

## The writing process: video script

Hi, and welcome to the first teaching video about writing your dissertation. This time, I'll be talking to you about the overall process of writing your dissertation and how to organise yourself to ensure that you use your time productively and efficiently.

This video is intended to make you think about creating a plan for how you will get your dissertation done within your deadline, and to understand what's involved in the dissertation writing process. As always, I'm happy to meet people individually to give you feedback on your writing – please use the link to book an appointment, and you can email me a draft before coming if you like – if you do send me something, please make sure it's at least one full working day in advance of your appointment. Otherwise, print out your draft and bring it along with you.

So, what's involved in writing a dissertation? Well, depending on your course, you will have a different word limit, but for all of you, it's the longest piece of work you'll complete during your degree here, and it's likely to be the most extensive writing you've ever produced. So the idea of a dissertation might seem a bit daunting – I know I thought that when I did mine! But a little bit of stress is actually quite useful, as it will give you the motivation to work hard on it and produce something you can be proud of. Your dissertation is a really nice time where you can look into something you're interested in, and find out something new – so hopefully you're feeling excited as well as a bit worried right now!

Whenever you take on an extended piece of writing, it's important to organise yourself. There's a Japanese author called Haruki Murakami whose take on the writing process I really admire. Although he writes novels, rather than postgrad dissertations, his description of how he schedules his time is very useful. So, in an interview a few years ago, he said: "When I'm in writing mode for a novel, I get up at 4:00 am and work for five to six hours. ... I go to bed at 9:00 pm. I keep to this routine every day without variation. ... If I'm asked what the next most important quality is for a novelist, that's easy too: focus—the ability to concentrate all your limited talents on whatever's critical at the moment. Without that you can't accomplish anything of value, while, if you can focus effectively, you'll be able to compensate for an erratic talent or even a shortage of it. ... You'll naturally learn both concentration and endurance when you sit down every day at your desk and train yourself to focus on one point." Now, I'm not suggesting that you need to follow this exactly – different people work best at different times, so you've got to find a timetable that suits you. The important thing to take away from this is the need to have a routine that you follow throughout the writing period, which will mean you can complete your work steadily and not have to panic towards the end. And also, you'll notice that Murakami doesn't write all day – he has a few hours of concentrated work, but also leaves time for other things, so that the writing doesn't overwhelm him. I'd now like you to pause the video and have a think about what time of day you work best – please use the link to answer the poll before continuing with the video. How do your

answers compare with other people's? Could you find others who work most effectively at similar times to you and set up a writing group?

At this point in the process, it's good to think about making yourself a schedule. And actually, there's a lot of time in each week – 168 hours to be precise. So, if you get the recommended 8 hours a night of sleep, that leaves you with 112 hours a week for everything else. I'd suggest that you treat your dissertation like a full-time job, so dedicate 40 hours a week to it. This means you still have loads of time (72 hours) to do things you enjoy, exercise, relax and see friends – you don't have to shut yourself away like an anchorite and live and breathe your dissertation. In fact, having a balance between working and other activities means that you will be rested enough to have that focus Murakami talked about, which means the time you spend writing or reading is likely to be more productive. So, make yourself a timetable by using your poll answers to decide when those 40 hours are going to be done – will you get up early like Murakami, or will you have a lie in and work into the night? It doesn't matter what you choose, as it's about when you work more effectively, which is something you've probably figured out by this time in your degree. Just make sure that it's something you can stick to, and also that it's clear enough to follow – don't just tell yourself you'll do 40 hours a week, but say that, for example, you're going to work from 10am til 1pm, from 2pm til 5pm, and from 7pm til 9pm every day. And if you have to miss a few hours one week, perhaps if you're ill, or something unexpected happens, then update your timetable and see how you can catch up those hours over the weeks that are left. I'd like you to pause the video at this point and take some time to work out a schedule. You might want to do this in a calendar you already have, such as one on your phone, or you can follow the link and use the schedule builder tool. When you've come up with your timetable, return to the video.

