

Honors Thesis Pre-Writing Problems (OR, An Interior Monologue of a Panic Attack)

Warning: there is no answer key to these questions! The answers depend on the discipline in which you are writing and the circumstances you are facing.

Negotiating the Literature:

I have so many gaps in my knowledge, and I'm swamped by the literature. I'm paralyzed by the sense that there is still an immense bibliography out there that I haven't even looked at, let alone mastered (made worse by advisors who keep piling on additional readings without any apparent appreciation of undergraduate time constraints). I've been asked to write a "literature review" or something like it and I'm not quite sure what that is and why it's important. If I start with the literature review, will I end up only procrastinating about writing my own opinions? How can I write a literature review that is predicated on my own stance to the literature unless I write my own views first?

I feel I need to complete my reading before I start writing anything – or should I? How much of this literature do I need? Which are the essential readings and which are less relevant to my project? What's the difference between primary and secondary sources? How do I know what I need? The literature is difficult or dense or overly technical, so how do I know if I'm missing something important? How do I take notes on this mass of material? How do I keep track of what I might need? How do I proceed with my own ideas? All of this is magnified by the fact that my project is interdisciplinary or covers new ground or provides new interpretations to already well-known material. Finally, where does my literature review fit in the overall design of the thesis? How much do I need to write up? When do I start writing it? How do I determine which documentation style to employ – and how do I know the correct format?

Acquiring Authority:

Who am I to say anything about this subject? What can I say when doctoral students or full professors may be grappling with the very same questions? I see trends and I even have some strongly developed opinions, but I lack the confidence to state them. What's my authority? What is authority, anyway? What I write may not even be interesting or relevant, and I want what I write to make a difference – but what if it doesn't? What if I am merely subjective, one-sided, or emotionally blinded by my involvement in the topic? I'm afraid of imposing my biases on the material – yet I'm always prodded to assert an opinion or argument. How do I do this while maintaining a "measured" or "dispassionate" tone that authoritative research is supposed to project? I've been constantly warned about imposing pre-conceived ideas on my material, so now I'm having trouble coming up with any argument at all.

Can I employ first-person singular? Can I say "I" or is that unprofessional?

I'm worried about the acceptability or validity of my data and of my methodology. I organized a survey but its results indicate the need for further surveys or it provides only incomplete data. What if my field work does not support my hypothesis? Worse yet, what if the field work does

not even reveal an alternative hypothesis? What if my experimental procedure fails? Can a failure be considered an honors project?

What if I engage in research and extensive readings and I discover that my analysis is not original? How can I say anything new? How can I be original? Why is being original so important, anyway?

My topic or research area is so new I lack models. How do I know I'm qualified or the topic is valid? I may become an expert on this topic, but how can an undergraduate criticize the work of professionals (in print, no less!)?

Facing the Audience:

I'm intimidated by my audience. I have a hard time envisioning an "imaginary audience," while the people who I know will actually read my thesis scare me. My readers know more than me and have more status, plus my thesis is supposed to meet professional standards that I'm not sure I can achieve.

I don't have command of the proper style of writing in my field. I can see from my reading that there's a special style, but I can't seem to pick it up, and when I try, my writing sounds wooden, stilted, inflated. My advisor keeps asking me to write with "clarity"? I wonder what she really means by this, especially after I read her own writing, which is difficult. And even though I've written a lot before, I'm overwhelmed by the newness of this language. My advisor criticized my proposal for its "tone," so now I have to worry about that.

My readers, even the entire department, are fractured along ideological or professional lines, which means some readers will think what I say is wonderful while others will feel that I'm writing utter nonsense. This is amplified by the fact that my thesis is an interdisciplinary project or one that uses multiple methodologies and the different disciplines and methodologies have different standards or biases. How do I negotiate these twists and turns?

While I'm writing this thesis for my advisor and the department, its audience includes the broader field or even the lay public. I may even want to get it published in a professional journal or special-interest magazine. How do I maintain the proper "tone" when what is demanded pulls in two or more different directions at the same time? I want to show the thesis to the people with whom I did my field work, and I'm worried about what they'll think about it. Will they think I've been unfair, or that I'm a wise-ass?

