Writing up and Defending a Thesis

or

Getting that albatross off your back

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With helpful additions by

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What should you expect at the defense?

• Could you fail?
• Could it be one of life’s memorable events?
• What are the characteristics of a great defense?
• How do you get there?

How to write up without (too much) frustration

1. Planning and structuring the thesis

   • Aim for papers, not a book, from the beginning, use appendices if necessary for non-publishable stuff
     – Taxpayers, efficiency, currency
   • Target specific journals from the outset; align choices with career goals
   • Create multiple explicit deadlines and meet them; use tools (task lists, time maps, Outlook) to align time
     with priorities
   • Complete papers sequentially, submit one or more before defending
   • Leave time for comment, digestion, and revision on at least two drafts before going to the committee

2. Maintain a good and active relationship with your supervisor

   • Provide periodic updates about progress without invitation
   • Collect and ask specific questions that generate specific feedback
   • Schedule regular meetings to bin questions and updates
   • Take your work as far as possible on your own and provide complete material when asked for review
   • Appreciate feedback and act on it
   • Train yourself to minimize defensiveness, maximize open-mindedness, and expect to grow

More on supervisor relations

• Actively read and comment on other theses and MS’s to identify common problems and solutions
• Remain modestly engaged in university life (seminars, lab discussions, etc) and helpful to lab-mates
• Stick to the deadlines you’ve agreed to as much as possible
• Expect feedback, not initiative
• Don’t expect your supervisor to remember the details of methods, previous drafts, the literature, her name,
  etc.

3. Intercept writer’s block

   • Know what causes it for you
   • Do other productive work when it strikes
     – Tables and figures, lit cited, table of contents
     – Not always helpful to read more papers
     – Use the chip-away approach, write bits as you go
   • Bang out a rough semblance of ideas and refine (add refs, check facts, change order) later; don’t agonize
     over style at the early stages
   • Improve your writing ability
     – Read a good style manual (e.g., Joseph Williams) simultaneously with writing
     – Aim for concision
   • Write backwards (see Rich’s Biology 506 website)
Writing Backwards*

1. Write the conclusions
2. Write the results that support them
3. Write the methods that created the results
4. Write the discussion that interprets the results; adjust the initial conclusions as a summary or portion of the discussion.
5. Write the introduction that poses the questions the conclusions answer
6. Edit to improve style, avoid redundancy and enhance clarity

4. Stay the course and avoid pitfalls

- Maintain mental and physical health
  - Recreation, Relationships, Resources
  - Exercise, Eat well, Explore
- Get input on specific problems via lab groups, MS circles, etc.
- Limit time devoted to holidays, conferences, teaching, recreation, other work, etc.
- Invest in the next stage, but not too heavily
- Avoid analyzing the same data repeatedly; there is usually more than one ‘correct’ approach

5. Engage your committee constructively

- Discuss the timing of circulation with your supervisor
- Provide them with complete and polished versions of MS’s for submission and theses; ensure they do not spend time editing things others could
- Format appropriately and consistently
- Leave time for meaningful feedback
- Acknowledge expertise and limitations to make specific feedback requests
- A single read is most conventional; time it right for the best feedback, ideally as-you-go

6. Prepare for a satisfying defense

1. Craft an excellent presentation
2. Answer questions carefully and thoughtfully
3. Control your emotions
   - Don’t get defensive, aggressive, meek, or apologetic
   - Don’t let nerves disrupt your preparation, sleep, or concentration
   - Identify techniques (breathing, practice, etc) in advance to generate an experience you’ll enjoy

Celebrate the end of an era