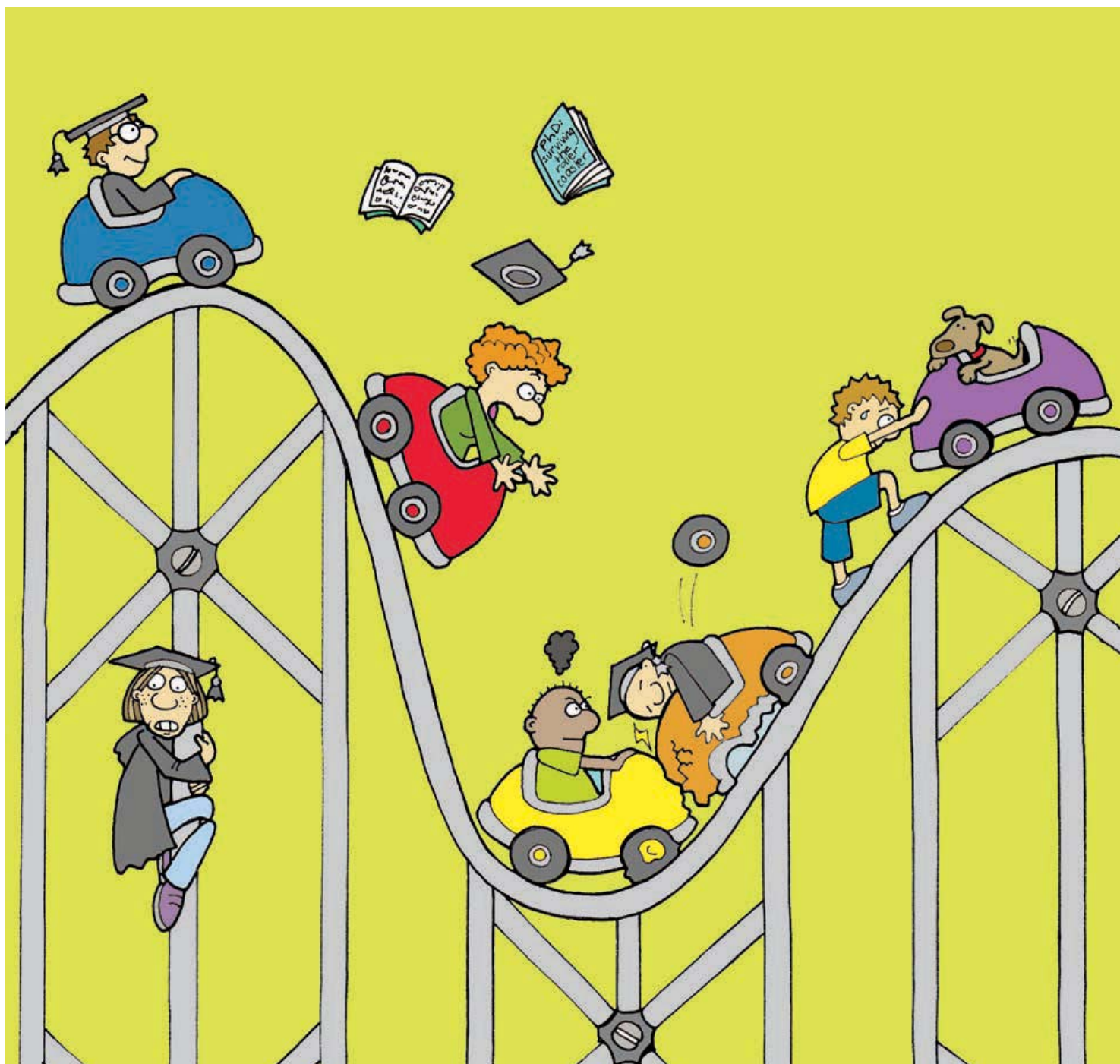


# THE SEVEN SECRETS

New  
Edition  
Completely  
Revised

of highly successful research students

Hugh Kearns & Maria Gardiner



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Hugh Kearns

Maria Gardiner

The seven secrets of highly successful research students

1. Research higher degree students
2. PhD students
3. Finishing a thesis

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# ABOUT THIS BOOK

About ten years ago we began running workshops for research students at Flinders University in Adelaide, Australia. We were looking at ways to help students be more effective and deal with the challenges that come with research. Together with our participants we learned about the difficulties in completing a research degree and the strategies for overcoming them. In 2006 we published the first edition of *The Seven Secrets of Highly Successful Research Students* to accompany the workshop of the same name. The book became so popular with research students that we had to reprint in 2008. We have now completely revised this original version to include more of what we cover in the workshop.

We now run our workshops at universities across Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Ireland, the United States and Canada. The systems and terminology differ in each country but, in our experience, the challenges remain the same and, more importantly, the strategies for being successful remain the same. This totally revised edition draws on our experiences and learnings of the past ten years, and the experiences of the thousands of research students we've worked with.

Ten years later, we're more convinced than ever that students who know and use these secrets get through their candidature more quickly and, just as importantly, enjoy it more.

Hugh Kearns  
Maria Gardiner  
March 2012

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# CONTENTS

<b>Secret 1: Care and maintenance of your supervisor</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Secret 2: Write and show as you go</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Secret 3: Be realistic</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>Secret 4: Say no to distractions</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>Secret 5: It's a job</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>Secret 6: Get help</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>Secret 7: You can do it!</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>Now do something</b>	<b>44</b>



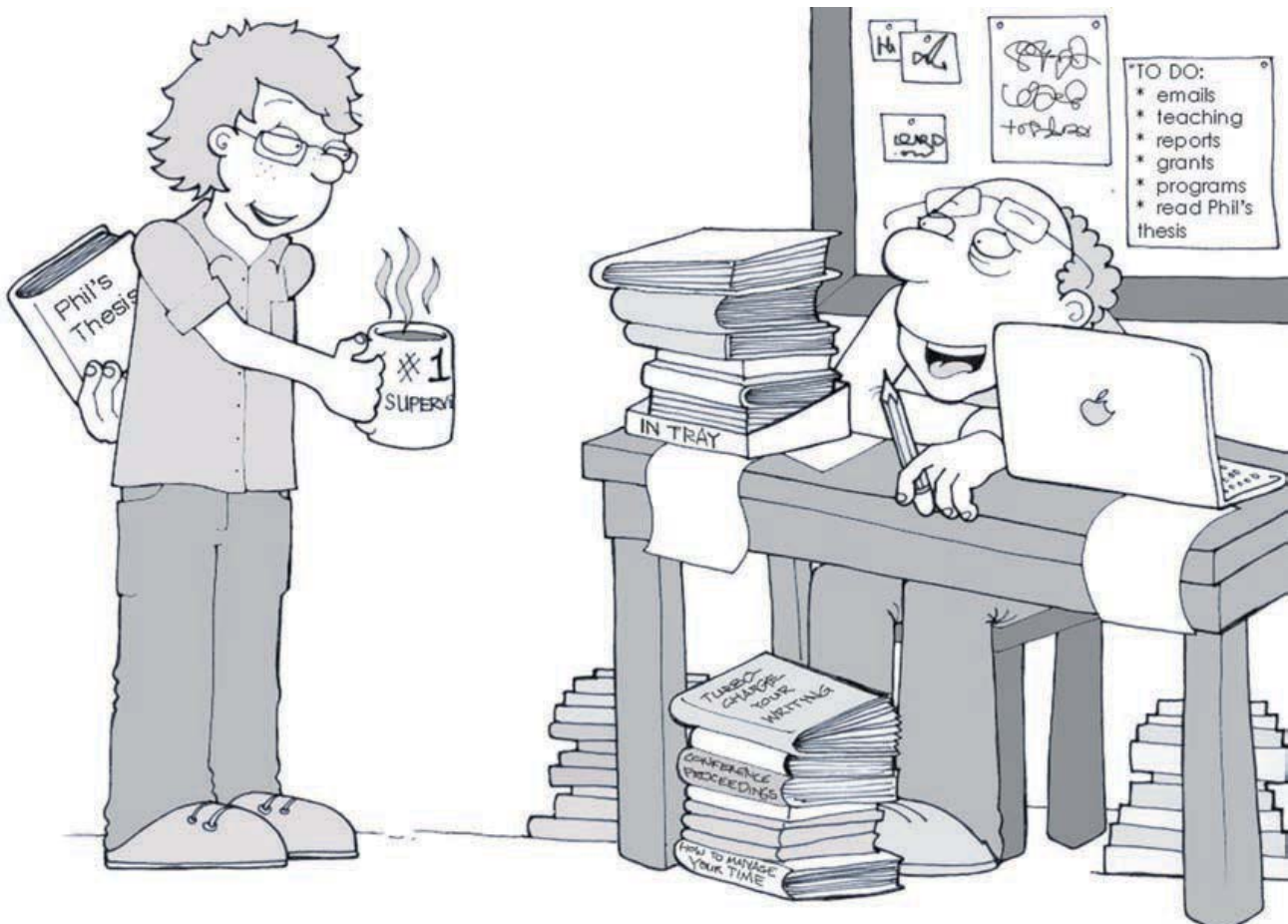
# SECRET 1:

## CARE AND MAINTENANCE OF YOUR SUPERVISOR

### Getting the supervision you need

The first of our seven secrets is called Care and Maintenance of Your Supervisor. It's first because it's the most important. In our experience, when you look at completion rates and times to completion, one factor stands out – the quality of supervision. If you are fortunate enough to receive good supervision and have a good relationship with your supervisor, then your chances of finishing on time and, in fact, of finishing at all, greatly increase.

We have also deliberately phrased this secret – it is you caring for and maintaining your supervisor, not them caring for and maintaining you. If you have a supervisor who does all the things we suggest below, great. Consider yourself fortunate and cherish them. But in our experience, most supervisors are very busy, some are even fallible (yes!), and this is when you need to take a more active role.



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## Priorities

Just before we get onto the nuts and bolts we need to have a word or two about priorities! Hopefully your thesis is one of your top priorities. It needs to be! One of the mistakes we all tend to make is to assume that what is important to us is just as important to other people too. And PhD students tend to assume that their PhD is very important to their supervisor. That their thesis must be their supervisor's A1 priority (or A3 / A4 at least). Sadly this is often not the case. It's more likely that you are C17 on your supervisor's list. This doesn't mean they don't care about you – the reality is that supervisors are very busy.

