

THE
PROCRASTINATOR'S GUIDE

TO A

PhD

HOW TO OVERCOME PROCRASTINATION
AND COMPLETE YOUR DISSERTATION

EDWINA MURPHY

The Procrastinator's Guide to a PhD

How to overcome procrastination and complete your dissertation

Edwina Murphy

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For Peter,

who has patiently supported me during my recovery from (and occasional relapse into)
procrastination.

Preface

Procrastinating is an occupational hazard of doing a PhD. But what if you already have procrastination issues? It's one thing to start as a well-organised, diligent student and then lapse when faced with the lack of deadlines and accountability. It's another to have been flying by the seat of your pants for the last several years, pulling all-nighters to finish assignments and cramming for exams. What to do? As a recovering procrastinator myself, with several decades of bad habits to overcome, I want to reassure you that change is possible! You can use your well-honed skill in mind games for good instead of evil.

The happy news is that if you've made it this far, you've got all the brains you need to succeed—you just have to know what to do with them. At the end of the day, it's perseverance, not brilliance, that will get you to your goal.

Whether you have long dabbled in the dark art of procrastination or you're a relative newcomer, you'll find something here to help you achieve your PhD.

Note: The focus of this book is on the thesis or dissertation, not on the coursework and qualifying exams which are part of doctoral studies in the USA.

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Structure

1. Have a good idea of your topic before you start.

If you've already started, work it out as soon as possible. This doesn't mean you need to know the answer, just the question. Too many people (and not just procrastinators) spend their first year of candidature wandering around, reading lots of stuff with no idea of what, specifically, they're looking for. By the time things are starting to come together, a year's gone by. It's always better to start with a clear focus—it makes it easier to know what's essential, what's non-essential, and what must be avoided at all costs. See *Destination Dissertation* for how to come up with a preproposal (itinerary). I'm not sure that the suggested timetable will work for all disciplines, but their recommendations will certainly set you on the right track.

2. Decide how you're going to structure your work early on.

In *Authoring a PhD*, Patrick Dunleavy suggests aiming for 8 chapters of 10 000 words each. (Obviously, this is for a "big book" thesis. If you're in an IMRAD field, you're already set.) Now your particular project may need a few more chapters or a few less. But if you start thinking about your thesis in this way, you can then break down each chapter into its constituent parts and, depending on their relative importance, allocate a certain number of words to each section. This will save you from writing 3000 words on a given topic, when clearly 1000 will suffice. And that will save you from being 2 years past your submission date because you wrote 150 000 words and now need to cut out a third of the text.

3. Make sure the conclusion fulfils the promises you made in the introduction.

I was going to say, "cashes the cheques you wrote in the introduction," but I wasn't sure if anyone was still familiar with cheques. Anyway, it usually takes at least 3 or 4 years to complete a doctorate (in the good old days, before the government started putting pressure on completions, people even took 10 years or more). Often, candidates are required to write some kind of literature review at the beginning. If you are one of those people, do not simply add the chapters as your supervisor approves them one by one, rush off a conclusion (since you're pushing up against your submission date), and send it off. Your research may have taken a different course, new work relevant to your project may have been published, you may even have learnt something over the past few years! So revise to make sure that your overall thesis is clear throughout the work and be certain that your conclusion answers the question that your introduction is asking. And speaking of literature reviews...

4. Be over the literature, not under it.

It's easy to get swamped by everything that has been written before on a topic. You know you're under the literature when you produce a lengthy running commentary (probably in chronological order): X said this... Y said that... then Z said.... Being above the literature means controlling it rather than it controlling you. It means displaying the scholarly competence and confidence to select the key contributions that will provide the framework for your research. In the humanities, this can often

only be done after you've written the rest of your thesis. So do the groundwork early on, but finish your literature review when you have the expertise to handle it maturely. An added benefit is that it will be much easier to convert your thesis into a book—a bloated literature review is usually the first thing to go!

Planning (and Doing)

5. Plan your work.

I love making plans. I feel the joy of productivity simply setting out what I will do. And planning is certainly important, because, as the saying goes, if you fail to plan, you're planning to fail. Sadly, just planning is not enough, you have to...

6. Actually do some work.

Paul Silvia is my favourite on this point. His book *How to Write a Lot* is a joy to read and reread—which I like to do now and then for inspiration. He may say that writing is difficult and painful, but I don't think that someone with that much humour actually feels that way (at least, not all the time). The (not-so-secret) secret is making a schedule and sticking to it.

