? Notice which sorts and sizes of breaks are most responsive to particular needs. Sometimes only a long break will do. **But frequent, brief breaks can be surprisingly restorative.**

18. Think of your work in terms of relationship, a process of continually connecting and re-connecting. Things get out of perspective when they fall out of relationship: we cannot tell how big or small things are unless we see them in relation to something else. To keep your work in perspective, or to bring your thesis back to scale once you've lost perspective, try to stay in relationship with, i.e., connected with

your curiosity and your caring (also known as your interest, your passion, your desire to understand or to know) -- by remembering what drew you to your question in the first place.

your question -- by freewriting, being playful with ideas (see #5 and #6 below).

your coaches (i.e., teachers), colleagues (i.e., fellow students), and loyal fans (i.e., friends) by talking with them about your ideas and about your experience of trying to write.

You may find the following three metaphors of connecting and reconnecting helpful:

Engaging, disengaging, and reengaging gears. Imagine your mind and your project as two gears. To turn, they need to engage, to mesh. Questions are the cogs of the gears, the means by which your mind engages with your project. You prepare to write (or read) by remembering the questions your piece is addressing (or discovering the questions an author is addressing) and by generating questions of your own. These questions set the gears in motion. Whenever your mind disengages (i.e., you lose your concentration) use these questions to help you reengage.

Relating (to your project). Relationships, whether with your studies or with people, share common phases and themes: Getting acquainted. Courtship. Falling in and out of love. Disillusionment. Negotiating new terms. Staying in touch. Getting reacquainted. Remembering what about the other initially attracted you, appealed to you. Remaining curious about the other. Finding common ground. Negotiating more formal relationships, i.e., those based on something other than love or friendship.

Practicing Zen (an approach to everything in life, including one's writing, reading and studying). A Zen approach to life involves mindfulness (*vs.* mindlessness); being present (*vs.* being absent); and cultivating an abiding awareness of your relation to all you do and encounter in your life.

When your attention wanders, as it inevitably will, just notice that it has, and bring it back to your task. Don't judge yourself or your behavior ("There I go again being such a poor writer (or reader). I never keep my focus. I have such a short attention span. I bet I have the poorest concentration of anyone. I can't believe I am so distractible. I must be doing something wrong. Everyone else in this class (or this library, or the world) knows how to keep their focus. I'm just not a good reader. . ."). Such judgments waste your precious time and energy. When you lose your concentration, just notice what you are doing, and then bring your attention back to your focus.

19. Negotiate with yourself. When you seem to be sabotaging your own efforts to do what you intend, listen for internal voices that express your **competing needs, desires and fears**. Part of you might be saying, "Me, I really do want to do well on this project. I want to get down to work." But another part might be saying, "Me, I'm going to make sure I get some time to hang out with friends no matter what." And yet another part might be saying, "Me, I'm afraid I'm really not competent to do this project. I'm afraid that if I work on it now, I'll just discover that I really don't know what I'm doing or that I can't do as good a job as I want to."

At times like this, it is as if our behavior is being guided by an internal committee whose members each have a vested interest in their own particular preferred activity. The committee as a whole has trouble either accomplishing a task or enjoying itself wholeheartedly because its members keep quibbling over which activity should have priority. Worktime tends to be compromised by the desire to rest or play, and playtime tends to be contaminated by guilt and anxiety over not working.

To work and play with less internal conflict, you need to form alliances among various parts of yourself -- for example, among the part of you that aspires to do your best, the part that values other things in life besides achievement, and the part that is afraid of failure, compulsive working, loneliness, or other potential risks of engaging with your work. To form such an alliance requires that all of the separate, uncooperative, "**me/I**" voices join to create a generative "**we/let's**" voice (e.g., "Okay, we have a lot of different things that matter to us. Let's figure out how can we get going on this project and also help manage our fear about not being good enough and also guarantee that we can have time to play"). In creating a "we/let's" voice, you bring together all of your energies in the effort to live **a life that feels whole and true to the complexity of who you are.**

20. Let yourself be surprised in the process of writing your thesis. True learning involves a transformation of sorts, and we all know how disorienting transformations can be.

Resources

Burka, J. and Yuen, L. (1983). Procrastination: Why You Do It, What To Do about It. Reading, MA: Addison Wesley.

Elbow, P. (1973). Writing without Teachers. New York: Oxford University Press.

_____. (1981). Writing with Power: Techniques for Mastering the Writing Process. New York: Oxford University Press.

Goldberg, N. (1986). Writing down the Bones: Freeing the Writer within. Boston: Shambhala

_____. (1990). Wild Mind: Living the Writer's Life. New York: Bantam Books.

Lipson, A. and Perkins, D. N. (1990). Block: Getting out of Your Own Way: The New Psychology of Counterintentional Behavior in Everyday Life. New York: Lyle Stuart.

