

From Times Higher Education site

How not to write a PhD thesis

28 January 2010

In this guide, Tara Brabazon gives her top ten tips for doctoral failure

My teaching break between Christmas and the university's snowy reopening in January followed in the footsteps of Goldilocks and the three bears. I examined three PhDs: one was too big; one was too small; one was just right. Put another way, one was as close to a fail as I have ever examined; one passed but required rewriting to strengthen the argument; and the last reminded me why it is such a pleasure to be an academic.

Concurrently, I have been shepherding three of my PhD students through the final two months to submission. These concluding weeks are an emotional cocktail of exhaustion, frustration, fright and exhilaration. Supervisors correct errors we thought had been removed a year ago. The paragraph that seemed good enough in the first draft now seems to drag down a chapter. My postgraduates cannot understand why I am so picky. They want to submit and move on with the rest of their lives.

There is a reason why supervisors are pedantic. If we are not, the postgraduates will live with the consequences of "major corrections" for months. The other alternative, besides being awarded the consolation prize of an MPhil, is managing the regret of three wasted years if a doctorate fails. Every correction, each typographical error, all inaccuracies, ambiguities or erroneous references that we find and remove in these crucial final weeks may swing an examiner from major to minor corrections, or from a full re-examination to a rethink of one chapter.

Being a PhD supervisor is stressful. It is a privilege but it is frightening. We know – and individual postgraduates do not – that strange comments are offered in response to even the best theses. Yes, an examiner graded a magnificent doctorate from one of my postgraduates as "minor corrections" for one typographical error in footnote 104 in the fifth chapter of an otherwise cleanly drafted 100,000 words. It was submitted ten years ago and I still remember it with regret.

Another examiner enjoyed a thesis on "cult" but wondered why there were no references to Madonna, grading it as requiring major corrections so that Madonna references could be inserted throughout the script.

Examiners have entered turf wars about the disciplinary parameters separating history and cultural studies. Often they look for their favourite theorists – generally Pierre Bourdieu or Gilles Deleuze these days – and are saddened to find citations to Michel Foucault and Félix Guattari.

Then there are the "let's talk about something important – let's talk about me" examiners. Their first task is to look for themselves in the bibliography, and they are not

too interested in the research if there is no reference to their early sorties with Louis Althusser in *Economy and Society* from the 1970s.

I understand the angst, worry and stress of supervisors, but I have experienced the other side of the doctoral divide. Examining PhDs is both a pleasure and a curse. It is a joy to nurture, support and help the academy's next generation, but it is a dreadful moment when an examiner realises that a script is so below international standards of scholarship that there are three options: straight fail, award an MPhil or hope that the student shows enough spark in the viva voce so that it may be possible to skid through to major corrections and a full re-examination in 18 months.

When confronted by these choices, I am filled with sadness for students and supervisors, but this is matched by anger and even embarrassment. What were the supervisors thinking? Who or what convinced the student that this script was acceptable?

Therefore, to offer insights to postgraduates who may be in the final stages of submission, cursing their supervisors who want another draft and further references, here are my ten tips for failing a PhD. If you want failure, this is your road map to getting there.

1. Submit an incomplete, poorly formatted bibliography

Doctoral students need to be told that most examiners start marking from the back of the script. Just as cooks are judged by their ingredients and implements, we judge doctoral students by the calibre of their sources.

The moment examiners see incomplete references or find that key theorists in the topic are absent, they worry. This concern intensifies when in-text citations with no match in the bibliography are located.

If examiners find ten errors, then students are required to perform minor corrections. If there are 20 anomalies, the doctorate will need major corrections. Any referencing issues over that number and examiners question the students' academic abilities.

If the most basic academic protocols are not in place, the credibility of a script wavers. A bibliography is not just a bibliography: it is a canary in the doctoral mine.

2. Use phrases such as “some academics” or “all the literature” without mitigating statements or references

Generalisations infuriate me in first-year papers, but they are understandable. A 19-year-old student who states that “all women think that Katie Price is a great role model” is making a ridiculous point, but when the primary reading fodder is *Heat* magazine, the link between Jordan's plastic surgery and empowered women seems causal. In a PhD, generalisations send me off for a long walk to Beachy Head.

