Tribulation or Rapture?

Surviving the 'End Times' of your PhD

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October 10, 2007 in Finishing the PhD by Stephen

I've been asked to speak later on this month to the third+ year theology PhD students on that last year or so of getting the PhD thesis to submission (and beyond). The university's Student Learning Centre has lots of resources and tutorials to walk PhD students through the process of writing, research and formatting etc. so I want to add to the material that they (should) have already seen.

I've decided to do a quick Top 10 things that came out of my PhD journey and to help that process over the next few weeks I'll be blogging them here to help get them straight in my head before the actual meeting. I also figure they might be useful to other students outside of that group, though the discipline you're involved in will have specific requirements that will shape thesis development.

My current Top 10 list is:

1. Don't Panic!
2. Doing it with style
3. Practice makes perfect
4. A footnote in history
5. You have backed up your work, haven't you?
6. Supervisors are people too
7. Reading. Just say No!
8. Thesis trajectory
9. Finding my own voice
10. Finish or else!

I'll expand on each of these in later posts.

1. Don't Panic!

October 11, 2007 in Finishing the PhD by Stephen

When faced with the perceived enormity of finishing the thesis (N.B. the thesis by this stage is often referred to in less polite terms), it is not unreasonable to experience varying degrees of panic. However, while some manner of concern over finishing the thesis and indeed feeling pressure to finish are

useful motivators, *panic is not your friend*. Neither is excessive stress.

So, sit down and work out exactly what has to be done and when it has to be done by. Take into account all the other commitments you have to family, other people, work, your own health etc, and break the path to finishing down into bite-sized, manageable chunks. This is helpful because:

1 You can identify what is critical to finishing and thereby ignore things that look important but are actually distractions.
2 Each mini-section or task you complete helps to affirm you're on the right track.
3 You know when in the day you do different types of work well and can select (within reason) the right type of work to do. For example, I don't concentrate well straight after lunch (1-3pm) so I'd do thesis tasks then that required less concentration. The best times to write for me are 10am-12pm and 4pm-8pm (which never worked out with family life). Sure you need to work whenever you can but try to work smarter.
4 You get an idea of how long particular tasks take, such as revising an established piece of writing or checking a set of references, so you can estimate how long other tasks might take (allowing for the fact that they always take longer than you think).

At this stage it's all about grinding it out. You know your stuff, the thesis structure is pretty much set in stone, and it's just plod, plod, plod until it's done. There is no other way.

One other thing. Related to the feelings of panic are also feelings of guilt about how much you haven't done, and the perception that you mucked around in the first two years and should have worked harder. Perhaps, but things that took weeks then now take hours or days because you've become immersed in the material for so long and have thought researchy-type thoughts for longer. The worst case scenario is that the guilty feeling gets in the way of getting finished, as you wallow around in it for a while. You are where you are, acknowledge that you might have been able to be further along, also acknowledge that you know more now than then, and then get on and finish anyway.

See PHD Comics: Time to end this

Making sure you're getting regular exercise and contact with other people helps both with managing the panic and guilt stuff. It may help to have an 'academic confessor' (not your supervisor necessarily) to vent to - I had one or two from time to time and it was useful to get my head straight in the thesis process.

2. Doing it with style

October 12, 2007 in Finishing the PhD by Stephen

Okay, assuming we've assuaged the overwhelming sense of panic the next thing to talk about relates to the formatting of the thesis.

By the time you're in the third year of the PhD you should be sleeping with your institution's guide to formatting/presenting/preparing a thesis under your pillow. This booklet, or similar, is the essential guide to how things must be done. Your faculty or department may also have a similar publication. Read this thoroughly until you know what is required in terms of the layout, sections, margins, line spacing, and bibliographic and citation requirements etc. And if you don't understand something then find out as soon as possible. Don't wait until you're printing the final draft to discover you've mucked something up. (For example, the University of Auckland booklet is here).

Next, there is often support from your Student Learning Centre or equivalent. I did a workshop of formatting your thesis which was really helpful, even thought I was a competent user of a word processor for academic writing. There was also a workshop on how to bring all the different parts of the thesis together for submission. Again useful to make sure you haven't forgotten something. (For example, University of Auckland - Centre for Academic Development - Postgraduates).