They have lots of things to do. They might teach. They have administrative roles. They have their own research. Which means that often you fall down their priority list. Supervisors also assume that you are an independent learner who will take quite a bit of responsibility in the relationship. This misunderstanding of priorities can lead to frustration. Students send some writing to their supervisor looking for feedback. They assume the supervisor will get right onto it. But, of course, if it's on the supervisor's C list then it can take quite a while before the student gets any feedback, leaving the student frustrated.

So ... you need to be more active. Here is a real life example to show you what we mean.

“It's more likely that you are C17 on your supervisor's list.”

## Benign and gentle stalking

A PhD student from Information Technology was a participant in one of our workshops a few years ago. He was very frustrated and explained that his supervisor was a lovely guy, very knowledgeable in the field but always very busy. He travelled a lot to conferences and other universities. The problem was that the student had given the supervisor a draft of a chapter about two months ago and hadn't received any feedback. Which meant that he couldn't get on with other work, because it depended on the approaches described in that chapter.

We asked the student if he had followed up with his supervisor and he said that he had. He'd sent an email asking about it a month ago but hadn't even had a reply. He was very frustrated and wasting a lot of time, with no idea of what to do next.

Fortunately, another person in that workshop had some ideas. She was much more assertive. We asked her what she would do. Here were some of her suggestions:

*If I heard that the supervisor was flying into Adelaide airport at two o'clock, I would offer to pick him up from the airport and ask him questions on the way.*

*Or I would find out his lecture schedule, wait outside the lecture theatre and walk back to his office with him, asking questions as we go.*

*Or if that didn't work, I would camp outside his office door so that every time he came out I was there and I'd ask about the draft.*

*As you can imagine, she was getting her thesis finished in record time. In fact, what she was suggesting was benign and gentle stalking of the supervisor.*

*While her approach might be a bit over the top, it does demonstrate the difference between a more passive approach and a more assertive approach.*

## It's your thesis – you need to be the driver

Most PhD students somewhere along the journey come to realise that it's your thesis. Your name is on the front cover. It's your work. And the implication of this is that you need to become the driver. You need to become more active and assertive in asking for the things they need. This might be called “managing up” out in the job world.

Managing up means taking control of many of the issues related to your job (here, your PhD) and communicating directly to your boss (here, your supervisor) about these issues. In particular, bringing solutions rather than problems, and not just waiting for the boss (supervisor) to pick it up and fix it. Most supervisors say they love it when their students take more responsibility. It is certainly one of the skills it is expected you will have learnt by the end of your PhD.

## Cultural issues

Some students may find it difficult to take a more assertive role. This is particularly the case for students who come from an educational culture where you do not question your professor. However, in most western countries, the expectation is that you will ask for what you want. This means letting your supervisor know when you don't understand something or when you need things to be done differently. It doesn't mean that you will get it, but if you don't ask, your supervisor won't know.

Which leads us to an important strategy for raising yourself up your supervisor's priority list – meetings.





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## Meetings

### *The open door policy*

Many supervisors, when you start, will say something to you like “I have an open door policy. Come and see me whenever you want”. This sounds good and it is nice to have an open door policy. However, in practice it often doesn’t work out that way. Sometimes the door isn’t as open as it sounds. For example, the supervisor may be on sabbatical, or conference leave, or just somewhere else. And even if the door is open it doesn’t mean the supervisor is really available. They are likely to be very busy getting ready for a lecture, or writing a grant proposal, or any of the other things that busy academics do. This can mean that meetings can be more like rushed crisis talks with just enough time to deal with the immediate important issues.

The other problem with the “open door, come and see me when you want” approach is that in our experience, students have a tendency to avoid having meetings. Because when there’s a problem, often the last person the student wants to talk to is their supervisor. There is a tendency to think “I should be able to work this out myself”.

### *Regular vs frequent meetings*

So while it’s good to have an open door policy and ad hoc meetings, we (along with many other researchers) also advocate regular scheduled meetings. How regular should they be? In our experience, regularity matters more than frequency. Regularity means that you have a regular meeting at a scheduled interval. When we talk to students about why it matters so much, they tell us that if they know they have a meeting with their supervisor on the following Friday it is more likely that they will do some work. They won’t want to turn up having done nothing.

So, regular meetings are important. The frequency probably depends on the situation. Early in the candidature, we suggest quite frequent meetings eg weekly, because at this stage it’s easy for the student to feel overwhelmed and get a bit lost. Once the student is a bit more independent, it may be okay to meet less frequently eg once every two or three weeks. At critical points, for example, data analysis and writing, it is helpful to meet frequently again. It is at these points, without regular meetings, that students can waste a lot of time.

## Sciences vs Humanities

However, there are no absolute rules. In the Sciences, students and supervisors tend to meet very frequently, sometimes even daily. The nature of the work often requires frequent discussion. In some Arts and Humanities disciplines, the norm is to meet less frequently.

It also depends a bit on the type of student. Some students are very independent and capable of a high degree of self-management. They can find frequent meetings a bit unnecessary. Other students need the structure of regular and frequent meetings.

A note about lab meetings. In the experimental areas there are often regular lab meetings. These are good but they are not thesis meetings. Lab meetings can often focus on what's happening in the lab that week, for example, who's got the chemicals, who left stuff in the fridge. It's essential to make some times to talk specifically about your thesis and your progress.

## Responsibility for meetings

At the beginning, a research student usually expects the supervisor to be in charge of the whole process and do things like organise the meetings. If you have a supervisor who does these things, that's great. However, if you don't, then it's up to you to organise the meetings. And what if your supervisor cancels the meeting? Straight away re-book another time. Supervisors are busy but you are entitled to some of their time. You need to make sure you get it.

## Taking control of meetings

*Another student we worked with felt that the meetings with his supervisor were not very productive. He was never sure he was doing the right thing. He had been enrolled for over two years and didn't feel he had done anything near the required work. He didn't feel like his supervisor was very happy with his progress either.*

*So we suggested that he start sending emails to his supervisor to let her know what he wanted to discuss at his fortnightly meetings. He would make sure that they stayed on track with the things he had written in the email. Sometimes this led to talking about hard things (that both he and his supervisor would rather have put off until a later date or avoided altogether!). And to make sure he had understood these discussions properly, he promptly sent a summary email after the meetings. Sometimes the supervisor replied to say that the student had misunderstood. While this was frustrating for him, it was better to know this two days after the meeting than fourteen. Despite some initial difficult (but necessary) conversations, the student's progress picked up markedly. And yes, he finished on time!*

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## Meeting agendas

*One student described her meetings with her supervisor. They would start off with some pleasantries about the weekend or the department. Then they would talk about some aspect of the research that was interesting. Usually the supervisor would get distracted by something and they would spend the next hour on some side issue or other. The student didn't feel it was her role to interrupt or bring her back on track. And they were discussing the project – just not in the most helpful way. When we suggested having a simple agenda, the meetings became much more productive.*

So ... just having the meeting isn't enough. It's easy to get distracted. The solution is to have a simple agenda. It doesn't have to be complex. Here's a sample one.

### Meeting agenda

- *What I've done since the last meeting*
- *Questions that have arisen*
- *Feedback*
- *What I will do before the next meeting*
- *The next thing*
- *The next meeting*

Most of the items are self-explanatory. The one worth explaining in more detail is item number five – the next thing. The following page shows a more detailed agenda.

### The next thing

Many students tell us that they leave meetings more confused than when they went in. This is understandable because often there is a wide-ranging discussion with lots of options and potential approaches. The problem is, if you leave the meeting without a clear understanding of what you are supposed to do next, you are likely to do nothing. So to overcome this, you should agree in very specific terms on the next immediate thing you are going to do. For example, it might be to re-analyse the first dataset using the criteria you've just discussed. Or it could be to read specific articles. The more specific you can be, the more likely it is that it will happen.

# Sample Meeting Agenda

Since Last Meeting		Outcomes
1	Things I was going to do: * * *	
2	Things the supervisor was going to do: * *	
3	Other developments since last meeting: * *	
4	Show and tell: Drafts, results, hypotheses	
5	Feedback from supervisor * *	
6	Questions, issues that need clarification * *	
The Next Steps		When
7	Things I will do: * *	
8	Things the supervisor will do: * *	
9	Are we on track? What is the next milestone?	
10	Date of next meeting	
11	FINALLY, THE NEXT MOST IMPORTANT THING IS: ..... .....	

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## Email before and after meetings

Once you've got your agenda then we suggest that you email it to your supervisor before the meeting. You could probably send it two or three days beforehand. This gives the supervisor enough time to think about any issues that are raised. We also suggest that you print it out and bring it to the meeting. At the start of the meeting you can then say "Here are the things I think we need to talk about today". If sending an agenda feels too formal, at least send through three or four dot points outlining what you want to talk about.

And then we suggest that you send an email to your supervisor after the meeting. This email records the decisions you made during the meeting. It's not every word that was said – just a record of outcomes, and usually just a few dot points, for example:

My understanding from our meeting today is that:

- I will finish the last section of the literature review
- I will re-run the latest set of experiments
- You will find out about conference funding for me
- We will meet again in two weeks (23/6, 2pm)

## Co-supervisors – don't be a carrier pigeon!

Most universities have a system of a primary supervisor and a secondary or associate supervisor. The advantage of this system is that you are not relying on just one supervisor. If one person is unavailable there is someone else to go to. The two supervisors may bring different expertise or have different levels of experience. When it works well, co-supervision is very good.

However, there can be difficulties, for example, the two supervisors may not get along. They may provide different or conflicting advice. This makes the position of the student very difficult. Who do you listen to? Sometimes you end up like a carrier pigeon, carrying messages between supervisors.

If you do end up in a situation where your supervisors are giving very different advice, it's time to get them in the same room. If they still don't agree, then you will have to point out that you are confused about the way forward. Summarise each supervisor's view and then say you are not sure what you should do next.

You should also agree at the beginning of the relationship the role that each supervisor is going to play. Will they both be at all meetings? How will they communicate with each other? How will conflicts be resolved? If your co-supervisor is only going to play a minor role, we suggest that they still come to a meeting at least once a year and probably more often. They should also see some of your major drafts. We have seen primary supervisors go on leave, have babies, get sick, die(!), right when you need help or are close to finishing. Having a co-supervisor who has some basic idea of what is going on is very helpful at these times.