The best doctorates are small. They are tightly constituted and justify students' choice of

one community of scholars over others while demonstrating that they have read enough to make the decision on academic rather than time-management grounds.

Invariably there is a link between a thin bibliography and a high number of generalisations. If a student has not read widely, then the scholars they have referenced become far more important and representative than they actually are.

I make my postgraduates pay for such statements. If they offer a generalisation such as “scholars of the online environment argue that democracy follows participation”, I demand that they find at least 30 separate references to verify their claim. They soon stop making generalisations.

Among my doctoral students, these demands have been nicknamed “Kent footnotes” after one of my great (post-) postgraduates, Mike Kent (now Dr Kent). He relished compiling these enormous footnotes, confirming the evidential base for his arguments. As he would be the first to admit, it was slightly obsessive behaviour, but it certainly confirmed the scale of his reading. In my current supervisory processes, students are punished for generalisations by being forced to assemble a “Kent footnote”.

3. Write an abstract without a sentence starting “my original contribution to knowledge is...”

The way to relax an examiner is to feature a sentence in the first paragraph of a PhD abstract that begins: “My original contribution to knowledge is...” If students cannot compress their argument and research findings into a single statement, then it can signify flabbiness in their method, theory or structure. It is an awful moment for examiners when they – desperately – try to find an original contribution to knowledge through a shapeless methods chapter or loose literature review. If examiners cannot pinpoint the original contribution, they have no choice but to award the script an MPhil.

The key is to make it easy for examiners. In the second sentence of the abstract, ensure that an original contribution is nailed to the page. Then we can relax and look for the scaffolding and verification of this statement.

I once supervised a student investigating a very small area of “queer” theory. It is a specialist field, well worked over by outstanding researchers. I remained concerned throughout the candidature that there was too much restatement of other academics’ work. The scholarship is of high quality and does not leave much space for new interpretations.

Finally, we located a clear section in one chapter that was original. He signalled it in the abstract. He highlighted it in the introduction. He stressed the importance of this insight in the chapter itself and restated it in the conclusion. Needless to say, every examiner noted the original contribution to knowledge that had been highlighted for them, based on a careful and methodical understanding of the field. He passed without corrections.

4. Fill the bibliography with references to blogs, online journalism and textbooks

This is a new problem I have seen in doctorates over the past six months. Throughout the noughties, online sources were used in PhDs. However, the first cycle of PhD candidates who have studied in the web 2.0 environment are submitting their doctorates this year. The impact on the theses I have examined recently is clear to see. Students do not differentiate between refereed and non-refereed or primary and secondary sources. The Google Effect – the creation of a culture of equivalence between blogs and academic articles – is in full force. When questioned in an oral examination, the candidates do not display that they have the capacity to differentiate between the calibre and quality of references.

This bibliographical flattening and reduction in quality sources unexpectedly affects candidates' writing styles. I am not drawing a causal link here: major research would need to be undertaken to probe this relationship. But because the students are not reading difficult scholarship, they are unaware of the specificities of academic writing. The doctorates are pitched too low, filled with informalities, conversational language, generalisations, opinion and unreflexive leaps between their personal “journeys” (yes, it is like an episode of *The X Factor*) and research protocols.

I asked one of these postgraduates in their oral examination to offer a defence of their informal writing style, hoping that the student would pull out a passable justification through the “Aca-Fan”, disintermediation, participatory culture or organic intellectual arguments. Instead, the student replied: “I am proud of how the thesis is written. It is important to write how we speak.”

Actually, no. A PhD must be written to ensure that it can be examined within the regulations of a specific university and in keeping with international standards of doctoral education. A doctorate may be described in many ways, but it has no connection with everyday modes of communication.