7. Think ahead.

While Silvia's own plan of writing for two hours each weekday morning is simple and elegant, Zerubavel, while also using the week as the basis of a schedule, takes into account that sometimes you will be at a conference, the in-laws will come for a visit, or the kids will have a snow day (not so much in Australia). His book, *The Clockwork Muse*, shows you how to plan ahead by first removing all the days on which you won't be able to write. He also helpfully differentiates between gross time and net time. That is, 14 days (or sessions) will certainly take two weeks if you write every day for a fortnight, but will take 3 months if you only write once a week.

8. Plan what you will do the next day.

This avoids the problem of sitting down and wondering what you're going to do. In *Organize Tomorrow Today*, Jason Selk and Tom Bartow suggest writing down your "3 Most Important/1 Must" tasks. This should be good for procrastinators as it is about tomorrow. Of course, when tomorrow comes, you have to do them – preferably as early as possible. That way, you're less likely to become waylaid by the inevitable emergencies that arise each day. If everything goes haywire, you've already had a successful day. And if things get crazy too early in the morning...

9. At least do a little bit, even if you really can't finish what you'd planned to do.

Even spending a couple of minutes on your priorities sends a positive message of commitment and lets your mind know that you're serious about following through. This is important because, as Timothy Pychyl says...

10. It won't get done unless you do it.

Perhaps your mum used to get so tired of asking you to clean your room that eventually she gave up and did it herself. Perhaps your colleagues at the office despair of ever getting the information they need from you so they work things out for themselves. Perhaps, then, you have a vague, unarticulated hope that someone, somewhere, will come and rescue you from your thesis. I'm sorry to be the one to

break it to you, but no mums, co-workers or fairy godmothers are going to do your PhD for you—it's really up to you!

11. You don't have to feel like doing it.

There are many things in life that you just have to do, whether you like it or not, to achieve your goals. Strangely, procrastinators often find that once they've started on the dreaded task, it wasn't as bad as they'd thought. Frequently, they actually enjoy it and wish they'd started sooner. On the strange logic of procrastination (and how to overcome it), see Timothy Pynchyl, *Solving the Procrastination Puzzle*.

12. Doing gives you energy and momentum.

Not doing wears you out. As Henry James famously said, "Nothing is so fatiguing as the eternal hanging on of an uncompleted task." That is why Joan Bolker's *Writing your Dissertation in 15 Minutes a Day* works. Not that you can write it in only 15 minutes a day, but if you commit to 15 minutes a day, you'll often find that you write a lot more. Getting started is half the battle.

13. Always have one or two (or three) high priority tasks to work on.

It's sensible to work methodically on one task and then, when it's complete, move on to the next one. If you like doing things that way, and you've been successful, go for it! But if you're a recovering procrastinator, then the habit of putting things off is probably strong with you. Why not use that to your advantage? When you don't feel like doing something you "should" be doing, take the opportunity to work on another high priority task—you're still making progress. The key, as John Perry, author of *The Art of Procrastination: A Guide to Effective Dawdling, Lollygagging and Postponing* says, is never to procrastinate simply by sharpening pencils, but to instead use "structured procrastination" to get things done. Perry doesn't mind missing the deadline on his top I-don't-want-to-do-it task whilst achieving other things. But I change my feelings about what I don't want to do, so if I start early enough, I can still get everything done in time, just maybe not in order of its supposed priority. (I don't always succeed, but mostly I do.) So work on another chapter, a related journal article. This will help you to...

14. Create a production line.

Once you've finished a chapter and sent it to your supervisor, you have to wait for feedback. Similarly, between writing an article, having it reviewed, and it actually being published, there's a lot of waiting. Don't just sit around until someone gets back to you. Sure, you may not be able to work on that particular piece, but you can make progress on something else. That's why most scholars like to have a few things in development. One article that you've roughed out a few ideas for, one you're actively working on, one under review, one accepted waiting for publication. There will be a few iterations as you'll need to revise the one under review, whether it's accepted or not, and you'll need to check the proofs for articles that have been accepted. Having one or two works-in-progress on the backburner means that you never have to start

from complete scratch. This in turn lowers the barrier to getting started, since you've already got a few ideas jotted down. Another way to use this principle is to...

Conferences and Papers

15. Present at a conference as early as possible during your candidature.

Deadlines are few and far between in a PhD, and if you've gotten through your coursework on that basis, then you're going to need help! Conferences give you a smaller project with a definite date to work towards. Choose a topic for the paper that is closely related to your PhD—if you can use it as a pilot project to test an aspect of your work, so much the better. And don't be scared—if my 12-year-old daughter and 14-year-old niece can enjoy academic conferences and engage in intelligent conversation, so can you! But it's no fun to be stuck in your room at the conference, trying to finish off your paper, when you should be out making connections with other scholars in your field, so...

