

Time Management and Scheduling in the Writing of your MA dissertation/PhD thesis

*A summary of Eviatar Zerubavel's book, **The clockwork muse: A practical guide to writing theses, dissertations and books**. This book helps writers see how to manage their time and their writing productively by establishing routines to enrich their writing lives.*

I hope this short piece can be of assistance to you in your writing.

In order to complete a PhD, it is advisable to make use of a time schedule and a timetable for WRITING:

- Do not wait for inspiration to write
- Establish a daily (or weekly) writing routine
- Integrate it with the rest of your life
- It protects your time and allows for other things (family, social life)

The key is scheduling – steady writing means regular writing – i.e. fixed writing times. This involves the *length* of time (how long you write) and *when* (e.g. John Grisham writes every day from 5:30 to 12:00). Write when you are most productive, but fit the time in with your lifestyle.

In order to draw up a schedule, first cross off the times you cannot write. Then make sure that you have protected time in a private space that can ensure continuity in your writing. Schedule writing times as frequently as possible – you should ideally not interrupt your writing for more than a day in order to ensure flow and momentum. For example, specify five-day stretches, long/short sessions – whatever is possible. These are your A-times and they must be protected.

B-times are times when you cannot do productive writing (such as reading sources or waiting to see the doctor!). Use these times to do reading and make notes, for example.

Writing a thesis can be an intimidating task, but see it as a number of smaller and more manageable pieces – a series of mini-tasks. This is much less intimidating – you do one segment at a time. For example, a chapter can be divided into three sections, and each section can even be divided into sub-sections. This means that you must start with a blueprint, an outline (which can be provisional and can be changed – you will write more than one draft, so nothing is final before you eventually arrive at the final draft).

You need to realize the value of revision – it helps to develop your ideas, so do not think that you have to finalise a chapter before you tackle the first draft of the next one. Accept the fact that you will rewrite your chapters as normal practice. Zerubavel says that he rewrites all his work at least four times.

You now need to draw up a timetable for the following weeks and months, with deadlines you set for yourself. Make a rough projection – you will write a certain number of pages every week. Estimate the time it will take you to complete a chapter if you follow this schedule. State the number of pages you will write every day and the time it will take you to do so. You will then have a deadline – when you must complete a chapter, and the study as a whole. This can change, of course, but then you must update your schedule.

Length (number of pages) and *pace* (pages per day) are the crucial things you have to establish. On the whole, it is best to underestimate the length and pace you will maintain during each writing session.

The important thing is PERSEVERANCE – to write daily and weekly.

You must now lay your schedule over a conventional calendar (eliminate all times/days you cannot write; include rest periods) and finalise your FINAL WRITING TIMETABLE. You will now have specific days, weeks and months for your writing programme. Remember to include times for rest and aspects such as data collection. Also remember to do reading during your B-times.

Remember:

- Accept that a first draft will still be flawed.
- Realise the need to keep “moving along”. In order to do so, end each writing session by planning what you will write in the next session.
- Put any new ideas in writing – keep a notebook handy.
- Make an outline of each chapter on a single page.
- Revise and rewrite each chapter before you send to your promoter.
- Place your schedule/planner on a wall or on your desk where you can see it every day.

SELF-DISCIPLINE is required in order to complete your study – be ready to write whether you feel particularly inspired or not.

Zerubavel, E. 1999. *The clockwork muse: A practical guide to writing theses, dissertations and books.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

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