5. Use discourse, ideology, signifier, signified, interpellation, postmodernism, structuralism, post-structuralism or deconstruction without reading the complete works of Foucault, Althusser, Saussure, Baudrillard or Derrida

How to upset an examiner in under 60 seconds: throw basic semiotic phrases into a sentence as if they are punctuation. Often this problem emerges in theses where “semiotics” is cited as a/the method. When a student uses words such as “discourse” and “ideology” as if they were neutral nouns, it is often a signal for the start of a pantomime of naivety throughout the script. Instead of an “analysis”, postgraduates describe their work as “deconstruction”. It is not deconstruction. They describe their approach as “structuralist”. It is not structuralist. Simply because they study structures

does not mean it is structuralist. Conversely, simply because they do not study structures does not mean it is poststructuralist.

The number of students who fling names around as if they are fashion labels (“Dior”, “Derrida”, “Givenchy”, “Gramsci”) is becoming a problem. I also feel sorry for the students who are attempting a deep engagement with these theorists.

I am working with a postgraduate at the moment who has spent three months mapping Michel Foucault’s *Archaeology of Knowledge* over media-policy theories of self-regulation. It has been frustrating and tough, creating – at this stage – only six pages of work from her efforts. Every week, I see the perspiration on the page and the strain in the footnotes. If a student is not prepared to undertake this scale of effort, they must edit the thesis and remove all these words. They leave themselves vulnerable to an examiner who knows their ideological state apparatuses from their repressive state apparatuses.

6. Assume something you are doing is new because you have not read enough to know that an academic wrote a book on it 20 years ago

Again, this is another new problem I have seen in the past couple of years. Lazy students, who may be more kindly described as “inexperienced researchers”, state that they have invented the wheel because they have not looked under their car to see the rolling objects under it. After minimal reading, it is easy to find original contributions to knowledge in every idea that emerges from the jarring effect of a bitter espresso.

More frequently, my problem as a supervisor has been the incredibly hardworking students who read so much that they cannot control all the scholarly balls they have thrown into the air. I supervise an inspirational scholar who is trying to map Zygmunt Bauman’s “liquid” research over neoconservative theory. This is difficult research, particularly since she is also trying to punctuate this study with Stan Aronowitz’s investigations of post-work and Henry Giroux’s research into working-class education. For such students, supervisors have to prune the students’ arguments to ensure that all the branches are necessary and rooted in their original contributions to knowledge.

The over-readers present their own challenges. For our under-readers, the world is filled with their own brilliance because they do not realise that every single sentence they write has been explored, extended, tested and applied by other scholars in the past. Intriguingly, these are always the confident students, arriving at the viva voce brimming with pride in their achievements. They are the hardest ones to assess (and help) through an oral exam because they do not know enough to know how little they know.

Helpful handball questions about the most significant theorists in their research area are pointless, because they have invented all the material in this field. The only way to create an often-debilitating moment of self-awareness is by directly questioning the script: “On p57, you state that the academic literature has not addressed this argument.

Yet in 1974, Philippa Philistine published a book and a series of articles on that topic. Why did you decide not to cite that material?”

Invariably, the answer to this question – often after much stuttering and stammering – is that the candidate had not read the analysis. I leave the question hanging at that point. We could get into why they have not read it, or the consequences of leaving out key theorists. But one moment of glimpsing into the abyss of failure is enough to summon doubt that their “originality” is original.

7. Leave spelling mistakes in the script

Spelling errors among my own PhD students leave me seething. I correct spelling errors. They appear in the next draft. I correct spelling errors. They appear in the next draft. The night before they bind their theses, I stare at the ceiling, summoning the doctoral gods and praying that they have removed the spelling errors.

Most examiners will accept a few spelling or typographical mistakes, but in a word-processing age, this tolerance is receding. I know plenty of examiners who gain great pleasure in constructing a table and listing all the typographical and spelling errors in a script. Occasionally I do it and then I know I need to get out more.

Spelling mistakes horrify students. They render supervisors in need of oxygen. Postgraduates may not fail doctorates because of them, but such errors end any chance of passing quickly and without corrections. These simple mistakes also create doubt in the examiner’s mind. If superficial errors exist, it may be necessary to drill more deeply into the interpretation, methods or structure chosen to present the findings.

