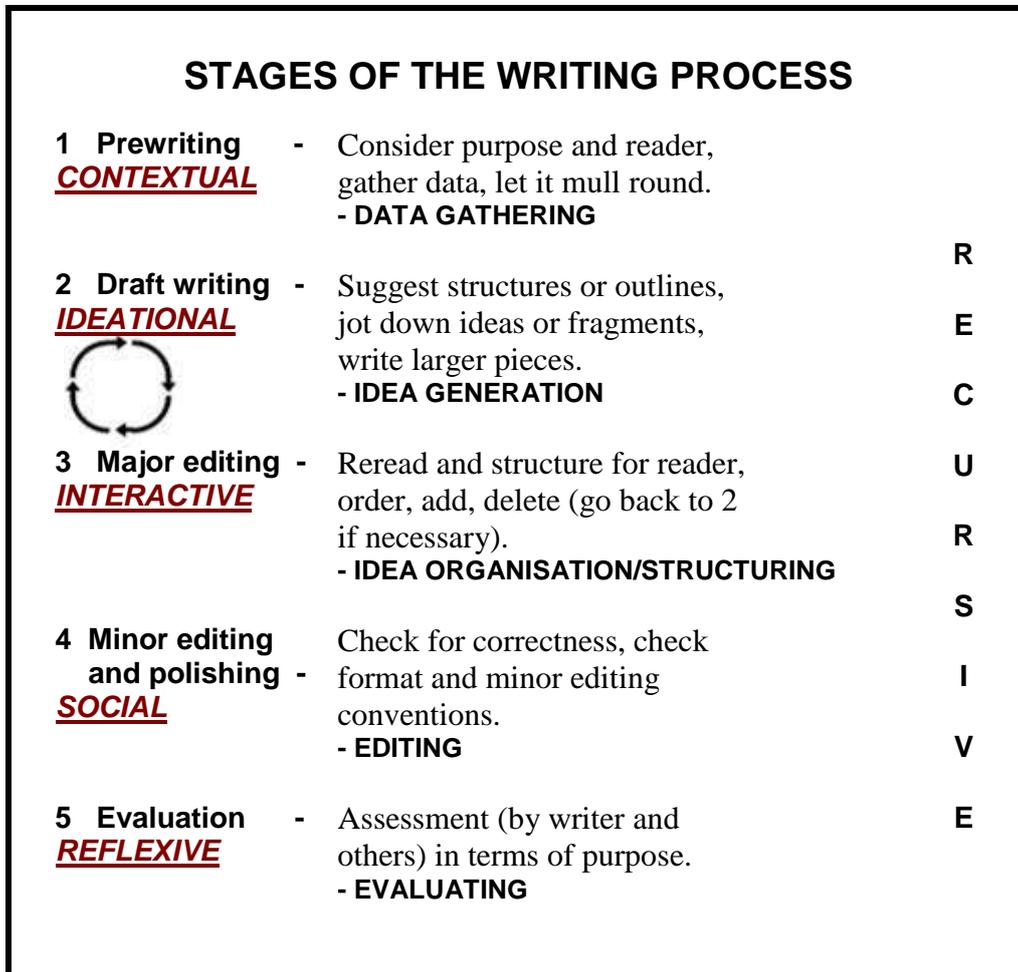


COMPOSING A THESIS

The word “thesis” means “argument”: a thesis is an extended argument supported by evidence. The evidence may take the form of literature (or other recorded knowledge) and the findings of other researchers, but in particular it should include new evidence gathered by the researcher in the course of his/her empirical work.



Various essential functions have to be carried out for writing to achieve its purpose.

1. The thesis must be **contextualised** by considering your purpose and reader/s, which triggers off the need to gather sufficient data with which to fashion a convincing argument. This phase includes note taking and filing information (which are, of course, ongoing activities throughout the writing of the thesis). You cannot produce a thesis without gathering extensive information (including your empirical data), but your thesis content is *not* the information (or data): your thesis content (see 2.) is *what you do with it* to argue your case.
2. This is the stage at which **ideational** content is ready to come out on to the page (i.e. the idea generation phase). Once you have absorbed enough information, you need to start planning what you want to say, so you jot down the rough plans or structures (*not* the final thesis chapters) which your argument will follow. In the earlier stages of writing a thesis, it is a good strategy to jot down ideas quickly without correcting or sorting rough drafts: this can be done once the ideas are down on paper. Some writers like to stop and sort at regular intervals (“serial sorters”) others like to wait until most of the draft is written out in rough (“cumulative sorters”). File everything you produce, and don’t erase files of rough drafts (rename and save as a new file). The focus of this phase is idea generation, which includes using other people’s ideas in your argument (with acknowledgments, of course) as well as your own. Plans, schemas, drawings, charts, figures, graphs and even photos are all part of idea generation: it’s what you produce on the page over and above notes. In fact, ideas are *generated* by your preliminary reading and notes (“ideas generally seem to be spawned

in data”, Shaughnessy 1977:245). That’s why you have to do most of the reading, and (usually) all of the empirical work, before you can start making a case.