## Not working out

Sadly, in a small number of cases the student-supervisor relationship just doesn't work out. This may be due to personality difference, philosophical difference or other reasons. Generally when the student thinks it's not going to work out, their response is to put their head in the sand and hope it will go away. It almost never goes away. It generally gets worse. So when it's not working out you need to do something about it. The first thing could be to talk to the supervisor. If this is difficult, another option is to talk to the co-supervisor. Also, each school or faculty will have a contact person that you can get advice from. Or you can go to the head of your department or your graduate centre,

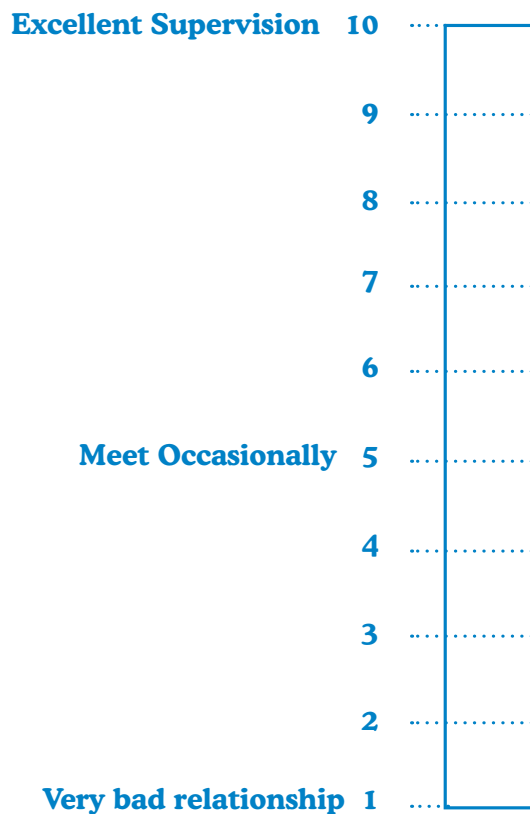
While this is not a very pleasant situation, in our experience, mostly when people change supervisors, things get better.



## Rate yourself on the care and maintenance of your supervisor.

How do you think you're going on the care and maintenance of your supervisor? Do you meet regularly? Do you get regular feedback on your work? Can you raise issues and concerns?

**Put an X on the scale below.**



What action could you take that would improve the care and maintenance of your supervisor? Eg organise a meeting.

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## SECRET 2:

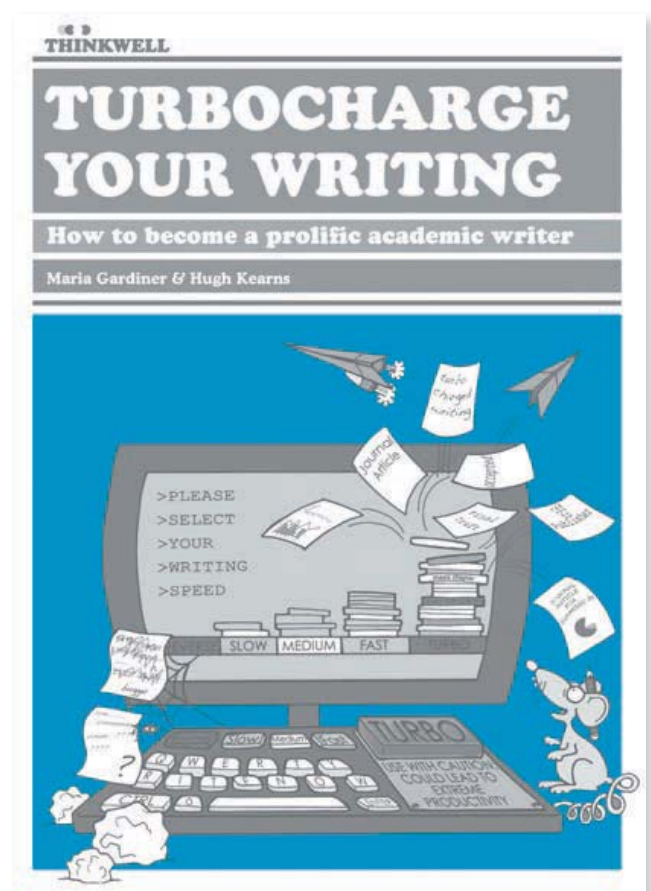
# WRITE AND SHOW AS YOU GO

**This is show and tell, not hide and seek!**

We've written a whole book called Turbocharge Your Writing on the psychology of high quality, high quantity, scholarly writing. In the following pages we highlight the key ideas.

### The reasons people don't write (or write much)

There are many reasons that people don't write. In academia one of the most common ones is that people don't feel ready to write. So, in order to feel ready, they go off and keep reading, or doing experiments, or collecting/analysing data, hoping that this will make them feel ready. Sadly, years of working with PhD students and academics has shown us that this actually makes people feel less like writing (generally because they get more confused). The reality is that you have to write before you feel ready. And if you doubt this, just think for a moment about how you instantly become ready when there is a deadline fast approaching! If you really weren't ready, why can you somehow produce written work when faced with a looming deadline?





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Another reason that academic writers don't write is because they are waiting to get it all clear in their heads. This is a fundamental misunderstanding of how writing works. Rather than thinking about something to get it clear, you need to write about it to get it clear – writing clarifies your thinking. Often it's an illusion that it's clear in our heads. It's only when we go to write about it that we realise it's not so clear after all. When this happens most people think it's a sign to keep thinking, when in fact, it is a clear indicator that you need to start putting it on paper in order to clarify your thinking.

## Snack v Binge

Once people get past what seem like plausible (although not logical) reasons for not writing, another barrier emerges – time! Or more precisely, big enough blocks of time. Most academics and students tell us that they couldn't possibly write anything worthy of committing ink to paper (or keyboard stroke to monitor) unless they had at least half a day, a day, a week, a month, etc. We call this the binge model of writing.

## Binge writing

There is nothing inherently wrong with the binge writing model (unless you overdo it); the main problem is that there just aren't that many big blocks of time. And the other problem is that many people, when they do get a big block of time, often don't use it well.

They decide that they will just get the emails, the phone calls, the sick cat, etc out of the way so that they can start on their writing without all those minor tasks hanging over their heads. Then before they know it, the lovely big block of time is gone – but all the emails are answered!

## Snacking - little and often

So what's the alternative? Snack writing. Snack writing means writing in small blocks of time. And, most importantly, regular small blocks of time. And how long is a snack? Research shows it is as low as 30 minutes. Our replication shows that about 45 minutes is a good minimum amount for a snack – but if you don't have 45 minutes, it is still better to do 30 minutes than to do nothing. And the maximum is probably around two hours (we'll explain why when we discuss our definition of writing).

There are two things you need to know for snack writing to work. The first is that the snacks need to be regular – once a week isn't enough! The second things you need to know is about parking on the hill. By this, we mean that you leave a few dot points where you finish, so that when you come back (hopefully the next day!) you can pick up from exactly where you left off, and get started quickly.

## It works!

*One of the authors of this book has just finished writing another book called *Presenting Your Research With Confidence*. That book was written using the principles applied here. In fact, much of the book was written in 20 minute snacks, first thing in the morning. But for this to work you have to be a quick starter – which means that when you sit down to write, you read the note you left yourself the last time and then you write. No re-reading yesterday's work, no worrying about spelling, no stopping to check a reference. With even short blocks of time like this, the words start to mount up.*



## What is writing?

Hopefully you are now ready to get started with your writing – and if you still don't feel like it, remember it's only for 45 minutes! But it's here that people often tell us that they just don't get enough done in that time. Some people tell us that they only get a couple of sentences written in a morning of writing. If this is happening to you, it may be that you are using a different definition of writing than we do – and other researchers in the area of writing productivity. We define writing as new words on the page or substantial rewriting of old words. And that's why generally two hours of writing is enough.

## What isn't writing

It might be easier to clarify what we mean by writing by explaining what writing isn't. Writing isn't reading (read afterwards). Writing isn't editing (edit afterwards). If you stop to edit your work, your brain is focused on finding the perfect word instead of the argument you are trying to make. In a sense, you are working at the level of detail before you know what the big picture is. Writing isn't referencing (reference afterwards). Just make a note that you need a reference in this spot and keep going. If you stop to look for the reference it breaks your concentration and there is a fair chance you won't come back afterwards! Writing isn't formatting long documents, realigning your tables or polishing previous chapters (do these things later – can you see the pattern here?).

## A glamorous arm with no body

*At one of our workshops, when we discussed not editing while writing, a student suddenly realised how she had been slowing down the quantity (and quality) of her writing. Her way of describing what she was doing was that she had been spending all her time on the clothes, hair and make-up – all the accessories – before she had a body to put it on. Using this analogy, there isn't much point in having a beautifully adorned arm with lovely jewellery and great nails (ie beautifully written and edited and referenced) if you later find the arm is in the wrong spot or isn't needed and gets thrown away.*

## The showing part – get feedback

If you want high quality, high quantity, scholarly writing you need to show what you have written to another human being – the dog doesn't count! It is at this point that many people begin to cringe and worry and sometimes go to great lengths to not show their work. This is because many people fundamentally misunderstand the purpose of feedback. Most research students think that if they get feedback on their work it is because there is something wrong with it – they missed something or said it wrong or didn't explain it properly, etc. A better way of viewing feedback is that it is about making your work the best it can possibly be. By this rationale, you will want feedback on every draft you ever give your supervisor or colleagues – because it can always be better.

We work with professors who have to show their work to their colleagues because they are co-authors. And guess what – they get feedback too, lots of it (and like you, often don't enjoy the process). Thinking that you can write everything down, and that it will be the best work possible, and that someone else couldn't help you to make it even better is probably not very realistic. In fact, it is through these iterations of feedback that we learn to construct better arguments and write better (yes, even if you are a professor!).

## Thank you

*As an author of this book and a person who runs lots of workshops on writing, I regularly thank my supervisor for writing all over my drafts – yes, each and every one I ever showed her! I didn't thank her at the time, but I now realise that this was the time in my academic life where I actually learned to construct arguments and write as an academic. Without her generous feedback I would not have learned this. That doesn't mean there weren't times when I cringed or felt hard done by (eg I would have made that point later or I was getting to that or I told you it wasn't the finished product yet etc etc). But I look back now and thank her for being willing to help me make my work the best it could possibly be and teaching me in the process.*

## But it hurts

Just because feedback is good for you doesn't mean that it isn't painful sometimes (well, yes, lots of times). But remember, feedback isn't about you as a person, it's about the work.

