

Getting Ahead

Secrets of postgrad success

In this third and final part of her series offering advice to anyone thinking of embarking on postgraduate study next year, **Layla Cassim** reflects on academic writing and publishing

In my first article (*Getting Ahead*, July 30) I said it is a good idea to start writing up your thesis as early as possible and to submit chapters to your supervisor regularly instead of expecting feedback on a whole draft thesis shortly before the submission date.

This is because it is essential that you know early on in your postgraduate programme what writing style your supervisor expects and that you become used to feedback from him or her.

I also mentioned the importance of the literature review, and I suggested the benefits of writing the first draft of it at the beginning of your postgraduate study. Many students prefer to put off writing until they "have a clear idea" in their minds about the significance of their findings; others delay their writing because they say they're still "reading the literature".

These are often valid reasons but, like any other reasons we might find to delay the moment of putting pen to paper, they can mask a fear of writing. This is understandable: writing involves a lot of effort and self-discipline, for a start. And then there's the self-exposure many of us fear: we're

opening ourselves to criticism, after all.

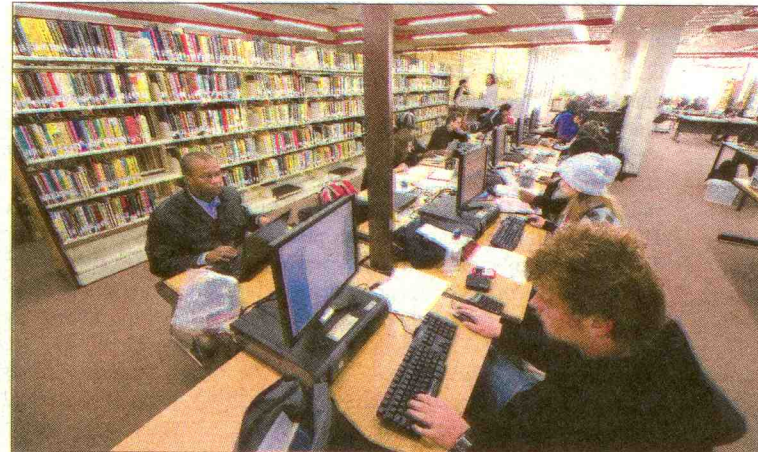
I would say that writing a thesis is a dynamic process. Many revisions have to be made before the final product is ready, but having something written down that you can then revise makes it much easier. Writing a small part every day can make the prospect of composing an entire thesis less daunting — and it's a way of avoiding writer's block.

Read some of the theses completed in your department or faculty to get an idea of the ways in which you are expected to write. As a scientist, I was expected to write in a lean, condensed way, with few adjectives, and to cite exact figures where possible.

At some universities, there is an informal system of "writing buddies", in which students team up and provide each other with regular feedback and support, making the writing experience less lonely. If there isn't a buddy system among your fellow postgraduates, why not create one?

Writing for publication

My research supervisor encouraged us to publish our research findings in academic journals before we submitted our theses. A list of publica-



Read before you write: Check out completed theses in your department.

Photo: David Harrison

tions at the beginning of your thesis greatly enhances its credibility. Having some of these published in peer-reviewed journals with high impact factors is even more impressive.

Either way, publication starts to establish you as an expert in your field. My supervisor at Rhodes University was Professor Santy Daya, who is currently based at the Ross University School of Medicine, Grand Bahama Island. He says: "The most difficult part of writing a paper is often the opening line and then knowing what to put under which section. This task can be made simple if you follow a few guidelines."

These guidelines will differ across

disciplines, but merely to illustrate (rather than prescribe), Daya's suggestion to postgraduates who were preparing material from their ongoing PhD research for possible journal publication was to jot down these headings: Introduction; Materials and Methods; Results; Discussion; Conclusion; and Abstract.

He described these headings as "section reservoirs". You could start filling any reservoir first: for many, "Materials and Methods" was a comfortable beginning. And then, he recommended, there were specific moves of thought you needed for each section reservoir. In the Introduction, for example, he suggested

there are four moves: describing the field, saying what research has been done before and by whom, identifying the knowledge gap that you have addressed in your research, and introducing the reader to your study.

Describing these and other moves further would take me too deeply into one methodology appropriate to my own discipline — and so too far away from my hope of using my own recent doctoral experiences to assist prospective postgraduates in any field. So I'll jump rather to the outcome of your submission to a journal. If your article is accepted, great! If not, don't take it personally. Study the reviewers' comments as these provide valuable feedback for improving both your research and your writing.

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● This is the last of a three-part series for *Getting Ahead*. If you missed the first two (July 30 and August 27) you can find them at www.mg.co.za/supervisors and www.mg.co.za/postgradsuccess