The university also provided a thesis template for MS Word that had a set of styles that matched the university's guidelines. Really useful, and once I started writing early on with only those styles and document formatting then I really didn't have to worry about whether I was going to have to do major edits for formatting later. **Write everything in the styles the final draft will use - then you won't have problems with formatting cut-and-paste issues later.**

It was really helpful because it helped me to see how big (physically) a chapter would finally be, as well as how many words fitted on a page and what the footnotes etc. looked like in reality.

Also, set your reference/citation/bibliographic style in concrete early on and in accordance with what's recommended for your department and faculty. Far better to get that sorted now than trying to do it later (even with bibliographic tools like EndNote).

I'd also recommend going to the library and getting out a selection of theses from your discipline to have a look at. What did people write in their abstracts, acknowledgements and prefaces? What did you like about how some theses were formatted? What didn't you like? It helps to see what the finished product looks like - though a bit daunting too.

Oh, and make sure you really understand how big the thesis is meant to be. I found that the PhD guidelines said 100,000 words in one place and the also said between 250-300 pages. Depending on the citation style you pick and

whether you're a heavy footnoter you may find that 100,000 words won't really fit into 250-300 pages. So you need to check which one is the real limit.

Finally, track down a good thesis proofreader. You may need to pay for one, but if you can find a good one (and I did) who can pick up not just typos but also grammar then strive to keep them. Also, don't wait for the final draft if possible. If they'll take early material in pieces then go with that - then your supervisor's time reading your work can be focused on the content and you avoid overloading the proofreader with a last minute panic.

See also: PHD Comics: Thesis submission, pt. 3

3. Practice makes perfect

October 14, 2007 in Finishing the PhD by Stephen

Putting the actual thesis together into its final form can be tricky. It will involve bringing together:
• The chapters you've written (with their text, tables, figures etc.)
• The material at the front of the thesis: title page, abstract, dedication, preface, table of contents, and various other lists of figures and tables and acknowledgements
• A bibliography
• Various appendices
• Anything else that needs to be added

As such it will involve some serious work with a word processor, your bibliographic software (if you're using some), lots of paper, and a computer printer.

Now, assuming that what you've been writing is formatted according to your institution's guideline put aside a couple of days and have a play at putting what you have together into a prototype thesis. If you haven't written certain bits yet then put in place holder pages with the titles on them but with no content (or content generated by something like Lorem Ipsum - All the facts - Lipsum generator).

In doing so you'll be forced to deal with making sure that the page numbers are right (I had to have roman numbers for the front material and arabic numbers (starting at 1) for the chapters.) You'll also have to make sure the you can generate a table of contents and lists of figures and tables correctly. If you've worked on chapters as separate files then merging them poses issues to do with footnote/endnote numbers being updated, as well as citations possibly needing to be reformatted.

Bibliographic material too can become a bit of a drama. Automated systems like EndNote etc. are really good at scanning the word processor files for references you've entered using it and generating a bibliography. If, however,

you're bibliography needs to include material outside of that which you have cited then you'll need to figure out how to add the extra material - and remember, regenerating the citation based bibliography will replace any bibliography you have at the end of your document. (I solved that problem by keeping an EndNote database that contained the material I cited, plus other references I wanted to include. I generated the bibliography from that database and manually pasted it into Word at the end.)

Also, it takes a long time to print, copy and bind a thesis (even spiral binding). Plus it costs a lot to copy and bind multiple copies if you don't have access to free copying and binding. Until you've done that once and worked out the kinks in the process you don't know what you're up against if you're doing it in a hurry.

So, do it at least once or twice well in advance of submission to get a feel for the task at hand. And if you're not skilled with using your writing tools find someone who can help you learn well in advance of the panic stage.

Also, I printed and bound a prototype thesis about a year out from submission. Really useful to see what was missing and I carried around with me all the time. Very useful to have it sitting beside you when you're writing other stuff. You can scrawl on it, reference it without having to balance too many word processor windows, and if you keep updating it you have growing proof that the thesis is actually growing. Plus it looks the goods if it's formatted right.