You also want to be specific about what you're going to achieve during your working time each session, day and week. This is going to be a large project, so you need to make sure that you've allocated time for all of the different things that are involved in the dissertation. Firstly, reading is going to take you a lot of time, as you need to be familiar with a range of research in your area. I took a look through some of the dissertations in the library, and people generally had about 74 items in their reference list – some had a little less, so about 60, and quite a few had a lot more – over 100 in some cases. And to have this amount of literature that actually ends up being referenced in your finished dissertation means that you'll read a lot more than this – so probably about 90-150 articles or book chapters. People read at different rates, so you need to think about how long this reading is going to take you, and add that to your timetable. And remember, as it's academic reading, you need to make sure that you are reading in a focused and critical way, and making notes – if you're not sure about this, please come to my workshop on reading, or speak to me about it. So what else do you need to allocate time for? Obviously, you need to make sure you have enough time to write each chapter – allowing time to plan out what you're going to say, and how you're going to structure the information, and making many drafts and editing and improving them. The only way

to end up with a well-written dissertation is to keep working on your writing – no-one can just type out a single draft of excellent academic analysis! For this project, you'll be likely to do some primary research, so you'll need time to collect your data – and if you're doing a survey, to get sufficient responses – and also to analyse it. Don't forget that transcribing interviews or focus group sessions can take a while – perhaps four times as long as the recording – as can the data entry if you're using Excel or SPSS to process your data. Once you've come up with a schedule for your work, think about when you will send work to your supervisor (you might be free to decide this yourself, or you might have interim deadlines to meet), and then contact your supervisor to arrange when to meet. Do this early on in the process – your supervisor is likely to have limited availability so you need to sort this out well in advance. Finally, as the dissertation process is going to last about three months, it's almost inevitable that something unplanned will happen, so make sure there's contingency built in for when you get ill/ have a family emergency/ or perhaps just have a friend unexpectedly visit for a weekend. Life is still going to go on so don't let small disruptions throw you, although obviously speak to your supervisor and the student association officer if something serious happens.

To summarise what we've talked about today, I'm going to give you some top tips for tackling your dissertation.

Firstly – as I've emphasised, have a clear plan for how to organise your time. Create this by looking at your deadline, and working backwards to find out how much time you have to get everything done. This is likely to be around 12 weeks. Also consider when you work best, and arrange a timetable around when you are most likely to be productive. Then, secondly, divide up your schedule, making sure you have thought about all of the different stages, and that you allocate time for reading, note-making, planning and editing as well as writing – don't forget that there are many aspects to the writing process other than physically typing out several thousand words. My third tip is to spend some time at the beginning, middle and end of the process to look at examples of other students' dissertations. There's some online which can be accessed through the library catalogue, and there's also physical copies – just ask at the library desk so you can sign them out. Look at a few so you can get a good idea of what's required, and also about the different kinds of approaches people have used, and which ones might work for your project. I'll also be taking you through excerpts of different chapters from the dissertation in the face to face sessions. My fourth suggestion is to back everything up. There's no allowances made if you lose any drafts or notes, so I advise you to save documents onto memory sticks, to your computer or laptop, to cloud storage AND to email drafts to yourself at the end of each work period. This might sound a little paranoid or excessive, but it's better to be safe than sorry, and I speak as someone who lost a whole day's work towards the end of my PhD because I only saved to cloud storage which then had syncing issues. The fifth advice I'd give you is to keep focused on your title when writing – it's easy to get distracted by side issues and move away from your main points. One method is to write your title on a post-it note and stick it to the

side of your computer screen so it's constantly there as a reminder. My sixth point is to be completely ruthless when editing – the only way to make sure your writing is really clear and concise is to get rid of lots of it! It might seem painful to delete sentences and maybe whole paragraphs that you've worked really hard to create, but if they don't add anything you need to erase them – believe me, your dissertation will be much better when you remove all the stuff that's just you repeating yourself or wandering off the point. Finally, my advice is to enjoy it! Yes, the prospect of writing so much and doing your own research is scary, but it's such a rare opportunity to be able to choose a topic you're interested in and focus on it for several months, and discover something that no-one else has. There'll be ups and downs along the way, but overall, I hope you relish the process of writing your dissertation.