3. Once enough ideas have been generated, the writer steps back to see how these ideas are coming across to the reader. As phase 2 tends to produce incoherent, mismatched content - perfectly normal, as the creative part of the mind is chaotic - quite a bit of sorting and ordering is needed. For example, you might have the whole thesis argument summarised in one paragraph, but the ideas have to be teased out (with supporting evidence) to fill the whole scope of the thesis. This is a highly **interactive phase**, where the writer hops back and forth between being writer and reader. The flip/flop between phase 1 and 2 is a powerful mechanism for producing thesis content, as reader accommodation generates further content (e.g. preambles, introductions, explanations, bridging passages, recaps and summaries). Supervisors and colleagues might help you to understand your readers’ needs (but if they start correcting your grammar now, back off and read it yourself: this is *not* the right stage for that kind of feedback, unless your writing is so incoherent that they really don’t know what you mean.) Careful structuring takes the place of turn-taking in a spoken discussion, and here you can seriously start deciding what content goes in which chapter (this is more negotiable than you think, because new discoveries take place as you write). Headings help with reader accommodation, but may change later. It is not a good idea to finalise your decimal numbering until you can see the whole thesis in perspective, right near the end.
4. While it is a good idea to draft the thesis in the font you are going to use in the examination copy, it is only at the minor editing and polishing stage that you should focus on the layout and conventions which make your work **socially** acceptable as “research” to your academic peers and colleagues. Conventions differ according to country, university, discipline and even from supervisor to supervisor. It is very difficult for novice students to know what is generally acceptable, as opposed to personal preference. The best strategy is to find a good exemplar in the same field and base your conventions on those found there. Ironically, consistency is actually more important than having the “correct” convention. For students who think that correcting spelling, punctuation and grammar is not important: after twenty or so generic errors, the examiner will suspect that the candidate might be careless generally, and will start checking on the accuracy of the data analysis. Be aware that large numbers of surface errors in your thesis text can easily change “minor corrections” to “major revisions and restructuring” in your examiner’s report. Note that, even at the polishing stage, you can revert to the idea generating phase – sometimes to get around an editing problem, and even do a little more restructuring. A careful check of the final decimal headings in the contents index might make you rethink the structure of the thesis (your examiner is going to read the index early on, so it had better make good sense!)
5. The **reflexive** function is to do with quality control, and is something like the feedback loop in the thesis writing process. You cannot really assess the worth of a thesis until it is in its final format. However, writers need to check their progress - and their texts - at all stages of writing the thesis. Again, some writers are “serial evaluators”, who need regular checks, and some are “accumulative evaluators”, who prefer to suspend assessment until large drafts are completed. It is quite normal go back and change your text after assessing it: the whole purpose of the feedback loop is to send you back to the task time and time again until you are satisfied with the result.

Reference:

Shaughnessy, M.P. 1977. *Errors and expectations*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Other readings mentioned in the Workshop:

Brabazon, T. 2010. How not to write a PhD thesis [Online]. *Times Higher Education*, 28 January 2010. Available: <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=410208&c=1> [Accessed 1 June 2010].

Dietz, A.J., Jansen, J. D. & Wadee, A.A. 2006. *Effective PhD supervision and mentorship. A workbook based on experiences from South Africa and the Netherlands*. South Africa-Netherlands research Programme on Alternatives in Development (SANPAD). Pretoria: UNISA Press.

Hoffstee, E. 2006. *Constructing a good dissertation: a practical guide to finishing a master’s, MBA or PhD on schedule*. Johannesburg: EPE.

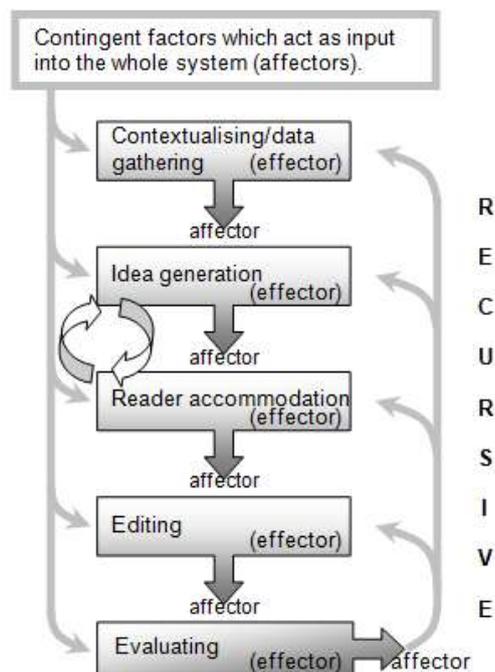
Van Aswegen, E. S. 2007. Post-graduate supervision: the role of the (language) editor: sed quis custodiet ipsos custodes? (Juvenal, Satire 6, 346 - 348). *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 21, 1142 -1154.

A SYSTEMS APPROACH

Both the research process and the thesis writing process are systemic in nature, underpinned by the same system of functions: contextual, ideational, interactive, social and reflexive.

RESEARCH	FUNCTIONS	THESIS WRITING
The researcher...		The writer...
...sets the research project in context by deciding on a topic, reading up on the subject, and planning how to carry out the project...	CONTEXTUAL	...sets the thesis in context by considering the topic, purpose and audience, completes the bulk of the reading, and ensures all data is collected and analysed. ...plans how to set it all down in thesis format.
...and gathers data...	IDEATIONAL	...gets most of the thesis content down in a rough draft.
...by interacting with participants and/or the world: observing, measuring, questioning and recording results.	INTERACTIVE	...interacts with an imaginary reader in structuring the thesis so that it presents a clear argument. [Interacting with "real" readers is helpful here.]
...carries out the project with attention to rigour and protocols, so that results can be seen to be reliable.	SOCIAL	...edits and proof-reads the thesis, and applies all research writing conventions rigorously, so that the finished thesis conforms to social expectations about research writing.
...checks assumptions and procedures to ensure that s/he is on track.	REFLEXIVE	...assesses the worth of the thesis in terms of how well it argues the case and whether it satisfies the criteria for research writing.

The composing system



Systems model of composing