

## Writing the thesis

### A complex task

Once students have negotiated their research, they arrive at the foot of another mountain called 'writing up' in which they have to transform the raw material into a thesis or dissertation. It will certainly be the largest scale and most complex task they have ever undertaken or, in many cases, will ever undertake. Even if they have been writing regularly since the start of their candidacy, producing the thesis may still be seen as a vast mountain to scale. But it is important that they do reach the summit on time or as near as possible for personal and financial reasons, as well as meeting sponsors' targets.

There is a complex range of reasons why research students do not complete or do not complete on time. So it is a good idea to demolish the barriers to completion for a disabled student so that disability does not become another factor in non-completion. This section aims to show ways of tackling the obstacles.

### Part 1 - The student experience

Students have given us unique insights into the particular difficulties posed by the thesis. Here are some of them.

Not surprisingly, my written English and grammar are poor. Unlike hearing people, I do not hear the background everyday English which would help me improve my writing/ grammar skills. I felt it took me longer to write my first year literature review report than it did take my hearing peers and I had to rely on ..... to make grammar corrections. I have concerns that my thesis may take longer than usual..

**Deaf PhD student (Science)**

I have been making use of the special typesetting software to produce written work. The difficulties associated with this include the detection of errors in source files and the reading back by my screen reader of the contents of these files, as they include a wide range of brackets and keywords that are difficult to distinguish between visual or via speech output. The same is true of my work using symbolic computation packages, which are an integral part of my work.

**Blind PhD student (Technology)**

They (my supervisors) have also been very good at helping me to devise strategies to solve practical problems. For example, feedback on work has been an issue because the traditional method of writing on submitted work is not accessible to me. I now submit work and receive feedback by email.

**Blind PhD student (Social Science)**

....at the beginning of a day I am fairly dextrous and mobility is not too bad. As the day progresses and tiredness increases I drop things, stumble/trip and am prone to headaches as I become anxious about completing the work I have set myself. At the end of a whole week of intense study and work, I need several days to recover.

**Employed PhD student with multiple disabilities**

I cannot write. When I say I have difficulties writing, people think I must be able to write but .. more slowly. But I cannot write. I can't use some software because it needs you to key in the first one or two letters. I don't know what the first two letters are.

**PhD student with dyslexia**

The issues are... having confidence in my English skills. Are they up to academic level? Has my poor school education affected me in later life, especially grammar? If I do not meet academic levels, will this be related to being Deaf or that I simply do not meet the required standards?

**Deaf PhD student**

So these and other disabled research students clearly have issues in presenting their work. An understanding of those issues and the individual, unique nature of the challenges presented by extended writing may assist us to provide support that is appropriate.

There is a need for us to differentiate; no two students experience disability in the same way. Some will have designed their own learning strategies and will have been using those methods for many years. Others could well learn how to manage their thesis more effectively with advice from academic staff willing to adapt, experiment and improvise. Peers can share what has worked for them and support staff can also give advice about what might work.

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## **Part 2 - Making reasonable adjustments**

Students who have difficulties in writing because they are, for example, pre-lingually deaf, have dyslexia or cannot sit for extended periods because of pain are not incapable of writing a thesis. As one supervisor said of a dyslexic student:

Having made the mental acceptance that this is a good student but an unconventional one, then the rest seems to be, 'Right, how do we get through this and around this and enable him to achieve his potential?'

So how is it possible to support a student without crossing the line and ‘doing it for them’?

Here are some scenarios. Think through what reasonable adjustments can be made to supervisory practice whilst maintaining academic standards and encouraging independent thinking.

1. Kathryn has dyslexia and she has profound difficulties in writing. She discloses this to you at her interview. She uses voice-activated software but the whole process of writing takes considerably longer than for a non-dyslexic student. The software does not recognise a lot of the technical language involved in her research area. She tends to panic about getting behind with her work.

### **Suggested action**

- Check out with Kathryn the nature of the difficulties. Is it a planning issue? Is it a writing issue? Is it a terminology issue? It is easier to make adjustments when the problem is clearly defined by both supervisor and student.
- The student’s level of anxiety may be one of the main issues; it could be hindering the student’s recognition of goals reached. Reassure Kathryn that she is making timely progress - if she is. Anxiety can make the symptoms of dyslexia much worse.
- Ensure that she is in touch with the Disability Service and is receiving appropriate learning support.
- Talk with the Disability Service about the student’s difficulties and work out what is appropriate support from you and from a learning support tutor.
- Give Kathryn a glossary of essential terminology so that she can ‘teach’ her software the words.
- Help her to break down the writing into manageable pieces.
- Encourage her to start writing from day one, beginning with what will be easier for her so that confidence will grow.