And just because it's good for you, it doesn't mean that all supervisors give it constructively. Sometimes they might be very blunt and not worry about your feelings. Sometimes they might give you feedback about the wrong things. So here are some suggestions to make sure you get better feedback:

- Ask specific questions – don't just say "What do you think?". Ask them a real question, for example, whether the theory you have used on page 17 links properly with the research question
- If feedback is particularly painful, put it away for a couple of days before you look at it in detail
- Don't misinterpret your supervisor's comments or blow them out of proportion. If they say one paragraph is unclear, that's probably what they mean – not that the whole thing is unclear!

## Rate yourself on writing and showing as you go

How do you think you're going with writing and showing? Do you write regularly? Are you a binger or a snack writer? Do you show your work?

**Put an X on the scale below.**



What action could you take that would improve the writing and showing of your work?  
Eg send your current draft to your supervisor.

.....

.....

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.....

## SECRET 3:

# BE REALISTIC

### It's not a Nobel Prize

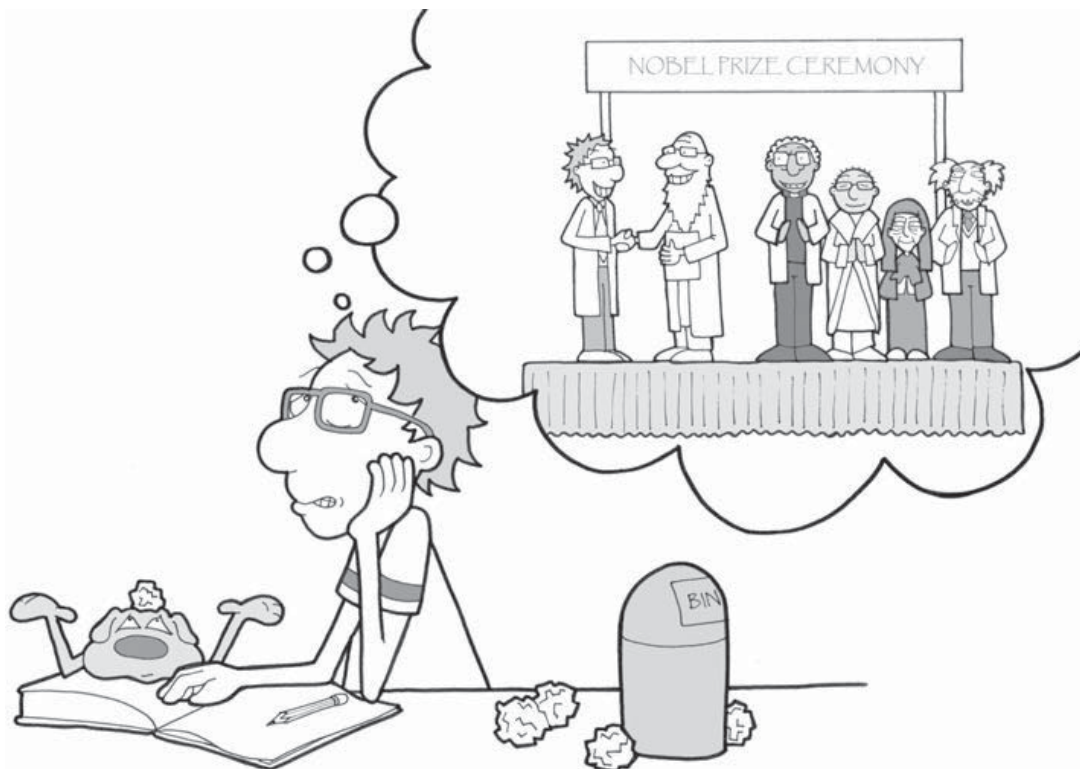
#### It's not good enough – yet!

Imagine you are sitting at your desk and, as it happens, you have just printed the latest draft of your thesis. Then along comes your supervisor and grabs the draft off your desk. As she is walking out the door clutching it, she says “You don’t mind, do you (not a question!). But we’re having a school meeting today to discuss writing standards among current PhD students and it would be good to have something written by a PhD student in front of me”.

#### *What’s your reaction?*

Do you want to rugby tackle her before she’s even got to the door and retrieve the draft that you never expected another human being to read until you had done a lot more work to it?

Or do you think “Oh well, it might not be that good, but at least I’ll get some feedback and find out if I’m on the right track”?



---

If you are more inclined to the rugby tackle, some of the things you might be thinking are:

- But I've missed a critical piece of information
- It's not very well written, it's naïve, it's too basic
- It doesn't say anything important. The supervisor is going to find out how bad I am
- Once they find this out they won't want to supervise me
- I'll have to quit my PhD. I'm a failure

If your reaction is "Oh well, at least that's one way of getting some feedback", you might be thinking:

- Better to find out now than once I've written a lot more
- I can always make it better if it isn't that good
- That's why I have a supervisor – to show me how to improve it
- The supervisor probably already knows how good (or bad!) my writing and thinking is
- If I really am that bad it's better to know now than in three years time!

## Imposter syndrome

Self-critical thoughts are very normal. We've worked with thousands of students (and academics!) who have these sorts of thoughts about their work. In fact, these thoughts are so common that they have a name – they're known as the imposter syndrome. The imposter syndrome is the fear that you are just one mistake or bad effort away from being revealed as an imposter. You feel like someone is going to tap you on the shoulder and say that they're sorry but you've been found out and it's time to pack your bags and go.

When we talk to people about the imposter syndrome we generally get nods of recognition. Then, when we dig a bit deeper, people tell us that they understand the imposter syndrome, however it's all the other people who have the syndrome part, they are the real imposter!

The way to combat the imposter syndrome is by engaging perspective and evidence. Rather than just trying to reassure yourself that all will be okay, take a look at the evidence and what is really required for getting a PhD. As part of the imposter syndrome many people magnify how big their contribution needs to be and minimise their own abilities and effort. Let's take a closer look at the facts.

---

## A significant and original contribution

The standard expected for a PhD is that it makes a significant and original contribution to the scientific literature. Students we work with often greatly overestimate how original or how significant their work needs to be. They think it needs to be the equivalent of a cure for cancer. The good news is that original work does not mean finding the cure for cancer. In reality, it means one small step, sometimes very small (this is the nature of nearly all research), in advancing existing knowledge.

Many of the research students we have worked with do much more work than is necessary – as a kind of insurance policy. We estimate that the average PhD student does enough work for two PhDs. But you still only get one doctorate at the end! So rather than asking “Is it finished?” (because it never will be – there is always more you can do), it might be better to ask “Is it enough?”. Many of the students we’ve worked with who suffer from “PhD insurance policy syndrome” put a sign next to their work area that says “Will I fail if I don’t include X?”. X is another experiment, set of analyses, data cohort, chapter, section, etc.

## You are learning how to do research

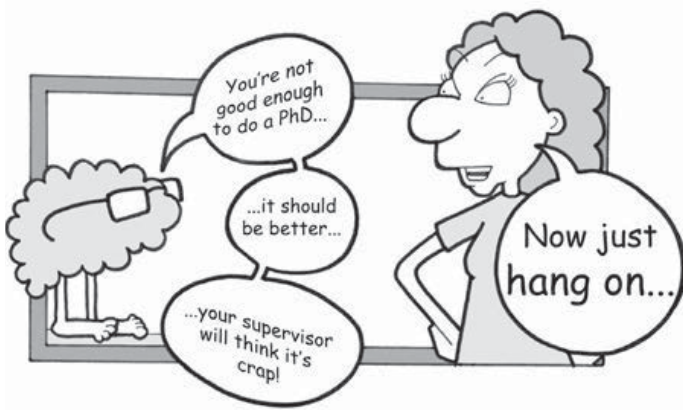
When you are doing a PhD you are learning how to do a PhD. A research degree is a training qualification. It means you are not expected to already know how to do it. If you already knew how to do a PhD you wouldn’t need to be enrolled in one.

Learning means not knowing things and making mistakes. So in order to be more realistic about your research, you need to expect to make mistakes. The PhD is supposed to be a demonstration that you know how to carry out original, scientific work. The fact is that not many people read PhD theses. This doesn’t mean it’s not worth doing. You may well publish your findings, go to conferences and so on. But a cruel truth – your thesis is unlikely to make it onto the best-seller list – so agonising over it may not be the best use of your time and energy.

## Perfectionism

Really, what we are talking about here is perfectionism. Striving for excellence is a good thing. But it is different to beating yourself up for never being good enough or for making a mistake. Being critical of yourself for getting things wrong slows down your progress and lowers the quality of your work. You become too scared to write and/or show your stuff to others (because you might get criticised).





## Get evidence

Which brings us back to the start of this section – if your supervisor were to come and take away your current draft to read, this would generally be a good thing. “Not if they find out how bad my stuff is”, we hear you say. And this is where we have to get tough with you. As an evidence-based researcher, we are going to suggest that you look at the evidence.

- Has your proposal been accepted?
- Have you gone through some confirmation process?
- Have you presented your ideas at seminars or conferences?
- What feedback have you had from your supervisors and others?

You also need to be realistic in interpreting your supervisor’s feedback. Some of them can be slow to give positive comment or feedback. But if they haven’t told you that you can’t finish, then it’s a reasonable assumption that they think you can. You could always ask directly!

Has your supervisor been okay with what you have written in the past? Most likely or you wouldn’t still be doing your research. This doesn’t mean she has sent it off to the Lancet for publication – it just means she has read it, given you feedback and told you to keep going. She hasn’t said “This is dreadful, we need to talk before you go on”. So either show your work to get some evidence that you are on the right track, or rely on the evidence you already have that your work is okay, and keep showing your work like we discussed in Secret 2.