16. Give an in-house presentation first.

Use a departmental seminar to give your paper a trial run. Not only does this give you an earlier deadline, it also gives you some experience in presenting, some valuable feedback, and time to tidy up your footnotes so that the conference version is close to your final paper. Then once you've added any conference feedback you've found helpful, you can...

17. Publish peer-reviewed articles.

This will give you confidence that your research is at the right level (and ultimately give the examiners confidence, too). And don't worry if your article gets rejected once or twice (or thrice)...

18. It's not you, it's them...

Being an academic is like being a model or an actor. You have to keep putting yourself out there, only to be told you're not quite what they're looking for. Or to use a different metaphor, as Paul Silvia says, rejections are like a sales tax on publications. So recognise that, on average, you will be rejected, even if you're fortunate enough to have the most gracious and diligent reviewers. Sometimes you will be unlucky and the reviewers chosen are determined to misunderstand what you have to say, despise your methodology, and/or hate life itself. Don't let their bile put you off. The article you've slaved over may not be published (at least not by that journal), but it certainly won't be published if you don't send it in.

19. But sometimes it's you.

No matter how wonderful it is, your qualitative article will not get published in a journal that is only interested in quantitative studies. If your article only appeals to a specific subset of your field, it is unlikely to get published in a prestigious journal with a broad audience. Just as you're unlikely to get the leading role in a Hollywood blockbuster as your first acting job, your first attempt at writing an article probably won't be published in the top journal in the field. (You can still audition, especially if you've received encouragement about the piece, just realise that it's a longshot.) So think carefully about where to send your paper, and most importantly, adhere to all

the infuriating details in the style sheet. Yes, perhaps senior figures (maybe even your own supervisor), can get away with ignoring them and still get published. When you're recognised as *the* expert in your field, and journal editors are approaching you, feel free to disregard my advice. Until then, follow the instructions!

20. Save brilliant, but tangential, projects for after you've completed your PhD.

Write them down and put them in a folder, real or virtual, and have them to look forward to when you've finished. Of course, their appeal may diminish when they're no longer a substitute for the work you're supposed to be doing, but there are bound to be a few good ones, and you'll have a head start on the next phase of your career.

Grow

21. But what if I'm no good?

Some people, according to Rita Emmett, one-time procrastinator and author of *The Procrastinator's Handbook*, procrastinate out of fear of failure. If you don't do well, you can comfort yourself with the thought that you never really tried anyway—if you don't do it, you can't fail. Unfortunately, this attempt at ego protection is ultimately unsuccessful because if you don't do it, you can't succeed either! Doing something you've never done before is a risk, and maybe you will fail, but the good news is...

22. You can improve.

Carol Dweck is known for her research on having a fixed mindset versus having a growth mindset. If you see everything as a measure of how smart you are, you'll fear failure and avoid risk. If you realise that you can learn new skills and you practise them—surprise, surprise—you'll get better. Some people find it hard to go from being extraordinary and top of the class to an “ordinary” PhD student. Don't be unrealistic—it's an achievement just to compete at the Olympics; not everyone can win the gold medal. But...

23. Don't psych yourself out.

Some people succumb to the imposter syndrome. Everyone around them seems so brilliant that they feel like a fraud, just waiting to get found out. Famous and successful people feel this way too, so don't worry about it. (Unless, of course, you fabricated the results that enabled you to get into the PhD program.) I don't feel like a fraud, even though I don't know everything, because one thing I do know is that nobody else knows everything either.

24. Find out what you don't know.

Some things are more important to know than others, like assumed knowledge. The problem is that your supervisor assumes you know it, so doesn't tell you, whereas you don't even know that you don't know it, so you don't ask. To avoid this trap, learn from others who have gone before, either people you know, or those you don't (e.g. *The Smart Way to Your PhD: 200 Secrets from 100 Graduates*). In fact, it's a good idea in general to ...

25. Read books about how to write a thesis.

If you're doing a PhD, you probably believe you can learn things from books. But books are not only useful for the content of your PhD; they can also help you with the process. Of course, this is one such book, but don't stop here—follow up on the suggestions I've made. Subscribe to a newsletter like the ABD Survival Guide (www.abdsurvivalguide.com). It's also helpful to read up on how to improve your writing, how to persevere, how to set goals. Just save your reading for after you've done your work for the day. The good news is...

Measure

26. Four hours of deep work a day is all you need.

Science people seem to spend long days in the lab, but in the humanities, if you do four hours of deep work a day, 5 days a week, you will (I reckon) finish in less than 3 years. What is deep work? Serious concentration. Read the book by Cal Newport to find out more. Now the four hours doesn't include going to the library, attending seminars, playing around with your references, or managing the dreaded emails, but I still think that you probably don't need much more time than that to get the work done.