Worksheets for Senior Thesis Writers

(and other writers, too)

These worksheets provide prompts for freewriting, i.e., questions and sentence stems that give you a running start when you sit down to do some focused freewriting. Focused or prompted freewriting is uncensored writing that is done in the service of creativity, of generating ideas and potential links between ideas. For more information on freewriting, see pp. 1-3 of "Twenty Tips for Senior Thesis Writers."

- ❖ **Connecting with Your Curiosity, p. 1**
- ❖ **Putting Vague Thoughts into the Form of Questions, p. 2**
- ❖ **Identifying Your Governing Question, p. 3**
- ❖ **Questions and Prompts toward an Introduction, p. 4**
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*This packet of exercises was prepared by Sheila M. Reindl
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Connecting with Your Curiosity

What really interests me is . . .

(OR, alternatively, When I started this project, the thing that really interested me was . . .)

(OR, alternatively, What really drew me to this topic in the first place was . . .)

Putting Vague Thoughts into the Form of Questions

Here is a list of questions -- large and small, near and far, grand and modest, and in no particular order -- that I might want to consider in my thesis:

Identifying Your Governing Question

If I had to put my topic into the form of a single question, that question would be . . .
(OR, alternatively, What I really want to know is . . .)

Questions and Prompts toward an Introduction

or

So What and Why Bother?: Identifying What Makes Your Question a Question at All and What Makes It a Question Worth Addressing

My governing question derives from competing observations*, i.e., observations that appear to me to be in tension with one another and to indicate an apparent puzzle, problem, discrepancy, oversight, mystery, contradiction, or surprise. The competing observations that give rise to my governing question are . . .

. . . on the one hand . . .

. . . but on the other hand/and yet . . .

This problem/puzzle, discrepancy etc. and my governing question are of interest to other scholars/researchers because . . .

*Any given paper might be a response to more than two competing observations.

Questions and Prompts toward a Literature Review

Who else (or what other body or bodies of literature) has attempted to address my governing question (or related questions)?

The question they asked was . . .

The way they approached their question was to . . .

What they ended up saying in response to the question they posed is . . .

What remains unasked/unresolved/overlooked/unexplored/unaddressed/misunderstood is . . .

My project addresses that gap by . . .

Questions and Prompts toward a Methods Section

I can think of my methods as being, in part, the actual tasks (e.g., library research, interviews, viewing of videos or film, field observations) I will need to undertake to approach the question I am posing. Those tasks are (and I will try to be as specific as I can) . . .

Other methods I could potentially use (i.e., other tasks I could potentially undertake) to approach the question I'm posing are . . .

My reasons for choosing to use some of the methods I list above and not others are . . .

Terms I will need to define to do this research include . . .

Some of the methodological issues/problems/challenges with which I will need to contend are (these include both questions others might ask about how I am approaching my question as well as questions I myself have about how I am approaching my question) . . .

I might respond to or deal with those methodological issues/problems/challenges by . . .

Questions and Prompts toward a Chapter

If I had to put this chapter into the form of a single question, that question would be . . .

Here is a list of other questions I need to address in this chapter:

Questions and Prompts toward a Conclusion

The headway I've made toward resolution of my governing question is . . .

What remains unresolved is . . .

It remains unresolved because . . .

My research has implications for . . .

For instance, my research has methodological implications for future research, that is, implications for *how we frame the questions* in this field and implications for the *methods we use to address those questions*. Those implications include . . .

Other implications include (e.g., implications for specific practices or policies, implications for how we interpret results of previous research) . . .

Reckoning with Complexity

What makes my question a particularly complex* one with which to reckon is that . . .

I will attempt to reckon with those complexities by . . .

*Remember: You do not necessarily need to clear up all of the complexity, but you at least need to be clear about how and why things are (and remain) complex.

Narrowing the Scope

It is beyond the scope of my paper to . . .

Therefore, I won't consider/explore/analyze that issue in depth in this piece. For the purposes of this paper, I will . . . (e.g., assume . . . /work on the premise that . . . /summarize others' thinking on this matter . . . /refer the reader to . . .)

I make that *particular* assumption/work on that *particular* premise/summarize that *particular* person's thinking/refer the reader to that *particular* literature because . . .

Gems without a Setting*

Here are some of the ideas that I might not be able to include in this thesis or paper but that deserve safekeeping because they are brilliant and precious thoughts -- or at least interesting thoughts -- that might come in handy for some other project:

* I borrow this term from writing instructor Larry Weinstein. He encouraged me to write down the ideas and questions that I found interesting but that did not seem to have a place in my current paper.