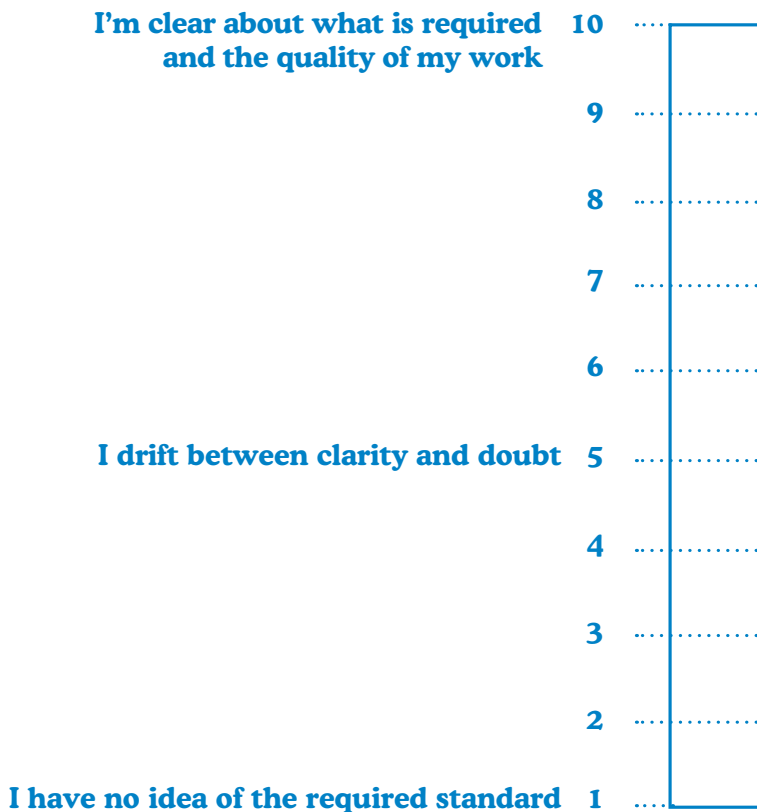
Finally, many students tell us they want their thesis to be the best it can be. There is an old saying – “The best is the enemy of the good”. Which in practice means that by striving for a perfect thesis you will find it very hard to finish any thesis. We say that the best thesis is a finished thesis.

**“The best thesis is a finished thesis”**

## Rate yourself on being realistic

How do you think you're going with being realistic? Are you trying to do two PhDs? Are you trying to answer every question in the world? Do you have a sense of what the standard is?

**Put an X on the scale below.**



What actions could you take that would help you to be more realistic about your work?  
Eg ask your supervisor if you are on the right track.

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## SECRET 4:

# SAY NO TO DISTRACTIONS

Even when you don't think they're a distraction

### Working on your thesis 24x7 – yeah sure!

Students used to tell us that they worked on their thesis 24 hours a day, seven days a week. But we were suspicious. So we did some covert research and now we can reveal the secret life of the research student.

You wake up early, well earlyish, and roll on in to your post-graduate office. Maybe just a quick look at the emails to see if your paper has been accepted, or if there's any feedback from your supervisor on that draft you handed in two months ago. No. But there are other emails. And after a good 45 minutes clearing your emails, your office mate arrives and wants to talk about her weekend and how awful her supervisor is. Then one of your lab mates drops by and asks if anyone wants to go for coffee. There's a special morning tea for Jeremy. He's handed in his thesis after seven years.

So you go for morning tea and by the time you get back there's not long left till lunchtime so you decide to chase down some references you heard about at a seminar. An hour later and with a bagful of interesting and slightly relevant references you head for lunch.



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While there, you counsel another PhD student who's just received some fairly brutal feedback, get talking to another academic in the department who is doing fascinating research which could be important to your study, drop off some letters at the post office and pick up your copy of the Higher Education Supplement. By the time you get back it's time for the department seminar which drags on till 5pm. Never mind, you can bring your data home and work on it this evening.

But when you get home one of your kids has homework that needs your input, there's that program on TV that sounded quite good, and of course you have to prepare for the lecture you're giving tomorrow.

And that's how you can spend 24 hours a day, seven days a week thinking about your thesis but not actually doing much about it.

The list of possible distractions is endless – here are some we've come across:

- Formatting
- Editing
- Looking for references
- Attending courses
- The latest news
- The stock market
- Supporting other struggling students
- Family
- Surfing
- Walking the dog
- Facebook
- And, of course, emails.

How many can you tick? Do you have new ones to add to the list?

## Why is housework so much fun?

How is it that when you're supposed to be sitting there writing a chapter or analysing some data that washing the dishes, putting on a wash or vacuuming seems so much fun? We seem to be overcome by this irresistible urge to live in a clean house, yet when there's no thesis to write we can happily watch TV while the dishes wait patiently.

In psychology, these distractions are known as displacement activities. What this means is that they are displacing the guilt you feel for not doing something else. You get home at the end of the day and you had planned to do an hour on the lit review but it seems so hard. Now if you just sat down and watched TV or had a little sleep, that would obviously be procrastination or avoidance and you'd feel guilty. So you have to come up with a plausible reason to get out of it. Enter your creative brain! Well, the dishes do need to be done so I'm not procrastinating, I'm helping out at home. The dog does need to be walked. My kids do need help with their papier mache fortress.

Classic displacement activities include:

- Teaching and tutoring
- Marking
- Helping out on other grants/projects
- Helping other students
- Editing and formatting
- Filing and organising
- Committees
- Housework
- Others?

It's important to note that there is nothing wrong with any of these activities in themselves. The problem is when they stop/distract you from what you really should be doing.



## Training parrots

*One student we worked with was unable to make progress on her thesis because every time she sat down to work, her parrots would start calling for attention. And she would give it to them. She had made little progress over the previous six months. We gave her some advice on how to modify the birds' (and her own) behaviour. This worked and she got the thesis finished quickly. In her acknowledgements, she thanked us for teaching her how to train her birds!*

## Email

When it comes to distraction, email is in a class of its own. So we need to have a frank and open discussion of this topic.

Here's a tip that will improve your productivity by 10% immediately if you put it into practice. Don't check your emails first thing in the morning. Easier said than done. For most people this is harder than giving up addictive drugs. We are addicted to email.

The good news is that most of us are not that important. If we don't check our emails until 10am, or even 11am, nothing bad is likely to happen. In fact, something good will happen. You will be able to use your morning brain for some constructive writing or analysis.

## Some strategies to avoid distractions

Work where there are less distractions. For some this is in the uni, for others it's at home. It could be in your office, the library, a coffee shop without wireless access. Wherever there are less distractions.

If you have a door, close it. Get a Do not Disturb sign. We've created the one shown here.

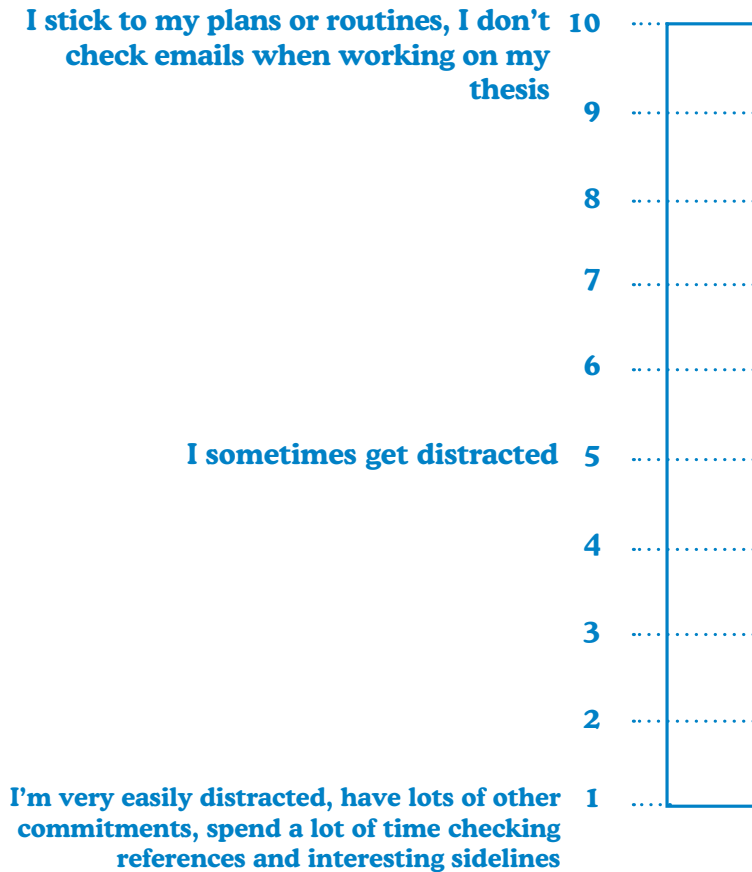
If you work in an open plan area think about using headphones. You don't have to buy an MP3 player. Just the earphones are enough! And if the little white ones don't work, then get industrial sized ones!



## Rate yourself on saying no to distractions

How do you think you're going on saying no to distractions? Do you grab every new opportunity that comes along, despite already being very busy? Do you work on anything but your PhD first thing every day?

**Put an X on the scale below.**



What action could you take that would help you say no to distractions? Eg get rid of one extra (non-PhD related) activity that you are currently engaged in.

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## SECRET 5:

# IT'S A JOB

**That means working set hours,  
but you get holidays**

Once you've been working with research students for a while, you can spot them a hundred metres away. This is because of the big black cloud of guilt that follows them around whenever and wherever they are. It's there 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Research students are always guilty. When they're working on their research, they think they're not working hard enough, not getting good enough results, or that they should be spending more time with family and friends. And when they're with family and friends, they think they should be working on their research!



What's this about? It's a bit about the nature of a PhD or research in general. The great thing about research is the flexibility. If you need to spend some time with a sick friend or child, no problem. Generally, there's no boss watching.

The terrible thing about research is the flexibility. You can be doing research at any time of the day or night, at the university or at home. Which means you are theoretically always on the job.

And if you didn't get much done today then you can tell yourself that you'll work on it this evening and if that doesn't happen then you can do it on the weekend. And so it goes.

So what's the answer to this constant guilt?



## Fantasy hours

Well, in order to deal with this guilt we need to introduce you to the concept of fantasy hours and real hours, or as we call them, golden hours. Fantasy hours are when you tell yourself (and others) that you are working on your research when in fact you are thinking about it but doing something else eg surfing the net, photocopying articles, renaming your folders.

Real hours or golden hours are quite different. These are when you are engaging with the real part of the research. It could be writing. It could be analysing results. It could be trying to grapple with a really difficult concept.

The good news is that two golden hours equals about ten fantasy hours. And even better, when people leave our workshops and do the two golden hours regularly, they report that their productivity usually doubles.

