

Emily Dwight, Spring 2019

If you are reading this I'm sure you are already well accomplished, successful, and excel academically, otherwise you wouldn't be writing a Honors Thesis. I'm sure you have already written a 10 page paper for some class in the last 4 years, so maybe you are thinking this will be a walk in the park.

I thought it would be too. That was before I completely changed my topic 4 times, waited 3 months for a source to get back to me, had my database crash twice, and cried in public once. Even though I cried in public, I am baffled by how much I gained after completing what I now look back on as my favorite semester, and one of the best parts of my undergraduate career. Writing a thesis is no small feat. It will take a lot out of you, but you will also gain so much once you finally see your finished product.

And since I'm older, wiser, and now officially completed the Honors Thesis Gauntlet, I have 10 tips that might help you tackle your own Gauntlet.

1. Pick a Topic you are EXTREMELY passionate about.

At the beginning of this process it is terrifying having to come up with something to write about. I made the mistake of trying to write about something that I thought would make a good paper, or one that may be easier to write. But I also ended up changing my topic 4 times. I kept worrying about what others may think about my topic, not that I was going to be thinking about this topic for the next 9 months.

Since you are going to work on this project at minimum for 9 months, make it something you love. It's much easier to force yourself to sit down and read 30+ journal articles if you truly love the topic.

2. Your Paper will change and that's OK!

I guarantee that your end product will not be what you expected it to be, and that's OK. One of the hardest things for me to comprehend was that you are writing a manuscript, not a 100% publishable piece of writing. This means that its OK and EXPECTED that your paper is perfect, and it should change over time.

3. Don't Compare Yourself to your peers

Along the same lines that your paper will change over time, you CANNOT compare yourself to your peers. One of the coolest parts about this experience is that it is your own. Don't compare your experience to the person next to you. This may be difficult if it seems like your peers are miles ahead of you, but you are all running different races.

#### 4. Find a Document Organization System

One of the most critical things for me during this experience was figuring out a document organization system that worked for me and my writing style. I found myself working on several different components of my thesis concurrently so it was crucial to find a way to keep track of it all. For me what worked best was a series of Google-Docs which basically broke my paper into sections. I also found that organizing all the things I was writing made the giant task of writing this paper so much easier since I could just try to finish one section at a time.

#### 5. Walk Away

Unless you are some sort of alien, I guarantee that at some point during this process you will have been sitting at your computer for an hour with nothing to show for it. I often felt like I couldn't move onto other things I had to do until I got something on the page, but the best thing was often to walk away. If you aren't in the headspace to write, don't stress yourself out. Move on to something else.

#### 6. Don't let this be your ONLY focus

Since you are writing your Honors Thesis you are likely about to graduate. This is such an exciting time, so don't use this as an excuse not to enjoy your final year at IU. I found myself using my thesis as an excuse not to do things with friends, when in reality I easily could have spent time with them. Similar to walking away, don't let this experience consume your life since there are so many other things to experience at IU.

#### 7. It's OK to be wrong and make mistakes. Take the opportunity to grow.

During this whole process I was always so worried to be wrong or to make a mistake. I wanted this experience to be as perfect as possible. But that is part of the process. Take the opportunity to grow and better yourself and paper. Making mistakes may end up being the best thing to happen to you and your paper.

#### 8. Join a Coffee Loyalty Program

If you are a coffee drinker, I would 100% join every local coffee shop, and Starbucks loyalty program possible. I loved writing in coffee shops, mostly because I needed the caffeine, and whenever I had a reward I was so much more productive. It's nice to get free coffee, and if you are anything like me you will drink a ton of it while writing your thesis.

#### 9. Write, Write, Write followed by Edit, Edit, Edit

As someone who doesn't generally have a problem writing long papers I thought this would be no problem. However, I found it was really hard to craft an argument and understand exactly what my thesis was saying. My advisor and I talked once a week and he kept saying that our conversations were great but I needed to put it all down on paper. I had a hard time with that since I was so afraid to be wrong. (For advice on that see #7) But I found that once everything was on paper, it was ten times easier to scale it all back and edit it into a readable paper and something that I was proud to put my name on.

Bottom line, just write everything down. Most of it may be cut or edited heavily, but you can't do any of that until something is on the page.

#### 10. Invest in your Peers

One of the more unexpected parts of this experience was the friendships I gained. On day one of the research design course, I was sure that the 5 people sitting with me in one of those tiny discussion rooms in SPEA would just be people I pass in the hall and say Hi to, and nothing more. I thought that they would just be class friends. But I was completely wrong.

