



# Writing your thesis



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Why are science writing tasks among the most procrastinated activities in the academic life? Thesis writing can inspire fears of not succeeding or not being able to, because it is a major issue, the success of your PhD depends on it. So how can you overcome the confusion, fear, lack of motivation and self-confidence that the thesis can create? The advices below were collected during the conference «Sit down and write your thesis» by Professor Geneviève Belleville, organized by the PhDs@Work project on October 26th, 2018. These advices may not apply to all cases, adapt them to your daily life. The key is to find out what is right for you, a process that often requires going through phases of trial, frustration, changes, etc.

## The three steps of writing

*First, it is important to understand the 3 different steps of writing: planning, writing and editing.*

- **1. Planning:** planning in itself is procrastinating, but it is «good procrastination» that reassures and helps to organize the writing process. When a plan is precise and well worked out, it reduces the worry and anxiety that writing can cause and therefore makes writing easier. A good plan has sections, subsections, ideas for each subsection and names of authors, books and articles to support each idea. At this stage of writing, you can even copy and paste parts of the articles in question that are appropriate for each section. So the plan takes time.
- **2. Writing:** to begin writing «throw your ideas» on paper as quickly as possible, without hesitation, without evaluation, without editing. Write the idea down as long as it goes through your head, accurately enough to be able to understand yourself afterwards, but without thinking about the form. You can also write in a mixture of French and English, use jargon, paraphrases, etc. Professor Belleville calls this «badly writing good ideas».
- **3. Revision:** when revising, it is strongly recommended that you not only correct spelling and syntax, but also rework the structure of the argument, the idea behind each paragraph (as a reminder, one paragraph equals one idea), and the necessity of each sentence (so as not to repeat itself).





## The golden rule of writing: plan ahead

According to Professor Belleville, it is crucial to respect a simple golden rule: plan in your agenda periods of time devoted to writing AND respect this schedule uncompromisingly.

*To do so, she offers a few specific guidelines:*

- **Schedule**, for example, **writing sessions** from 10:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. twice a week, three one-hour sessions a week, or two two-hour sessions a day, depending on where you are in your doctoral training. This schedule should be established in advance and should be regularly reviewed. You can therefore, for example, schedule a monthly writing schedule at the beginning of each month.
- **During the writing session, it is imperative to make yourself completely unavailable.** Eliminate, not limit, any distractions from the beginning to the end of the session. Refuse inter-college breaks, mute email and phone notifications, etc. If you realize that it is impossible to make yourself completely unavailable for two or three hours in a row, then we recommend that you plan, for example, three-four 45-minute sessions. Once the period is over, stop writing.
- **Take breaks and holidays free from writing:** take full days off when you are not writing. By respecting these writing sessions, you will avoid spending your time feeling guilty about not writing during your “off-writing” hours.
- Even if you think you don't have time to work on your thesis a few days a week, try to schedule even 30 minutes three times a week. It has been proven that the more time you allow to pass between writing sessions, the harder it is to get back into it.
- **Don't wait for the long free periods** (reading week, free day of the week, holidays etc.) to start writing. It is often thought that it will be possible to catch up during these off-peak periods. This is a bad idea because it is difficult to find motivation and inspiration during these periods.
- **Do not wait for inspiration and don't wait to “find out more” either.** The most common mistake is to want to master the subject completely, to read all the books and scientific articles on the subject before starting to write. Professor Belleville urges to start writing at the same time as you start your research. It is true that this beginning of writing will not be of high quality, but it doesn't matter, the important thing is to get started. Because a person retains about ten percent of what he or she reads, if you wait a year or two of research and reading before you start writing, once you finally decide to start, you will have retained very little. So as you go along your research and read, write down the important information you want to use. Then start writing down your ideas straight away. You will have to modify them later, but at least you will already have the basis.

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These tips can be applied to research as well. Just as PhD fellows struggle to find time for writing, doctoral assistants often struggle to find time for research. For more information on time management and work organization, see the “Facing the challenges” sheet.

## Inspiration takes practice

You don't have to be a gifted writer to be able to write or be inspired. At the risk of repeating oneself, don't wait for inspiration! What makes writing so difficult is the pressure to write well straight away. If you take this pressure off yourself, it is actually easy to write. So Professor Belleville encourages “bad writing of good ideas”. Besides, it is easy to write badly without inspiration. Again, the most important thing is to write. Afterwards, it is easier to modify, improve, synthesize these bad writings than to start in front of a blank page.

Moreover, although it is impossible to control one's inspiration, it is quite possible to create conditions favorable to inspiration.





Here are a few of them:

- Write daily: inspiration is like sports, it's a workout.
- Ideas often arise when you're not in the middle of writing. So keep a notebook of ideas with you so you can remember them for your next writing period.
- Overcome the feeling of joy from one finished chapter and the de-motivation to start the next. This feeling of not being able to rewrite a whole new chapter is just a feeling and not the reality.
- Vary your tasks in a day. An 8-hour day of writing doesn't work for everyone. A session of "pure" writing (not reading, thinking, correcting, etc.) should not exceed two hours. If you absolutely have to work on your text all day, then vary the tasks by interspersing "revision", "planning" and "writing" sessions or write several sections or chapters in parallel.
- Stop on a downhill slope, not when you run out of ideas. When you get to a point where your inspiration has subsided but you still have one or two ideas left, write these in a few key words on a post-it note and stop your writing session. That way, the next day when you start your new session, you'll have something to get you going again.
- Talk about your topic with your colleagues, your family. On the one hand, this will allow you to acquire new knowledge, and on the other hand, popularizing your subject will also give you new perspectives - and thus a new source of inspiration.

Would you like more advice on writing? Check out the [video](#) or [notes](#) from Professor Belleville's lecture.

### Myths about inspiration to forget:

**«An experienced writer is capable of writing a great article on the first try. If I can't write well, then I'm a bad writer.»**

**«The ease and speed of writing is a good indicator of the quality of the text produced.»**

**«You have to feel you are an expert in a field before you start writing.»**

#### INFORMATION & CONTACT

**UNamur, Euraxess Unit**

euraxess@unamur.be,  
<https://www.unamur.be/en/research/euraxess>

**ULB, PhD Unit**

doctorat@ulb.be, [www.ulb.be/doctorat](http://www.ulb.be/doctorat)

**UMons, Doctorate Unit**

phd@umons.ac.be

**UCLouvain, PhD cell**

doctorat-adre@uclouvain.be

**ULiège, PhD Unit**

doctorat@uliege.be, [www.recherche.uliege.be/doctorat](http://www.recherche.uliege.be/doctorat)

**USaint-Louis Brussels, Doctorate Unit**

doctorat@usaintlouis.be and <https://www.usaintlouis.be/sl/2877.html>



The PhD@Work project aims to strengthen and enhance the transversal skills of researchers. It is an integrated and inter-university project which has several sub-objectives: to continue the effort already made to strengthen the transversal skills of PhD students and PhDs, in better adequacy with the needs of the socio-economic world; to promote these skills to recruiters in order to improve the employability of PhDs and to support innovation; to develop supports, tools and support for professional integration; and to organize communication and events aimed at PhD students and PhDs as well as academics and companies. The project leader is the ASBL Objectif Recherche and the partner universities are UMONS, UCLouvain, USaint-Louis Brussels, ULB, UNamur and ULiège.



The PhD Welcome Pack was written by UNamur in collaboration with the partners of the PhDs@Work project.