8. Make the topic of the thesis too large

The best PhDs are small. They investigate a circumscribed area, rather than over-egging the originality or expertise. The most satisfying theses – and they are rare – emerge when students find small gaps in saturated research areas and offer innovative interpretations or new applications of old ideas.

The nightmare PhD for examiners is the candidate who tries to compress a life’s work into 100,000 words. They take on the history of Marxism, or more commonly these days, feminism. They attempt to distil 100 years of history, theory, dissent and debate into a literature review and end up applying these complex ideas to Beyoncé’s video for Single Ladies.

The best theses not only state their original contribution to knowledge but also confirm in the introduction what they do not address. I know that many supervisors disagree with me on this point. Nevertheless, the best way to protect candidates and ensure that examiners understand the boundaries and limits of the research is to state what is not being discussed. Students may be asked why they made those determinations, and there must be scholarly and strategic answers to such questions.

The easiest way to trim and hem the ragged edges of a doctorate is historically or geographically. The student can base the work on Belgium, Brazil or the Bahamas, or a particular decade, governmental term or after a significant event such as 11 September 2001. Another way to contain a project is theoretically, to state there is a focus on Henry Giroux's model of popular culture and education rather than Henry Jenkins' configurations of new media and literacy. Such a decision can be justified through the availability of sources, or the desire to monitor one scholar's pathway through analogue and digital media. Examiners will feel more comfortable if they know that students have made considered choices about their area of research and understand the limits of their findings.

9. Write a short, rushed, basic exegesis

An unfair – but occasionally accurate – cliché of practice-led doctorates is that students take three and a half years to make a film, installation or soundscape and spend three and a half weeks writing the exegesis. Doctoral candidates seem unaware that examiners often read exegeses first and engage with the artefacts after assessing if candidates have read enough in the field.

Indeed, one of my students recommended an order of reading and watching for her examiners, moving between four chapters and films. The examiner responded in her report – bristling – that she would not be told how to evaluate a thesis: she always read the full exegesis and then decided whether or not to bother seeing the films. My student – thankfully – passed with ease, but this examiner told a truth that few acknowledge.

Most postgraduates I talk with assume that the examiners rush with enthusiasm to the packaged DVD or CD, or that they will not read a word of the doctorate until they have seen the exhibition. This is the same assumption that inhibits these students in viva voces. They think that they will be able to talk about “art” and “process” for two hours. I have never seen that happen. Instead, the emphasis is placed on the exegesis and how it articulates the artefact.

Postgraduates entering a doctoral programme to make a film or create a sonic installation subject themselves to a time-consuming and difficult process. If the student neglects the exegesis until the end of the candidature and constructs a rushed document about “how” rather than “why” it was made, there will be problems.

The best students find a way to create “bonsai” exegeses. They prepare perfectly formed engagements with theory, method and scholarship, but in miniature. They note word limits, demonstrate the precise dialogue between the exegesis and artefact, and show through a carefully edited script that they hold knowledge equivalent to the “traditional” doctoral level.

10. Submit a PhD with a short introduction or conclusion

A quick way to move from a good doctoral thesis to one requiring major corrections is to

write a short introduction and/or conclusion. It is frustrating for examiners. We are poised to tick the minor corrections box, and then we turn to a one- or two-page conclusion.

After reading thousands of words, students must be able to present effective, convincing conclusions, restating the original contribution to knowledge, the significance of the research, the problems and flaws and further areas of scholarship. Short conclusions are created by tired doctoral students. They run out of words.

Short introductions signify the start of deeper problems: candidates are unaware of the research area or the theoretical framework. In the case of introductions and conclusions in doctoral theses, size does matter.

Hope washes over the start of a PhD candidature, but desperation and fear often mark its conclusion. There are (at least) ten simple indicators that prompt examiners to recommend re-examination, major corrections or – with some dismay – failure. If postgraduates utilise these guidelines, they will be able to make choices and realise the consequences of their decisions.

The lessons of scholarship begin with intellectual generosity to the scholars who precede us. Ironically – although perhaps not – candidatures also conclude there.