2. Barry is deaf and a BSL user. Sentence structure in early draft chapters is inconsistent and it is difficult for you to understand his arguments. His grasp of the subject terminology is poor. Working through his BSL/English interpreter, it is clear that his thinking, ideas and proposal are sound. He gained a first in his degree at another university.

### **Suggested action**

- Ask Barry about the type and range of support he received when he was studying for his first degree. What did he find particularly helpful – both from support and academic staff?

- Is that type of support available at your institution? Is he tapping into that source of help? Is it appropriate support?
- Find out from the Disability Service what can be provided. If there is language support, discuss whether it would be more appropriate for the language support staff to proofread all first drafts. That would leave supervisors free to concentrate on content and structure of the whole rather than wording and sentence structure.
- Make sure that other supervisors know about the language support issues.
- Provide a glossary of essential subject terminology and general research terms. Signpost him to BSL signed subject glossaries for engineering, science, art and design and general terms at:  
[http://www.engineeringsigns.ac.uk/home\\_glossary.asp](http://www.engineeringsigns.ac.uk/home_glossary.asp)  
[http://www.sciencesigns.ac.uk/home\\_glossary.asp](http://www.sciencesigns.ac.uk/home_glossary.asp)  
<http://www.artsigns.ac.uk>

3. Veronique has low energy levels and gets very tired when writing for long periods of time. Her concentration is poor and she finds many research activities hard to sustain because of her ME (myalgic encephalopathy)

### Suggested action

- Ask Veronique the maximum time she can work on one task.
- Decide together on a plan which mixes reading, analysis, note-taking, writing up.
- Ensure that she has attainable goals.
- Encourage her to spend part of each day in writing.
- Develop a plan which ensures the student will not store up their writing until the writing up year but will complete chapters each year.
- Find out the times of day when she has optimum energy. Build that into the planning process.

4. Glen has spelling difficulties caused by his dyslexia. The first draft of the literature review is riddled with mistakes. It is the first piece of his writing you have seen. How would you give feedback?

### Suggested action

- Talk with the Disability Service about the assessment of support requirements, if one has already taken place. Find out whether spelling is the main issue.
- Ensure that Glen has his work proofread before it is given to you. The Disability Service will advise the student on where and how to get their work proof-read.
- Give feedback on the structure, content and ideas, giving credit to the student for what is good. A student with dyslexia which affects written

language may lack confidence in their right to be studying at research degree level. Feedback which affirms the student and constructively advises on where improvement is needed can be crucial to a student's completion.

- Give feedback in clear and unambiguous language so that Glen knows how he can improve his work.
- Avoid focusing all your attention on the spelling. It is not a reflection of the student's competence, knowledge and research skills.

5. Joe has mental health difficulties and his confidence in his own abilities is very low. He gained a first in his degree. He has put off several deadlines for submitting his first chapter to you. His explanation to you is that he does not think he has fully understood the results of his experiments although discussion with him shows that he has.

### Suggested action

- Encourage Joe to put something, however brief, down on paper.
- Highlight the student's understanding of the results, confirm the rightness of his interpretation so that he has the confidence to commit the findings to paper.
- Review Joe's work plan with him. Stagger the writing up so that he gains in confidence and builds up the amount of writing he does.
- If the issue is persistent, then advise him to look at student support services/counselling/learning support.
- Ensure that all supervisors know what the teaching and learning issues are and that there is consistency across the team in handling the issues.

These are suggested 'adjustments'. They are not definitive answers; there are no right or wrong adjustments. Therefore, it is a good idea to review our approaches and see if they are working. The person who can give the most help in this process is the student. They have the fullest information about their disability and can advise on what is working and what is not. They have travelled a long way in higher education, have insight into their support requirements and know their own coping strategies.

A research supervisor interviewed as part of this programme said:

I need my supervised students to continually tell me what they are doing, what their timetable is, where they've progressed. I would impose that expectation on all students and so I do on T. T's anxiety is about will he finish on time. He always feels he's not making enough progress. He's always trying to run before he can walk. I don't whether it's to do with his dyslexia but we are always telling him to slow down, not to worry, that he's actually making very good progress, you've got to put the work in on this and you've got to go deeper rather than faster.