4. A footnote in history

Just some brief tips here relating to citations, footnotes and the like.
- Cite as fully as you can when write and edit. Put full citation details etc. in your notes even. Makes it much easier to find where a quote or idea came from when you're looking for it in a hurry.
- Do not attempt to do the footnoting/citations when you've written the thesis text. Recipe for disaster.
- I kept a separate EndNote database of everything I had in my filing cabinet. Essential for determining whether I could check a source immediately or whether I had to find it online or at the library.
- If you have any references you meant to follow up later, follow them up now. I had a footnote for some Justin Martyr stuff that said 'check this reference at some point'. Took ages to find the correct reference because I'd written the wrong one down. You don't want to be doing this at the last minute because the source might be unavailable (e.g. borrowed from the library).
- Check all the references/citations thoroughly. I had a couple that EndNote bodged because I'd manually edited the citation tags at some point.

- Check you computer can generate the bibliography and format the citations with all the thesis text if you're using citation software. You don't need last minute resource issues with the computer.
- Check people's names. In a couple of places I swapped the first names (Mary for Margaret and vice versa) because I was thinking about the one person while writing another person's name.
- Be consistent with publishers and place names. If you aren't sure of US state abbreviations etc. then here's a useful list.
- Do not muck about changing the citation style at the last minute. You should have been working with one of the department or faculty styles for the past 2-3 years. Even though software like EndNote allows you to switch styles you may fall foul of things like how that new style's default settings handle repeat citations.
- Clearly identify what is required in your bibliography. Some institutions only want material cited. Others want you to demonstrate you know the field well by listing other material that isn't directly cited to show you know about it. Others want the bibliography arranged into different sub-sections (e.g. primary sources vs. secondary sources). Make sure you get it right early on.

Get your citation system and formatting sorted early on and you'll sleep better when you're trying to bring everything together. Plus, I've met several examiners who say they check references rigorously (e.g. taking the thesis to the library and looking up every third reference in a chapter!). Good citation style and use demonstrates you know what you're doing and is informative and helpful to the examiner.

A footnote on EndNote.

Many institutions have site licences etc. for EndNote and it's the most widely used bibliographic software (though not the only one). If they do have a site licence then often there will be nice extras that allow you to connect to the campus libraries. Take advantage of this - getting the bibliographic information from your campus library catalogue means it will be for that same book you used (probably). Also, learn to use EndNote or similar early on. Just get the basics right. I didn't have too many problems with it but I've heard some horror stories. If your student learning centre/library run courses on it, then go along. Taking a couple of hours to do that early on can save you major grief later.

5. You have backed up your work, haven't you?

October 16, 2007 in Finishing the PhD by Stephen

Everyone has a horror story about losing part of their thesis. In my case it wasn't so bad, just a day or two's notes I'd typed out a year or two back which weren't there when I came to check something. I was lucky because I had a day or two spare to write them out again.

Mostly though, I don't have a horror story because I'm fairly obsessive about backups. Here a measure of paranoia is useful, because basically, the thesis is your life and your life's work. Computers fail and die. Computers have accidents (a friend's 2 year old poured a glass of cola into his laptop keyboard!). Computers get stolen.

If you do not know how to back up your thesis then learn. Now!