Cite as follows:

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].

Online responses:

- **John F.** 16 February, 2010
Good article, Tara. I just escaped out of a PhD which ran to a princely 156,000 words - I can tell you would have loved it ;-) I'm also a qualified secondary teacher and I'm wondering do any secondary schools give a bonus for having a PhD (in my case in history) or is there any bonus at all for having it as a secondary school teacher?

I'm just recovering from a "footnote every sentence" mentality. I need a holiday now! ;-)
- **Ian Henderson** 16 March, 2010
hi tara,!!! fanx 4 d info lol!!! I fink dat itz reely gud d way d@ u deconstruct dis stuff 4 uz students!!! i reed loads meself u no! i fik d@ ur discourse is ded structuralised (i no all about dis coz i do it at mi uni but i fink d@ sum ov dem chat rubbish) i dont no nuffin sometimes i fink i'm a bit 2 postmodern if u no wot i mean!!!!!!! ne way.
- **LSH** 28 June, 2010
I don't understand why many of these comments are so flippant. I'm about to enter this world and am petrified. What Tara offers is some reassurance and help, for which I am grateful. So, why the attitude?
- **James** 7 July, 2010
I'm at the end of writing my PhD thesis for neuroscience and apart from the fact that the article author does a terrible job of generalising outside of their own field, there are several reasons to make flippant remarks (response to LSH).

Mainly, nobody who does a PhD has any idea of what is expected from the thesis. In my department alone some people have no corrections offered by their supervisor and others have mountains yet this has absolutely no bearing on the quality of the writing or what the external examiner (or internal) will say of it. There is no common way of examining a PhD thesis, even in the same field and so an equal number of boffins and not-so-bright people both slip through the net or get stuck without funding for months on end. Supervisors are the problem because they don't all adopt any kind of system for checking PhD theses whatsoever. In my opinion, the same number of people (but not necessarily the exact same people) would pass or fail their PhDs without a supervisor at the end. The examiners decide all.

ie - leave the country and block your emails when writing up.

- **Arturas** 17 July, 2010

I just wonder (I haven't read all of the text here but..) why do we need to have a phd to be experts in our field? is it always the case of trying to get new status ? or we want to progress to teaching?

I think with the majority of people : if we are interested in a subject we will achieve our phds in our heads rather than through an institution. We need phds because of the support given from our fellow academics, but.. do we actually use this support that often ? I think that in these times phds to some people are becoming a standard ...just like getting a BA. do we really want to thicken the water this way ? of course not .. at least i do not, I think even without the status of a doctor ... I can get the knowledge worthy of one . Love Tara ! she is amazing!

- **Tiffany** 11 August, 2010

@rjm - I'm about to embark on the world of phd-ism and hope that my new supervisor will offer me guidance and support, because I didn't get a great deal from my MA supervisor. She offered tutorials when I was working (even though she was aware I work full-time and study part-time) we only managed one tutorial; would not meet me before the evening classes that were held at the Uni where she worked, and she only commented on 1 chapter of my dissertation. Thank you for your contribution to this discussion, it livened things up.

- **Phd lackey** 11 August, 2010

Don't write.

- **helen** 3 October, 2010

This is helpful. I'm writing my own thesis and I begin to realise why my fussy supervisor keeps making me revise stuff she liked when she first saw it. Maybe I won't throttle her with my bare hands and flee the country after all! [Joke, OK?]

I have seen what happens when supervisors don't give their students a hard time during preparation. It's a complete misery to have to do major revisions post examination and an extra 18 months is realistic. It doesn't tell you about the sense of failure and humiliation that goes with it though. Not to mention all those extra fees to pay! And having your career on hold while your contemporaries are doing exciting new jobs.

Part of the problem is that you get so tired. No hols for 3 years, no weekends for a year, constant work. And this is a project that's gone fairly well. Seems to me that A levels and first degrees are very accessible, when so many students seem to get a A*s all the way and there are so many Firsts. PhDs are HARD.

- **Sly** 3 October, 2010

Thanks Tara. @ others why the attitude.