### Part 3 – The role of learning support

A student who is, for example, dyslexic will probably have access to a learning support tutor. Their role is to create a level playing field for the student by providing relevant, timely and appropriate support. Their role will vary depending on the requirements of the individual. Here one tutor explains what she does.

Postgraduate research students are obviously far more aware because they have a basis of undergraduate knowledge and skills. Even those who come to research MAs with limited experience of extended written work at undergraduate level have that intellectual capacity. They are more aware and switched on. They discuss, I think, at a higher level with you, even though they are struggling with the written element and sorting out their ideas. Certainly discussion is a key element in supporting postgraduate research students.

Usually the main issues seem to be: sorting out ideas, understanding the language of research, the differences (in level) from undergraduate to research ideas. But they have it all there; they just do not always know they have it there. Very often we talk it through, pulling out from conversations with them the key elements and presenting that back to them to say: 'Is this what you are talking about? Is this the focus?' And then you can see the light bulb going on and they'll say yes. Then it is mind-mapping it or writing it down and I will usually be the person who does that.

This year the main purpose of the learning support has definitely been pulling out the structure and the focus of their research. The MA by research students have to write research dissertations and they do not believe they actually have the information there or even know what direction they are moving in. So it is teasing that out. Last year it was language and developing language. With the MA students teasing out the ideas is usually done in an hour, or an hour and a half. With PhD students it took 4 hours. But there was a lot involved in that. Some of the session was bit by bit planning and understanding the huge structure of a PhD. It was 4 hours with a break in the middle - two hours either side of intense discussion.

Their requirements, their questions are: What do I do with all this work, this research, these ideas? How do I put it into written format? How do I structure it? Usually they have been left to get on with it. One research student was just told to step up their skills but with no indication about how to do that. The other research students I have on the MA side are getting a lot of support which is good and I am just supplementing that. That has been by arrangement with the supervisors and the course leader.

The academic staff just recognised the issues as general disorganisation in the students' written work for the research elements. They could not provide the support at the level it was needed.

It's mainly structure and language. Stepping up and using a more specific research language or specific course related language. It's about using research language. They can grasp a definition and they know it. They understand the word on its own, but not how to use it in context.

When I am supporting a student with planning their thesis, I usually get them to tell me what their research is about; to outline the focus. Just to explain it so I understand a little bit about what they are trying to write about. That just helps me because usually they have everything everywhere and understanding the focus helps me to keep it pulled in. I usually just make notes as they are telling me a bit about their research. It involves going through and pulling out the key elements and then fitting that into what goes into the methodology, what is in the literature review. How does the literature review information relate to the research? It is linking it all together and making sure you have the forward and backward movement.

I gained my own knowledge of how to structure the thesis from reading a large number and analysing how they are put together.

I suppose they can pass their thesis to me for proofreading to me because it is not a supervisor, it's not a friend; it's a professional service provided by somebody who understands why they may have structured something in a bizarre way and can give sympathetic and constructive feedback. We are able to say what they should concentrate primarily on ...spelling errors, sentence structures, any inconsistencies. If they have written something inconsistent, it usually jumps out at you if they have failed to mention it before. I will flag it up and say: 'This strikes me as something you haven't mentioned before, or you are relating it to something that I can't see. Would you go back and just check that?'

Ideally, I will give feedback in a one-to-one session, just to talk through and find out if I have understood everything - because obviously it is not my area and I am not the supervisor. I talk through all the spelling errors and any inconsistencies that I pick up which I think could be a problem. If it is not clear what it means, I ask them to explain it to me and, by getting them to do that, usually they say straight away: 'Ah yes, that's right.'

I do write on their work; I try to use different colour pens. Most of them are not offended by red for errors, and I try to use green or another colour for other sort of comments or suggestions.

Supervisors have never challenged the support I offer. Our priorities as support tutors are to proof read, to look for grammar and spelling errors and inconsistencies in the text.

In the process of learning support you just see the growth in confidence. They realise their own potential. I think they come in feeling knocked down, that they are pretty average. Then when they get comments back, they realise that they

can actually achieve and they jump up from an average performance to excellence.

A lot of students are anxious when they come in. We build up the sessions week by week and obviously they start to trust you. When they go out of the room, lots of students leave the door wide open. Sometimes you get the anxious backward glance and they whisper: 'Bye. See you next week.' The day they walk out and say, 'Right, great, fantastic, see you next week,' smile and shut the door is when I know it's worked.

Sandy Alden (Newcastle University)  
Interviewed 2005

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