Here's how I did it. Pick what works for you.
- Work out what you need to back up. Backing up half of your research is better than nothing, but you don't want to miss anything. I had a single Research folder on the computer, plus my email mailbox. With those backed up, I was pretty good.
- Every day or so I put a copy of my recent files on my flash disk I carried around with me. If it was important I made sure I had a copy at the end of the day (or even at lunchtime). That included the EndNote database if I'd make lots of edits or additions. Flash disks are cheap. Go get one.
- I'd regularly burn a thesis CD or DVD with all my notes, drafts, bibliographic databases, downloaded material, **essential fonts and emails!**. CDs are really cheap. Don't lose a whole lot of work because you were too cheap to spend less than 50 cents on a CD. If you don't know how to burn a CD then get someone to teach you.
- At any significant milestone in the writing I'd print out a draft of that writing and put it in the filing cabinet. Worst case scenario I can type it in again from the paper (and it would be all cited properly - see the footnoting post earlier).
- Sometimes I'd dump the thesis stuff to my iPod's hard drive. Big disk that allowed me to keep multiple versions of the thesis. Not necessarily easy to bring back on another computer though. A straight USB hard disk would do the trick too.
- Off-site storage is useful too. If your house burns down and takes the computer, your printing and your backups with it, what will you do? In my (obsessive) case, I left a CD backup every now and then with someone I trusted. You might also look at using an online storage facility.
- Always backup your work before you or someone else does something to your computer. New versions of Mac OS X or Windows, upgrades to your primary writing tools (e.g. MS Office and EndNote), and new hardware shouldn't happen until you have a copy of your most recent work made. If you're near to the end of the thesis and all your writing tools are working well, then hold off changing anything until you've submitted.
- Check your backup worked. Obvious, really, but try to get a file or set of files back from the backup and see if they're usable.
- Clearly label your backups. A bunch of unlabeled CDs is a nightmare to find a file on.

Mostly, it's just common sense. If your work is important to you then make sure you won't lose it.

As a former database administrator for large computer systems I'm pretty paranoid about making sure my work is recoverable, but you have to pick the level of risk you want to take. Just remember how you will justify it to your 'significant other' and your supervisor.

6. Supervisors are people too

October 19, 2007 in Finishing the PhD by Stephen

One of the things that needs to be taken into account as you struggle to finish the thesis are your supervisors. For you, finishing the thesis has probably become you entire life and it's easy to assume the same of your supervisors. However, they have their own lives to live - and your project is just a small part of that, along with their own teaching, research, other grad students, marking, and their life outside of university.

Simple courtesies really.
- Don't dump 50,000-100,000 words on them and expect it back tomorrow or the next day with comments.
- Check that they're not disappearing off to conferences etc. when you need them to sign essential forms for submission or to cast an eye over a final draft. Also, check what they have to do for you to submit.
- By the end of the process you should be defending your research and writing decisions to them as peers and colleagues. If you differ in opinion (and you will in places), then you must be prepared to defend that to the examiners (and in the oral exam, if you have one).
- Don't forget to thank them for their input and work in the process - in person and in the thesis acknowledgments.

7. Reading. Just say "No!"

October 22, 2007 in Finishing the PhD by Stephen

One of the temptations when trying to finish off the PhD thesis is to continue to try and stay up with the latest reading material, and to incorporate that into the thesis. However, there comes a time when you simply have to stop doing that. To draw a line in the sand and say that the body of work you're referencing is as closed as it can be.

This doesn't mean that you don't pay attention to new material in your area that's being published. In a worst-case scenario someone else will publish very similar work to yours and you should definitely know about it (and maybe even have to rework you own work in response). But while you're paying attention to new material, spending a lot of time on it will get in the way of the final writing and editing.

Keep track of the new material, and some of it may make it into the bibliography (depending on what's required there), but don't be overwhelmed

by it. After submission, you should probably revisit the new material so you can talk about it in the oral defense and demonstrate that, while it isn't in the thesis, you do know about it and can respond to it there.

Your thesis is a snapshot of the state of the field at a particular time, and by its very nature cannot include references and responses to every piece of related material up until the day of submission.

8. Continuity

October 22, 2007 in Finishing the PhD by Stephen

In television or film production people, such as a script supervisor, are responsible for making sure that there is a consistency seen about the persons, plot, objects, places and events as seen by the viewer, even though the episode or film is made up of small pieces and later edited together. When things aren't consistent you get 'continuity errors' of one sort or another that annoy or jar the reader or viewer.