So to get rid of the guilt, you need to know when you are supposed to work. Then you know when you can have time off. If you set yourself regular hours and stick to them, you can have the rest of the time off without guilt.

## Golden hours

But they must be golden hours. What this means is:

- No email
- No Facebook
- No surfing the net
- No checking references
- No quick break to put on a wash

What it means is sitting at the desk with your feet nailed to the floor. The nails are necessary to stop your body from levitating out of the chair and putting on an experiment or cleaning the pantry or the gutters.

When people try this out they report two things. Firstly, their productivity increases and secondly, their guilt disappears.

## Two golden hours

*One student we worked with had a full time job and lots of family responsibilities and still wanted to do a PhD. When we met her she had been enrolled for a year and hadn't achieved much. After attending one of our workshops, she decided to institute the two golden hours rule and write for two hours – from 6am to 8am every morning. We kept track of her for a few months and she was doing well. That was about six years ago. Recently, we met her again, and she told us how she had kept to that schedule for six years and, lo and behold, finished on time, with a good quality thesis, and not too much stress. She is now an academic at an Australian university.*

## Other ways to treat it like a job

### **A place to work**

You need a dedicated place to work. It is very hard to build up momentum if you have to keep packing and unpacking your things every time you want to work or if you have to share the computer with teenagers who want to play Minecraft. So, set up a stable place to work, put up your Do not Disturb sign, and tell everyone about your regular working hours.

### **A plan**

You need to write down a plan that outlines what you want to have achieved each year, milestones along the way and some detail about the next few months. If you're brave you'll show this to your supervisor and see if it's realistic. This will be a useful tool to tell you whether you are on track or falling behind.

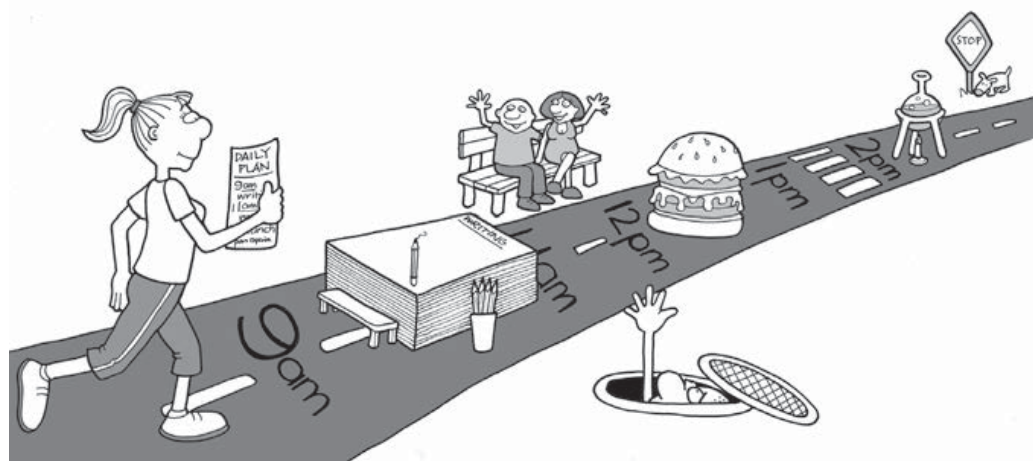
### **Equipment**

What equipment do you need? A good computer. Up-to date software. Since this is your job you need good quality equipment to enable you to do it.

## You'll get more done

A scientist came to one of our workshops and said "I'm so frustrated. I'm working really hard but I'm struggling with writing. I get into the lab at 8am every morning and I'm there doing experiments till 7pm every evening. Then on Saturdays I'm trying to write up my chapters, but I'm finding it so hard and tiring. Do I need to work on Sundays too?"

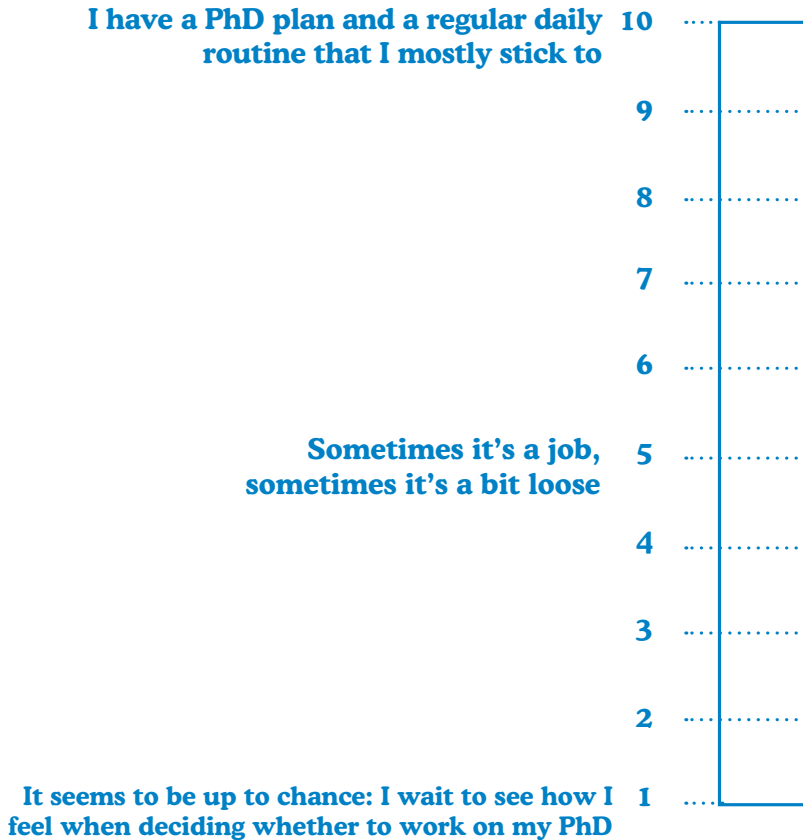
Although she couldn't see it, this woman was exhausted. She didn't need to work more. She needed to work less. Because she was so tired, she wasn't being very productive. We suggested that she write from 8am to 10am every day, experiment till 6pm and then go home. And take Saturdays off. She said "I can't do that, I'll fall even further behind". We asked her to give it a go for a week and see what happened. She tried it and a week later reported that she had got the same amount done as normal and was feeling a lot better too. Just putting in the hours isn't enough. You need to be awake and functioning too.



## Rate yourself on treating your PhD like a job

How do you think you're going with treating your PhD like a job? Do you set regular hours and stick to them? Do you have a proper workplace? Are you honest with yourself about how much work you are really doing?

**Put an X on the scale below.**



What action could you take that would make it more like a job? Eg set aside specific hours or days for research.

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# SECRET 6:

## GET HELP

### You're not an owner-operator, single-person business

In our experience, many research students feel that doing a research degree is a test of their ability to single handedly circumnavigate the globe. To ask for, or to accept, help seems like admitting failure. A PhD takes a long time, but if you also think you have to do everything yourself, it's going to feel twice as long. And maybe take twice as long too. One student told us that her supervisor offered to pay the lab's research assistant to clean the glassware from her experiments at the end of each day. She said no, because it felt like getting that kind of help was cheating.

So what kind of help is reasonable? We work across many universities and there is a huge variance in what is available and what supervisors allow or encourage.

Below is some of the help that might be available.



### Editing

This can be hard because editing covers such a wide range of activities. At its simplest, it might mean getting your partner or a colleague to read through your work looking for spelling mistakes and typos.

The next step is paying a professional editor to proofread your work. Many universities now expect that this is noted in the acknowledgements part of your thesis.

Most editors can do more than proofreading and this is where things get tricky. If you are thinking of using an editor in this way, then you need to talk to your supervisor about what is acceptable in your department.

An editor can be a great help at the end of your thesis. At that stage you will be sick to death of reading your own words and, worse, you will be almost blind to your own mistakes. A fresh pair of eyes will pick up things you could easily overlook.

Perhaps it's worth doing a deal with one of your colleagues to read each other's work.

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## Statistics

Many students find the statistical part of their thesis daunting. So it's worth finding out what help is available. Many universities have a statistician on staff whose job is to help staff and students with statistical enquiries. They won't do it for you but will point you in the right direction. And it's a good idea to go to the statistician early, even before you've collected your data or designed your study. At this early stage they can give advice about the type of data you need to gather to answer specific types of questions and also about the sample sizes you might need.

If your university doesn't have a dedicated statistician then you need to look further. There may be someone in your department who is good at stats, a post-doc perhaps. Also, most universities run courses on using various statistical packages, which can be very useful.

## Collecting data

Collecting data, while it is often the fun part of research, can be very time consuming. Are there other ways to collect your data? Do you have to personally gather it all yourself or could you train someone else to help you?

## Transcribing

Transcribing interview tapes can be one of the most soul-destroying tasks a research student performs – especially if you've done a lot of interviews. It can often take a day to transcribe one interview. And if you've got 50 to 60 interviews, that's a lot of days.

Once again we've found different practices in different universities and even within departments. Some academics insist that you need to personally transcribe every interview because in the listening/writing process you will pick up themes, specific issues and meanings. Others are happy that you transcribe some and then listen to the others with someone else doing the transcribing. The other extreme is where you outsource the whole job to a professional transcribing service.

The advantages of professional transcribing are obvious. You don't have to do it and they will generally be much quicker than you. The problem, of course, is that you will have to pay for the service.

So our advice is to go and talk to your supervisor about what is acceptable. Many students still insist that they are the best person to do the transcribing, even if their supervisor is happy to outsource it. Generally, in our experience, once you have listened to a sample of the tapes, it is just pure time consuming hard work that a trained transcriber could do better. If you are still insisting on doing your own transcribing, read our section in Secret 4 about displacement activities!

## Formatting

Many students tell us that they've been writing or working on their thesis when what they really mean is that they have been formatting their thesis. They have been making sure all the headings are the right style, that the labels under all the tables are the right size and font, that the page numbers work across long documents. While this is important, you do not get a research degree because you are good at formatting. And if you are spending your valuable thinking/writing time on formatting, perhaps it's time to get some help with it.

### Do a deal

*One person we worked with found the formatting almost the hardest part of her thesis. Following our course (and after hearing Secret 6!), she did a deal with one of her teenage children who was a computer whizz. She would type it all into Word and he would format it into a thesis.*



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## Technical help

If you use complicated pieces of equipment (and maybe even less complicated things like computers) then find out what help is available. If you're stuck, or your equipment doesn't work who can you turn to for advice? Who are the experts in your department? We regularly find students who have done no work on their PhD for six months because a piece of machinery is broken, missing or not working properly.