Balancing Breadth and Depth:

How do I balance breadth and depth? Scope and focus? I've written term papers before, but never something so grand, so long. How do I write something so different and of such enormous length? I know the thesis is not a book, but it is supposed to cover a major topic in depth. What is the difference between a term paper and a thesis? What's the difference between a thesis and a dissertation? Between a dissertation and a publishable book? I want to pursue the big picture and not be too narrow, but I know I can't get too big. I want to synthesize the approaches of people who usually don't talk to each other. I want to build bridges between factions within my discipline, and bridges between disciplines. Or, I want to avoid all factions, I want to adhere to

one approach and stick to it. Or, I'm trying to connect ideas that don't relate in a conventional way.

I'm just back from the field and I have multiple notebooks of wonderful material; I want to write about everything, and I know that I can't. I'm interested in so much, and there are so many trails I want to follow – how do I keep my rapidly expanding interests within practical bounds? I don't want to be superficial, and I know I have to focus. But, still, I don't want to be too narrow. In fact, I've narrowed my topic down so much that it is definitely going to be easier to do – but now it's also less interesting. How do I engage in what interests me without presenting myself with an impossible, impractical task?

I have many different notebooks of interviews, data, or notes, and I don't know what to do with them. Where do I begin? How can I get a handle on the mass of data that I've accumulated? I have pieces, but how will they cohere? What if they don't cohere? I have my data, but I need to discover an organization, a common theme or argument. How can I weave everything together? I cannot start writing until I figure out how everything is going to fit together -- but I can't figure out how everything fits until I start writing. I have a dim idea of how to organize my material, but that is sure to change, and I want things to come out right the first time. Where do I start? Do I begin with the Introduction? Chapter One? The Conclusion?

Keeping Personal Control of the Project:

My main interest is different than my advisor's. I'm trying to find a compromise between what my advisor knows/wants and what motivates me. While my advisor focuses on one thing, I'm not so sure that this is what I myself want to do. When I selected my advisor our interests were similar, but as I pursue my topic our interests seem to diverge, and I'm straying from my advisor's field. I want to combine two interests, but my advisor keeps on pressuring me to choose one or the other. I'm trying to distinguish legitimate demands for rigor from mere rigidity. My project is a tiny piece of a larger grant – what part of this is mine? I do whatever my advisor suggests – am I too compliant? Should I stake out my own position?

Whenever I meet with my advisor I am not able to explain what I am doing well. My advisor gets confused and impatient because I do not seem to be clear when we meet, yet I want to meet with my advisor precisely in order to get clear. How can I make my meeting with my advisor more efficient – and not seem like I'm lost (which I am).

I haven't seen my advisor in weeks/months/quarters, and I'm pretty much working on my own. What if he or she chucks out everything I've done? At what stage of writing should I show drafts to my advisor? Chapter by chapter? The entire first draft? Who else can read my drafts before I show them to my advisor? I keep hearing about "mentors." What's the difference between an advisor and a mentor? Is my advisor my mentor? Can she be?

If I have a dispute with my advisor can I turn to someone else in the department or in administration to help resolve it?

Finding an Effective Work Style:

How can I plan a long-term writing project? What are some of the differences in terms of work style between a thesis and producing a paper at the end of a quarter? I can only write at the last

minute because I know it's due the next morning – or I can't write under pressure, and I have to finish long before the deadline. How can I work like this for 80 pages?

I can't seem to be able to overcome the psychological hurdle of actually getting something on paper, especially when I don't know exactly what I want to say. Can I write a few pages, even a couple of paragraphs, which succinctly state my goal, my argument, and my methodology? And if I can't, do I actually have a goal, an argument, and a methodology? Or do I simply have a hard time articulating them? What are some techniques for getting started?

When is the best time to write – late at night or mornings or noon? I write best in total silence, or with loud music, or at the CoHo, or standing up, or stark naked, or eating junk food – is this the right way to work? Can I – should I – change the way I work? How do I find out about new ways to work? How do I know what's best for me?

Sometimes I get my best ideas in the weirdest or most awkward places, and during inopportune times (in the middle of a movie, while kissing, in class, etc.). It almost seems that I think most creatively at those times I'm forbidden, or when I'm not near a computer or don't have a pencil handy. How can I control my idea-brain to work for me – and at the right time? Are there techniques to make myself generate more ideas?

How do I manage my schedule? What if I stop and then start up again days, days or weeks or months later – how do I remember what I've been doing? Should I take my work with me during vacations – or should I take a real break? How do I try to have a life when I have such a weight hanging over me? How can I keep from breaking up with my boyfriend/girlfriend when the pressure builds up?

What if I get writer's block? Is there something wrong with me? How do I start up again? Can research and writing actually be a pleasure?

If I go to sleep, when I wake up the next morning will all this make sense? Will I care?