It's the same in putting the thesis together. You need to check that you're being consistent in how you're bringing the final product together. So it's important to check things like:

- Are all the questions I raised in the early chapters, and said I was going to address, actually addressed? It pays to go through looking for those questions, noting them down, and then looking to see if you did actually answer them in some way.
- If I pointed forward to a later section of the thesis or back to an earlier section, does that section actually exist as I refer to it? Sometimes you'll edit out a section that you referred to elsewhere and you're left with some loose ends for the examiner to pick up on.
- Are all references to chapters and sub-sections in the thesis correct? I had a couple of chapters that got merged and split several times and I had to keep updating chapter references in other chapters around those changes. (Missed one in the submitted copy and had to fix it in the final, bound copy).
- Is all the formatting - headings, quotes, citations, actually consistent? Sneaky things might be when you've referenced a magazine article in a journal format in one part of the thesis and as a magazine article in another part.
- Is the thesis an integrated whole or just a series of smaller snapshots or vignettes? Do the beginnings and ends of each chapter work to generate a smooth, continuous flow through the thesis for the reader?

It's time-consuming to do this sort of checking, but it's worth it to present a thesis that takes the reader/examiner through a carefully plotted journey to the end that leaves them satisfied that you're competent, have arranged your material well, and haven't left any questions unanswered (unless you meant to).

Don't give the examiner reason to be annoyed or disappointed with your thesis because of continuity errors.

9. Finding my own voice

October 26, 2007 in Finishing the PhD by Stephen

Fairly simple point, but harder, perhaps, to get right.

When someone reads your thesis can they clearly distinguishing you and your arguments in there. It's all about communicating your own contribution clearly. In the midst of citations, quotations, footnotes and comparing/contrasting ideas it's important to be heard clearly. Are my views, opinions and arguments clearly differentiated from the wider discussion. Sometime it may feel like you're shouting at the examiner/reader, or that it's obvious that this section is your own contribution, but better to be safe than sorry.

In a couple of places one of my examiners thought I'd said something that I definitely hadn't. I could point that out in the oral exam, but it would have been nicer to have been clearer on those points at first reading.

Also, good to have a consistent style or voice throughout the whole thesis. Because it's written over a 'long' period it's easy for subtle differences in writing styles to creep in.

10. Finish or else!

October 26, 2007 in Finishing the PhD by Stephen

To finish the thesis you have to want to finish it, and be prepared to sacrifice time and energy to get there. As a friend once told me, doing a PhD is 90-99% perseverance (and much less brilliance). Once you're committed to finishing you just have to get on and do it.

PHD Comics: Time to end this

If you just enjoy the process and lifestyle of being a PhD student, and you don't care about the result or are happy to live in the process forever, then there's no motivation to finish. Plus, once you've done the hard work of getting to this stage of wrapping it all up, it's really easy to say you know you can do a PhD and then not finish because the rest of it is just plain boring.

PHD Comics: Time-lapse Montage:

Getting to submission (with the thesis finally completed and all the paperwork done) is also just the beginning for the next stage in the PhD process.

My own experience (and that of others I know) is that after submission and the initial euphoria (or exhausted collapse) you can fall into a nice deep blue hole. Particularly if you don't have anything else (job etc.) to keep you occupied. After months of intense pressure, late nights, sore eyes from the computer screen, and not talking intelligently (or politely) to other people, you are suddenly left with this gap in your life. It can take you (and your family) a little while to recover from that. So bear that in mind.

PHD Comics: No rest for the weary

Also, don't forget that you may still have an oral exam, defence or *viva voce* to do a few months down the track with it's own stresses and strains, plus the outcome of your thesis examination and defence which will probably require some extra work before you can finally hand in the final hard-bound copies to the university. Don't fall into the trap that some students do, of passing the oral defense and the not finishing the required changes in the specified time. (This can cause significant financial penalties because you might have to pay another year's worth of fees!!!)

I submitted on the 10 January, had my oral defence 21 May, had confirmation of the oral result 1 June, handed the modified copies in on 22 July, and graduated 27 September. That's another 8-9 months on top of the four and half years it took to write the PhD thesis. It does feel good to be finally done.

And having done all that, have fun graduating, and remember that all the people who helped you get there in the end need to be thanked and to celebrate too.

So with these essential Top 10 points finishing the PhD is 'easy peasy' ☺