## Advice from other researchers

Sometimes people don't want to ask other researchers about questions related to their study in case it dilutes their ownership of the thesis. But the fact is that research moves forward by showing your work, getting feedback and revising your ideas. So if you are stuck on a particular idea or issue is there someone who could help? Someone in your department? Someone in your university? In fact, someone anywhere in the world? The beauty of the internet and email is that you can contact experts in your field anywhere.

The only caution here is to be wary of using up all potential examiners. And for those of you shy about asking – what is the worst that can happen? They could say no or just not answer your email. However, after talking to hundreds of students about this, we've found that most people do offer some help.

## Other help

### *Your supervisor*

Sometimes students are reluctant to impose on their supervisor for help. But one of the reasons you have a supervisor is to get help. Sometimes, they don't even have to give the help themselves. They might just need to point you in the right direction.

### *Your liaison librarian*

Liaison librarians are wonderful people and you should get to know yours. Try to build a relationship with them so that they know what you are working on and what you are looking for.

### *Your graduate centre*

Most universities have a department or section with responsibility for graduate education and development. Some offer workshops and are good sources of information about the post-graduate experience.

### *Your post-graduate association*

Your university probably has an organisation that represents the interests of post-graduate students. These can be a good source of advice that is independent of your supervisor or the university.

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## Help with housework, cleaning, gardening

Doing a research degree is a lot of work. It means that there will be less time for other things. It's a sure way to burn out if you expect that you will continue with your job, do a research degree, have a social/family life and keep the house and garden looking great. Something has to give. This might be the time to investigate a cleaner or other household help.

## But it costs money

The problem with many of the things we've listed here is that they may cost money. This is where you might speak to your supervisor and see if there are any funds that you might access? Or you might do a cost-benefit analysis to see if paying now and speeding things up is better than doing it all yourself but adding six months to your poverty.

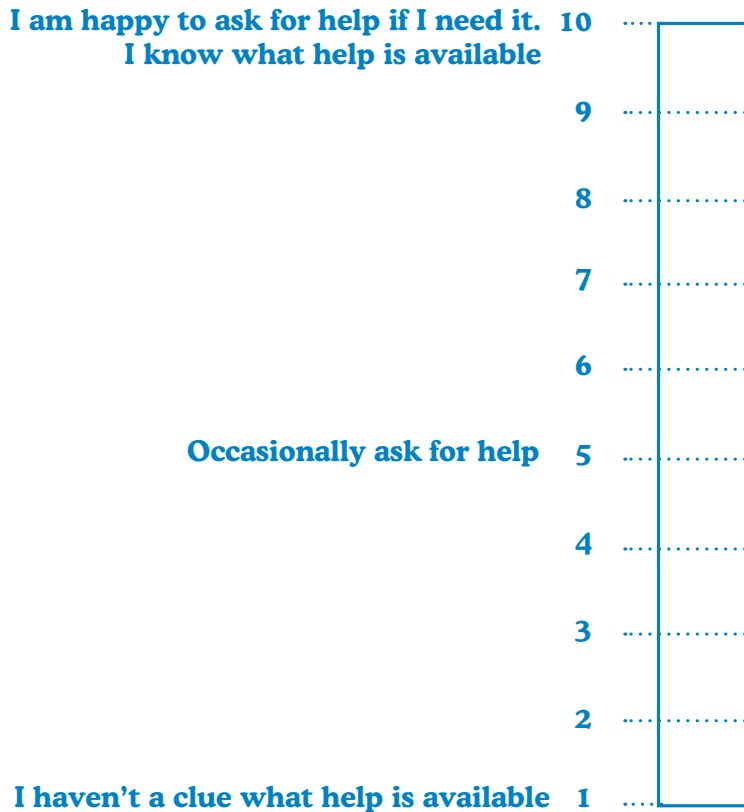
Our overall advice is to find out what help is available. Ask. Ask. Ask.



## Rate yourself on getting help

How do you think you're going with getting help? Do you get help when stuck? Have you asked around to find out where the kind of help is that you need?

**Put an X on the scale below.**



What action can you take that would make doing your thesis easier?  
Eg go to your graduate centre and see what they offer.

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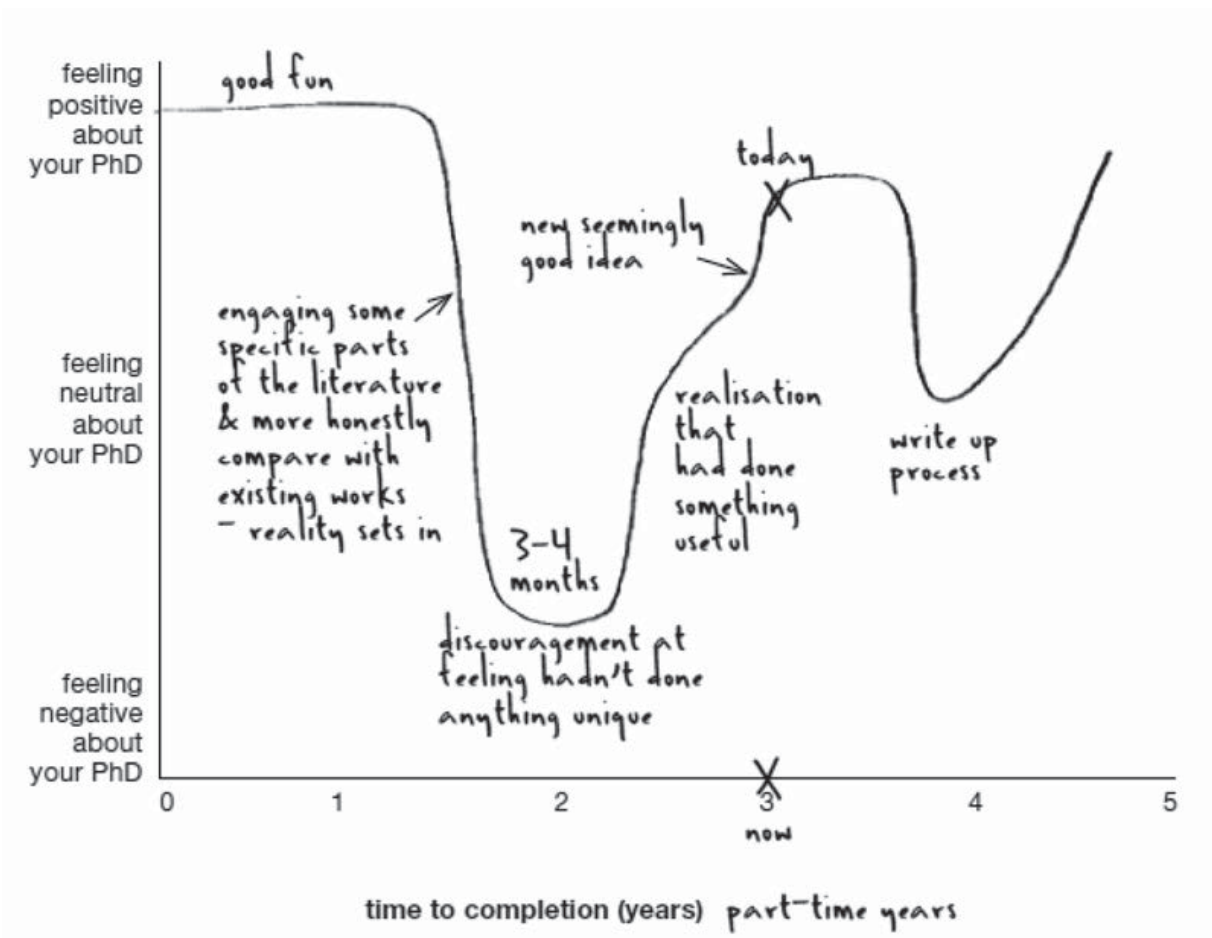
# SECRET 7:

## YOU CAN DO IT!

**A thesis is 10% intelligence and 90% persistence**

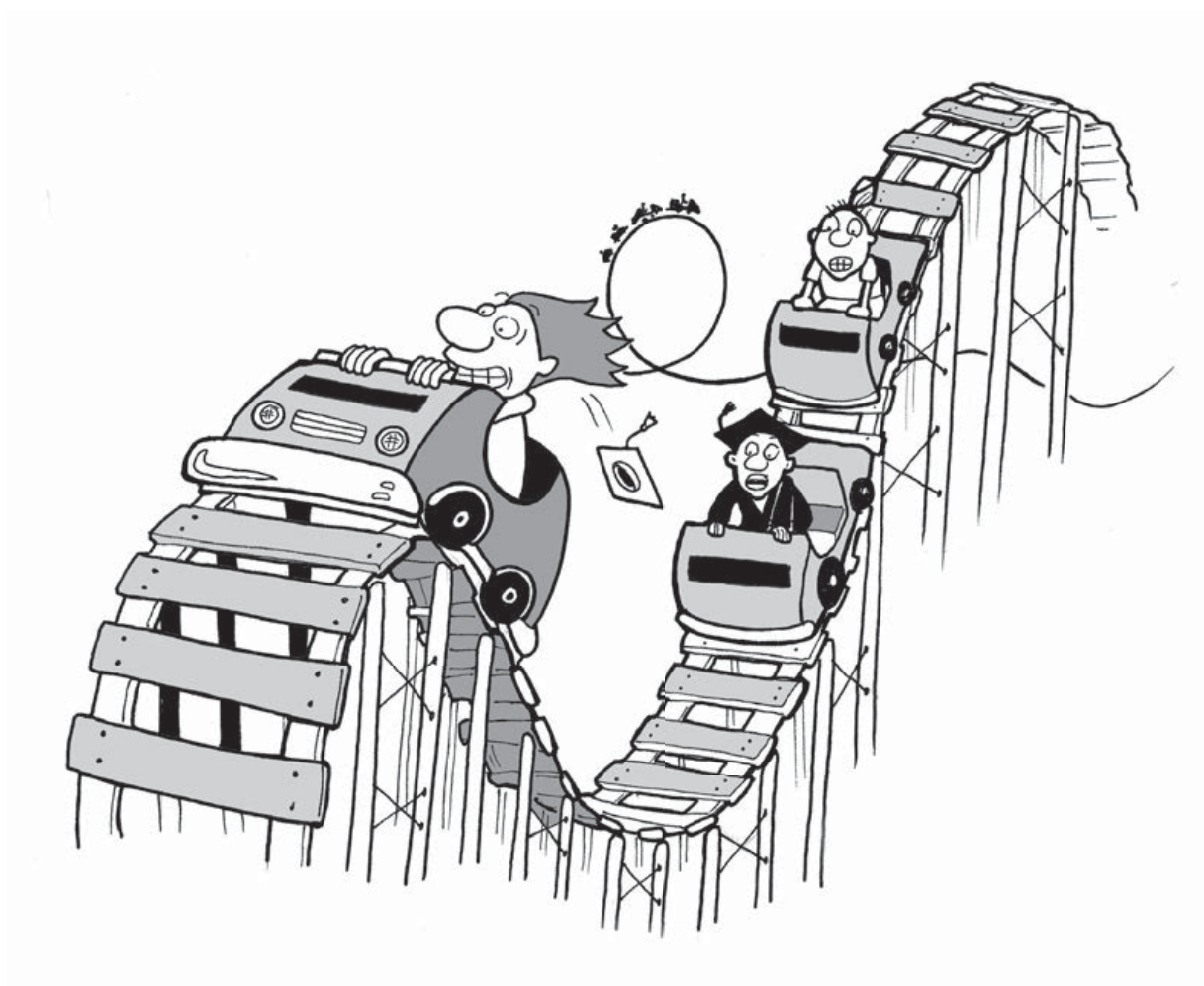
### Persistence

When we started working in this area many years ago, one of the first pieces of research we conducted was to interview a number of PhD students and ask them about their personal experiences of their PhD. (See *The PhD Experience: What They Didn't Tell You at Induction*). As part of these interviews we got them to draw the life cycles of their PhDs. The example below shows the highs and lows of one student's experience.



When we started our research, we expected to find a consistent pattern. In fact, what we found was that all the life cycles were different. But a common theme was that just about everyone had some down periods. They came at different times but the majority of students had a time or times when things weren't going too well.

And this is important to know. Because when people do have their down period(s) they tend to think that they are the only PhD student who has ever had difficulties. They begin to wonder if they are clever enough to do a PhD and if they will ever get to the end. And it is during these down periods that some PhD students are either tempted to, or do, withdraw. This led us to coin the term 'the emotional rollercoaster.'



## Intelligence

And here's the good news. You can do it. The failure rates for submitted PhD theses are tiny. Less than 0.1% in Australia. When you think about this more closely, it makes sense. You've been working on it for three to four years. Your supervisor has seen it (often many times). Others may have seen parts of it. This is why, when you hand it in, it is highly likely to pass.

In fact, the most likely outcome is that it will only need minor changes. Research done by the University of Newcastle in Australia shows that about 60% of PhD theses pass with either no changes or only minor changes. About one-third of theses require more major corrections but do not require re-examination. The remainder (about 4%) need more substantial changes and re-examination but still pass. As we said above (and it's worth repeating), less than 0.1% fail!

So the real test is whether you can get to the end and hand it in! Unfortunately, not everyone does. In Australia the completion rates are about 65% which means that 35% don't complete. Why? In most cases, it's not because they are not clever enough! It may be that people get a job, lose motivation for their topic, fall out with their supervisor, get sick, etc. Effectively, what we are saying is that if you can stick it out and hang in there until the end, you are more or less guaranteed to pass.



## So how do you persist?

So how do you do that? Well that is what the first six secrets were all about. If you take control of your working relationship with your supervisor, write early and often, don't be too perfectionistic, treat it like a job, don't get distracted and get whatever help you can, not only will you get to the end, there is a much greater chance that you will enjoy the journey. By applying the secrets in this book, instead of it being a long ordeal, it could be the unique learning experience it is actually intended to be.

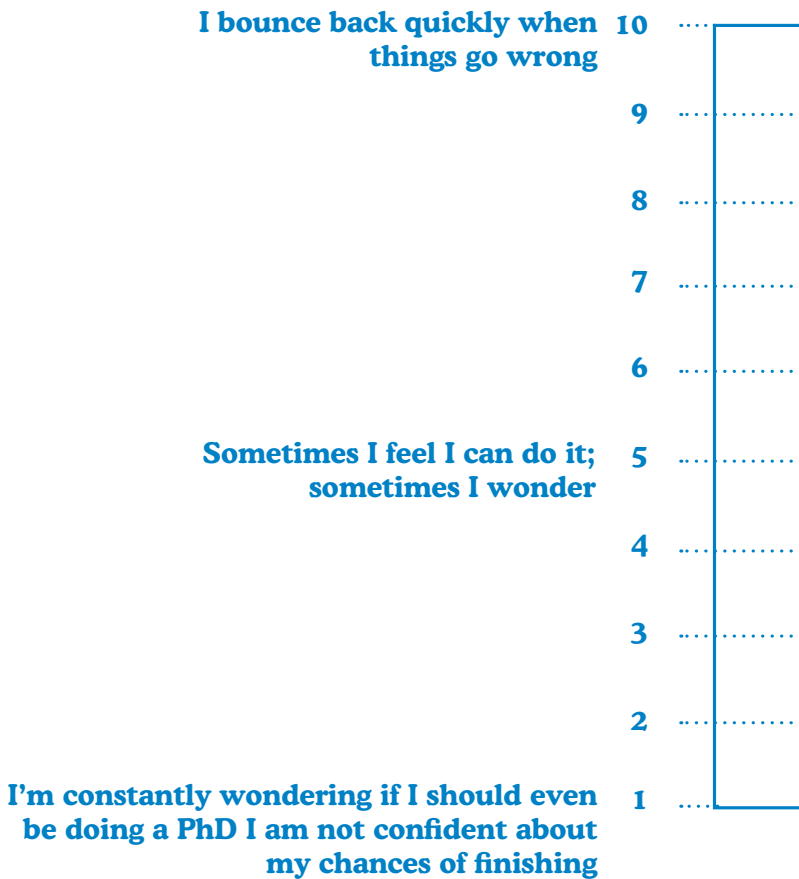
So instead of wondering if you are clever enough to do a PhD, you should probably be asking if you are persistent enough to do a PhD. Because our many years of experience with PhD students shows that a PhD is 10% intelligence and 90% persistence!



## Rate yourself on persistence

How do you think you're going with persistence? Do you check out your worries when feeling demotivated? Do you have a plan that you check and revise (at least occasionally)?

**Put an X on the scale below.**



What action could you take that would help you get to the end?  
Eg make a plan on any of the other six things we just discussed!

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# NOW DO SOMETHING

Now you know what the seven secrets are. You may have rated yourself against each one. This is a good start but there is one more important step. You have to do something! You need to take some actions that put some of the secrets into practice.

## Small actions

It's tempting to want to make great big changes – to reorganise your whole schedule and life; to commit to write for eight hours every day; to become the model research student. In our experience these types of changes don't last very long. It's far more effective to pick one or two small changes that you can put in place straight away, for example, write for two hours on Tuesday and Thursday mornings.

## Example actions

Here are some examples of actions that students have taken after attending our workshops or reading this book:

- Send my draft chapter to my supervisor by 5pm on Friday
- Send an email to my supervisor to arrange regular meetings
- Make a start on that analysis that I've been avoiding for months
- Reduce the scope of my question
- Make the changes to that chapter I got feedback on
- Find a cleaner for my house
- Hang a Do Not Disturb sign on my office door
- Stop checking emails during my two golden hours
- Go and see the university statistician

## Your action

So what is your action and when can you start it?

I will .....

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## ALSO BY THINKWELL

### **Turbocharge Your Writing**

*How to become a prolific academic writer*

If you want to be an academic or researcher you have to write. And if you want to be a successful academic or researcher you have to write a lot. Yet many academics and researchers never learn the techniques and strategies that can significantly increase their writing productivity.

### **Time for Research**

*Time management for PhD students*

'I love deadlines: I love the whooshing noise they make as they fly by.' Three years seems like a long time but without some strategies for making the most of your time, it will fly by. Find out about rolling plans, dealing with distractions and interruptions, making plans, working smarter and staying motivated.

### **Defeating Self-Sabotage**

*Getting your PhD finished*

Procrastination, perfectionism, over-committing. These are all common experiences for PhD students. Learn how to identify your own patterns, why you might do them and what you can do to tackle them and get your thesis finished. Topics covered in this book include: What is self sabotage? Over committing, Procrastination, Perfectionism and 20 excellent excuses for not starting work on your PhD.

### **The PhD Experience**

*What they didn't tell you at induction*

At PhD induction they tell you where the library is, what paperwork to complete, and if you're lucky, where the toilets are. But they don't tell you about the emotional side of doing a PhD. This book features ten PhD students telling their stories and sharing their own personal rollercoaster rides, as we attempt to explain the normal emotions students feel when completing their PhDs.

### **Presenting Your Research with Confidence (ebook)**

*The step-by-step guide to powerful presentations*

This book takes you step by step through the process of getting ready for and giving a presentation about your research. It follows a timeline that starts with thinking about your audience, then preparing your content and materials, next moving on to practising and finally the delivery.

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# THE SEVEN SECRETS

## of highly successful research students

1. Care and maintenance of your supervisor
2. Write and show as you go
3. Be realistic
4. Say no to distractions
5. It's a job
6. Get help
7. You can do it!

### About the authors

Maria Gardiner is a leader in the field of cognitive behavioural coaching, a qualified clinical psychologist and research associate in psychology at Flinders University.

Hugh Kearns is an internationally recognised expert on the topics of procrastination, over-commitment, distraction and perfectionism. He lectures and researches on these topics at Flinders University and is in high demand as a speaker at universities across the world.

Together, Maria and Hugh have developed award winning programs for academics and research students across Australia, New Zealand, the United States and Canada, Ireland and the United Kingdom. Over the past fifteen years, they have helped thousands of research students to complete their theses faster and with less stress, and shown large numbers of academics how to increase their rate of publication. They are the authors of six books that have sold in large numbers, as well as peer-reviewed articles and commentaries in the journals Nature and Science. They specialise in taking the very best research in psychology and education and applying it in an engaging way to help high performing people achieve their goals.

