Writing at the Doctoral Level: Refresher Tips and Resources

Prepared by Elan Paulson elan.paulson@uwo.ca

Readers want their experience with your writing to be positive and compelling. Readers are also not passive audiences. Because they bring their own biases, questions, and counter-arguments along with them, to be effective your writing must be gently persuasive as well as expository.

Effective writing will empower you in your education and your professional practice. Because your writing is a reflection of your thinking, becoming a better writer will distinguish you as a strong thinker, a reliable researcher, and more capable contributor to your team or organization.

Even for strong writers, improving one’s writing inevitably takes practice, persistence, and patience. As American novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne once wrote, “Easy reading is damn hard writing.” However, the harder you work to make your writing easier to read, the more pleasure your readers will take in your writing, and the more convincing your ideas will be for them.

10 refresher tips for improving your writing in your doctoral studies.

1) Content aside, make note of the ways that a particular article you enjoyed reading was written. Mimic those writing strategies in your next assignment.

2) Look back at your past writing, and reflect on your instructor’s feedback. Set 1-2 new writing goals for each subsequent writing assignment based on that feedback. Post goal reminders (such as “use a semi-colon correctly” or “define the terms”) on your computer monitor.

3) To get writing, or to get clarity, go for a walk and talk to yourself, or go for coffee and chat with a friend, about your ideas. Write down what you said afterwards.

4) Practice writing. Write every day, even if only for 10 minutes each day. The more you write, the better you’ll get at it. Start a research journal, an anonymous blog, or even a Twitter feed.

5) To begin writing an essay, compose a general outline by writing the most important sentences or steps first. Then go back and build on each idea, paragraph by paragraph.

6) Make your writing concise and straightforward. Write the whole draft, then revise to say what you mean in fewer and simpler words. Write for a reader who has little knowledge of jargon and a relatively short attention span.

7) Make your writing easy to read through the use of good structure and cohesion. Connect examples to definitions, steps in a process, and items in a sequence. Make connections within sentences, within paragraphs, between paragraphs, and between sections. Ensure every idea flows together smoothly and logically, one after another, like water flowing in a river.

8) Avoid self-evident statements, which are so self-explanatory they do not need proving, and totalizing statements, which are so general they cannot be proven. Use research to support demonstrated knowledge, but be specific and complex enough to reveal some new form of knowledge. Provide evidence, then offer a slightly different perspective or interpretation.

9) Read your writing out loud. Practice reading for tone, how others will “hear” what you write.

10) Have friends that you trust read your writing to tell you which bits are confusing or long-winded. Personal tastes in writing differ, however, so trust your own instincts as well.
6 resources for improving your writing in your doctoral studies.

GradWRITE (Western University, Canada): [http://www.sdc.uwo.ca/writing/index.html?grad](http://www.sdc.uwo.ca/writing/index.html?grad)
Western’s GradWRITE services include one-on-one consultations, writing workshops, and online question and answer resources. Here is an additional link to a series of podcasts and handouts.

*When to use:* Use to retrieve info on basic tips, and when you would benefit from face-to-face support.

Graduate Writing Kit (University of Ottawa, Canada):

See these 6 PDF handouts on the essentials of graduate writing, the essentials of thesis writing, writing a thesis proposal, information management, and writing a literature review.

*When to use:* Good overview for the beginning of each semester. Useful mid-semester refresher too.

Writing Tips for PhD Students (University of Chicago, USA):
[http://faculty.chicagobooth.edu/john.cochrane/research/Papers/phd_paper_writing.pdf](http://faculty.chicagobooth.edu/john.cochrane/research/Papers/phd_paper_writing.pdf)
This 12 page paper offers helpful suggestions for the organization of the paper and “big” and “little” tips for writing. Some information about empirical writing and presentations are included as well.

*When to use:* Read before starting a paper, and after writing a first draft. Good proofreading checklist.

Clearer Writing (University of Sidney, Australia):

Self-paced instruction on the various facets of clearer writing at the paragraph, information, vocabulary, and semantic structures. It takes some time to complete, but the effort will be worthwhile. Visit About this Site for computer requirements, then start with the Demonstration section.

*When to use:* When you already grasp of basic academic writing, but are looking for added polish.

Uni Learning (University of Wollongong, Australia) [http://unilearning.uow.edu.au/](http://unilearning.uow.edu.au/)
A unique website with many examples, interactive rollovers, and activities. See particularly relevant sections on effective writing and academic writing, as well as critical thinking and reading.

*When to use:* As a comprehensive overview of multiple academic activities. Great motivator!

The University of Victoria’s Hypertext Writer’s Guide (University of Victoria, Canada):
[http://web.uvic.ca/wguide/Pages/StartHere.html](http://web.uvic.ca/wguide/Pages/StartHere.html)
A simple online guide related to essays, paragraphs, sentences, words, summaries, logic, and grammar. Published by UVic’s English Department, there will be variation in terms of your program’s expectations and the guide’s suggestions for documentation, terminology, and marking symbols.

*When to use:* Quick reference for identifying and solving particular writing problems. Bookmark!!