

SOME ADVICE FOR WRITING A THESIS

from a (former) fellow student

Christina Caan, PACS Honors Student, Class of 2003

Picking a topic

1. Think about what interests YOU! Think about articles you have read, lectures you have heard, or papers you have written that stand out as topics that interest you -- something that fascinates you, disturbs you, or generally provokes your intellectual self. Ask yourself questions such as: What am I interested in? What am I concerned about? What do I want to know more about? What do I think is important to contribute to in this field or this area?
2. Remember that your topic will change and evolve. Because of that, I recommend starting at a broad level. Pick a general area to begin with and ground yourself in. Once you have your larger framework, move onto a more specific topic. Draw out the aspects of that topic that interest you and start discussing or arguing them with someone. See where that leads. Discussing your topic with several people and professors will help to narrow your focus and come up with a strong starting place.
3. Did I mention that you should choose a topic YOU enjoy and YOU want to write about? Make sure you do!

Doing research

1. A good place to begin your research is with your primary sources. They will help to continue the shaping process of your topic. If you are having trouble picking a topic, researching primary sources may also help you discover your topic. I found it very helpful to meet with a research librarian. Actually, it was like finding a golden treasure chest! They are very helpful and nice and will show you sources you never dreamed you could access or find.
2. Also, too much research never hurts! Spend a couple of days or as much time as you can just searching the library. Look through the bibliographies of readings for clues of other works that might be useful or insightful. Try to get a broad base of research on a range of issues related to your topic.
3. Ask yourself questions like: What information will I need to prove my argument? What information will I need to understand my topic? What information relates to this topic? Which authors do I want to include?

Writing

1. Where to begin? I started with what I knew best, what I was most familiar with. Writing a number of pages helped me to get into the flow of writing and boosted my confidence.
2. Break your work up into smaller pieces. Work on a specific section; break things down into a number of smaller papers. This helped me accomplish tasks quickly and less stressfully. However, make sure that you can fit all the pieces together. Rework them if necessary.
3. Remember that you are presenting an original argument. Be strong and clear in your writing. Back up your claim with primary source evidence and research.
4. Get to work! Do not begin your writing late in the semester. Your work will probably evolve and you may need to do more research. And remember, just before your paper is due, everything will go wrong: your neighbors will have a loud party, you will lose your keys and be locked out of your apartment, you will have another paper due, or your cat will have to go to the emergency room. Prepare in advance and don't leave too much to the last minute.
5. Constantly talk out your paper with other people. Present your argument to professors, friends, parents, or to anyone who will listen. I found myself talking out my paper in my dreams.
6. Don't forget about your big picture. Keep your outline and argument close by. Make sure your ideas fit into your framework and that you are addressing all the points.
7. **BACK UP YOUR WORK!** (And then back up the back up!!)

8. One of the most exciting aspects of this experience was that it allowed me to develop my own writing style. Remember, this is YOUR paper, YOUR topic, YOUR original argument. Unleash your creative side!
9. JUST KEEP WRITING! If you get stuck or can't find the words for a specific section, move on. Start working on a new part for a few days. It'll help you get passed your writer's block and you will still be making progress.
10. Turn in rough drafts to your thesis advisor. (A point about picking a thesis advisor: make sure they have time for you, that they are interested in your topic and are knowledgeable about your topic, that you feel comfortable talking to them, and that YOU are generally interested in what THEY have to say. I would also recommend setting up a weekly or biweekly meeting time with them that is reserved only for you. This will assure you some time with them and will help keep you on schedule, as you will need something to tell them during those meetings.)
11. Schedules...hmmm...The one thing I would recommend is giving yourself early deadlines -- that way if you miss them you will still be ahead of the game.
12. I wrote my introduction and my conclusion last. I had turned in an introduction in IAS 102, but, in the end, it changed dramatically. I highly recommend getting the body of your work done first.

Additional suggestions

1. Let your topic evolve. Give your topic some freedom to grow and change, even dramatically change.
2. Learn to deal with constructive criticism. Be open to what others have to say.
3. This is a long process; pace yourself and prepare yourself.
4. Be realistic about what you can do.
5. Keep your topic at the forefront of you mind. During lectures, newscasts, and discussions, think about how issues brought up fit into your topic.
6. Learn to love counter arguments. Think of counter arguments to your argument. How would you respond? Do you need to evolve your topic? Spend a day just thinking about or writing down what someone would say to bring your argument down. Then make sure they can't!
7. Make sure you have a focused and concise question that you are answering. Spend plenty of time developing your question. It will help you to stay focused.
8. ENJOY YOURSELF! This really in part relies on choosing a topic you love, but ultimately depends on your attitude toward this process.
9. Again, the best piece of advice I have is: LOVE YOUR TOPIC! Choose something you enjoy, are interested in, that you want to study, to learn more about, or find an answer to. Do not pick a topic because someone else tells you it would be a good topic, or because you think it will get you into grad school or law school, or because your parents told you to, or because you just can't think of anything else. Pick it because YOU love it, because YOU want to address it. This is YOUR paper, YOUR argument, follow YOUR bliss.
10. Remember: despair, frustration, anger, tears, sweat, sleepless nights, curses, hours staring blankly at the computer, and other hurdles are going to be a part of this process, but in the end, they are what make victory oh so sweet!