Those 5 people became the core of my support group that got me through the Honors Thesis. They were the people who listened to me complain about changing my topic 4 times. They were the people who read all 43 pages of my thesis when no one else would. They became some of the first people I would talk to, and were great listeners.

We became much more than class friends, and I hope that as you embark on this journey you may gain amazing friends as I did. The shared experience creates such a unique bond, and I am so proud of them and excited to see what they accomplish in the future. By investing in your peer, you end up investing in yourself. And you can never have too much support!

As I reflect back on this experience, trying to pass on some of the things I've learned, I promise you will be in my shoes in the not so distant future. But until then, put in the work and try to enjoy the experience as much as possible. I guarantee you will be proud of your work and accomplishments. I know I am.

### A step-by-step guide to writing your thesis in 9 months

If you're reading this then that must mean you're getting ready/already started writing your undergraduate honors thesis. DON'T FREAK OUT. You control your own experience. What you put into it is what you will get out of it. If you're the hardworking SPEA Honor student that I know you are then you're going to be just fine. Here are a quick few steps and guidelines to live by before embarking on this journey.

- 1) Breathe.
- 2) When deciding what to write on, make sure it has data. The purpose to the new track is to create our own data collection methods, but this can be extremely hard if there isn't data to do this on. So, when picking a topic, make sure there is not a shortage of data or you will find yourself struggling the whole semester. Side note: make sure you like the topic you're writing on because you're going to be spending a substantial amount of time writing it.
- 3) Ask questions. If I could go back and re-write my thesis, I would have asked more questions about what a literature review is for example. Before this class, I had no clue what a literature review was, and I thought I'd figure it out by looking it up on the internet but I was completely wrong. So, ASK questions. Your professors are here for that exact reason.
- 4) Start looking for an advisor early. Also, make sure you have at least two lined up. Unfortunately, my potential advisor said 'No' on the day of the advisor deadline and I did not have a strong back-up. Therefore, make sure you search for advisors early, and have several.
- 5) When looking for an advisor, make sure it is someone that challenges you. A couple edits here and there are doing more harm to your paper than good. Make sure your advisor will challenge you and bring out your full potential via your writing.
- 6) When writing the actual thesis, be as explicit as possible. Not wordy-but very detailed. There is a difference, and the earlier you know the difference, the better your writing will be.
- 7) Set aside at least three to four hours per week devoted to free writing for the thesis. By this I mean, it doesn't hurt to free write with no prompt, this can actually create for more ideas and more creativity and thoughts that would have otherwise not been written.
- 8) Breathe. (again).
- 9) Lastly, and most importantly, do not procrastinate as it will show in your writing. Set deadlines, be punctual, and hold yourself to writing every week. This is not a sprint; the thesis is a marathon and every little bit each week will help to culminate it into a strong research paper.

You're going to do great, I believe in you! Take it step-by-step. These were the main guidelines that I either did or would have lived by for my thesis. If I can do it, so can you.

GOODLUCK!

Ryan Ricker, Spring 2019

As I gather my thoughts about this experience, a few things come to mind:

- 1.) Find a topic you are genuinely interested in. By the end of the thesis process, you will be sick of talking about your topic either way, but the process will come much easier if you are passionate about what you are researching. The Honors Program is unique in that you are given complete freedom over what you want to learn about. Do not waste this opportunity. Do not pick a topic simply because it seems easy or straightforward. This is your time to research something you have always wanted to learn more about, something you have always wished your professors would teach about in class.
  - a. Additionally, try not to get discouraged if your topic has to change. My topic changed about three times throughout these two semesters. As frustrating as it was to have to constantly rewrite sections of my thesis to fit the new topic, my paper turned out better than it would have otherwise. Rewrites forced me to improve my writing each time, and take a more critical look at what I was saying.
- 2.) Keep moving forward. There will be times when it seems like everything is a disaster. Your topic might have to change. There might be no data available. Maybe your file does not save correctly. Regardless of what happens, there is always something you can be doing to make your life easier. If you do not have your data yet, practice using your statistical software with a fake dataset, or one that is publicly available. If you are uncertain what your topic will be, keep reading and finding what you're interested in. With a thesis, there is always something you can be working on.
- 3.) Do not get too worked up about it. When I first started this program, the idea of writing a thesis was incredibly daunting. Yes, writing a thesis is daunting in terms of the amount of work involved. In reality though, it is just another assignment. Do not let it overwhelm you or consume you. Do not think you are a failure if you struggle. Do not panic about the Wider World presentation or having to share your thesis with advisors and classmates. This process is not really about the output you create at the end. The thesis is not really what matters. It is about the skills you gain along the way, like learning research design, statistical analysis, and how to distribute your findings to various audiences. These are the things you will take away from the experience, and actually use in your career someday.