

Some personal writing strategies identified by HDR students

Interviews with HDR students in the Division in 2008 revealed six key types of personal writing strategies developed as part of becoming a researcher:

- Dealing with writing avoidance
- Knowing oneself as writer
- Organising one's writing processes
- Talking
- Wording
- Writing-to-think

Dealing with writing avoidance

If I got to one of those awful, awful blocks... Then if I read a new article or a new something or other, all of a sudden ideas would generate again and they would flow again. And that inspiration would often give me enough impetus to get back into it again, and I could re-utilise "OK, that idea, I like that one, I can blend that with this, and that and that and that".

Knowing yourself as writer

- identifying writing issues

I needed to be more authoritative about my writing. I had two supervisors, both giving me feedback and both very knowledgeable, very strong women with very different ideas.

- knowing what helps you write

I know definitely visually, the labelling and drafting things out on a big sheet helps

I think maybe I'm a verbal learner in some way; the verbalising I think does help me.

- knowing a weakness and providing for it in some way

I evaluate myself, look for the thing that I lack. Like I feel that I'm very poor on vocabulary in terms of narrative theory, so I keep my own dictionaries, so I don't have to go looking for the same word all the time.

- keeping and reviewing feedback

I keep every work that I have comments on from the group, every time. And then I have another folder for other pieces of work. I can look back and learn from that work.

Organising one's writing processes

- make a 'dedicated' writing time
- make a writing plan for a few weeks or longer

- leaving and coming back to writing

I learnt that I had to leave my writing at a place which I felt good about, so that when I came back to it, and it would often be four or five days later because of work, that I had made myself notes of “You need to do this, you need ...”, very explicit, a practical thing to start me off on the process. If I had left myself with a practical thing to do I could get into it again, and it would often take me, you know, an hour or two to actually get my head back into it.

- outlining

I found that I had to give myself very, very specific guidelines and structures, and I often would map onto the wall, with post-it, sticky notes and brainstorm them out and then put them up and rearrange them a bit and “No, I don’t like that arrangement”, and try to get the flow of the argument.

- managing tasks

I had lists for each chapter on the wall, and I’d be working on something, “Oh yes, I’ve got to attend to that, and I think that’s chapter 5, quick stick it on the list before it disappears”.

- printing out the latest versions of a series of chapters and putting them into a folder

I had so many versions of so many chapters and I thought “I’ve got to have my latest versions in a folder”, and as soon as I put it together it felt as though I almost had a thesis, and it was this tangible thing.

- having a clear picture of the audience for whom you are writing

I’ve sharpened my skills by writing for my intended audience, so I always ask who do I want to read this, and I try to imagine that person and write for them, and I also think about the purpose of it, why am I doing it, what’s driving it, and then when I’m really clear about that my writing is at its best.

I’m developing the habit of continually imagining a real audience for what I write. Probably there’d be two people on the whole planet who will read it, but my imagined reader is someone who is curious about my research issue. I don’t imagine the examiners at all.

Talking

- finding opportunities to talk about your ideas

talking through my ideas helped me to consolidate them.

- connecting with other doctoral candidates

You see that's the importance of speaking with other PhD students, and having that contact, whether it's in a formal group, or whether it's informally. You can learn so much just from sharing experiences with people at different stages

And, you know, we could see that it's possible to get finished because people [in the group] were getting really close to finishing, so that was really good.

- timing meetings with your supervisor(s)

I mean I couldn't stand it if I was called in for monthly meetings, you know, an hour every month, or an hour a fortnight or whatever some people get. Maybe some people want that.

It's a matter of how much you need, and it varies across the time of your candidature as well.

I did ask of [my supervisor] at one point, I just said "Look, can we line up meetings once a month for half an hour, just so that I can turn up and say what I've done? Because I need to be able to talk to somebody."

Wording

- making use of 'advice to writers'

a sheet of starting expressions and endings, some of those really practical things.

learning those linking sentences and the beginnings and endings, and how to rewrite 'so and so and so on said', you know, putting it in an imaginative new way.

- finding alternatives for habitual phrases

realising that I used 'as such' all the time, I said "OK, let's have an alternative for 'as such'".

- reading successful research writing

Pick up somebody's thesis who you think writes well, how do they start that sentence?

- recycling wordings

At the workshop they said we can recycle statements from what we read. So from that time I have my own notebooks for that, for the linking word, for the good expressions. I was motivated to do that.

Writing-to-think

- journal writing

My thesis supervisor said "Write a journal and you might not use much of it, but it's a really good process to get your thoughts down". I can't say I'm very big on doing it, but I do know other people who do write journals and who write pages and pages of whatever is in their head.

- concept mapping

When I do reading I conceptualise it for myself in a spider web or my mapping.

- keeping a reading log

you do the reading log by yourself when you do some reading.

- taking notes from reading

When I read I prefer writing what I think about that: why written in this way, or what is it the writer wants, or aims at when he says this and that? I just write down what I think when I read. But now I'm changing because now I have started using EndNote, so you start writing on that. I start changing my habit, writing something in the computer, in the EndNote, but often I still use a piece of paper – easier than opening up the computer.

- free-flow writing

Just to free-flow write, don't have any idea what it is. Just start writing. And I did that, and then I built on it, and I had, I think, about three or four stages, and it actually worked to make a whole chapter.