27. Keep a record of your hours.

Cal Newport likes to put a tick on a card for each hour of deep work. I've recently started using an app called Tally to record my hours per week. I also like to print out an A4 page listing each of my projects with some little orange boxes to the right (I don't think the colour is crucial, but you never know). Each box represents one day (4 hours) of work. So I colour in a quarter of the box for each hour I've spent working. Underneath it, I write the date. This has two benefits: I can see I'm making progress—progress is a great motivator—and I can tell how long a particular project has taken me. Sometimes I have to add a few boxes when the project's taken longer than I expected; sometimes I finish early. Keeping a record like this will also help you to...

28. Get better at estimating how long it actually takes to write a chapter or an article.

Or follow a journal's submission guidelines. Or find a single necessary footnote (from a book written in German and available in a library that is, according to WorldCat, 16 111 km away from you). In some (many?) ways, procrastinators are incredibly optimistic. They imagine that they will be able to carry out complex operations in a very limited time. And yet, things always seem to take longer than they think they will. This is because, while it's true, as Parkinson said, that tasks expand to fill the amount of time allocated to them...

29. Sadly, the amount of time required to complete a task does not contract to the meagre period left after you've procrastinated about it for several weeks (or months or years).

If you have a record of how long things have actually taken in the past, rather than your idealised memory, you can use that information to assist you in the future. This also works in other areas of your life. We say things like, "It'll only take a minute," when the fact of the matter is, it has never taken less than 10, and usually takes 20.

30. You may do as much housework as you like, as long as you finish your PhD hours for the day first.

Of course, cleaning the bath may not seem quite so appealing then.

31. But before you do anything, make your bed.

It's good to start the day with a victory. In less than two minutes, you've turned chaos into order. Now the sky's the limit!

Time

32. Manage your time.

Of course, you can't actually manage time—nor can you save it or make it (although Jake Knapp and John Zeratsky's book, *Make Time*, is well worth a read)—you can only manage yourself. Life works best if you spend your time doing what is most important to you. If you're strategic, you'll find there's enough of it to do what's essential. If you set up either/or choices, you will always be feeling guilty. You do not need to abandon your spouse, your children, your job or your social life in order to complete your PhD; you do need to avoid wasting time. To get a better idea of where the time goes, you can...

33. Log your time for a week or two.

It will reveal things you probably didn't want to know, but once you confront reality, you can do something about it. You may find that you can't work full time, raise two toddlers and complete your PhD in 3 years. But you may discover that there is indeed enough time in the 168 hours you have each week (hence the title of Laura Vanderkam's book) to work on your PhD, do some paid employment, manage your household, sleep 8 hours a night, fit in half an hour's exercise a day and still have a (fairly sober) social life. If you feel overwhelmed, with no time to work on your thesis amidst all your other obligations, but it turns out that you're watching 10 or 20 hours of TV a week, as well as spending another hour a day on social media, then the changes to be made become quite clear.

34. Fill up your diary.

If you only put in appointments with your supervisor and departmental seminars, it will look like you have all the time in the world to babysit your friend's cat, hit the outlet stores, or teach yourself how to preserve fruit for fun and profit, because your diary says you're free. But you are *not* free; you're working on your thesis. So schedule in the hours you'll need to meet your goals. This may well encourage you to make an appointment for later in the day to protect your time. Of course, you can still adjust your schedule when necessary, but you'll know that you'll need to find another time for the work that you'd planned to do.

35. Batch tasks.

Julie Morgenstern (*Time Management from the Inside Out*) talks about clustering similar tasks together, just like you should cluster similar objects together (*Organizing from the Inside Out*). And don't try to cram too much into a too-small amount of time, otherwise you'll end up with the equivalent of overflowing drawers in which it's difficult to find (or do) anything at all. Another way of organising your life is by embracing...

36. The power of habit.

Habits are potent. They can save us or destroy us. So harness their power for good rather than for evil. Wouldn't it be great if, instead of eating a doughnut at 3pm every

day, you went for a walk? If instead of automatically logging into social media, you opened up your Word document? You can help yourself by creating routines which progress automatically from a cue. For more on developing this superpower, see the book by Charles Duhigg. And if you need more ideas...

37. Learn from successful people.

Mason Currey has written *Daily Rituals* in which he has compiled the habits of famous people. They're all different, but almost everyone has one. Perhaps one of their frameworks will give you insight into what might work for you.

38. Make it easy.

This is one of the keys to developing habits, as James Clear says in *Atomic Habits*. We naturally take the path of least resistance, so make it easier to do the right thing than the wrong thing. Is it possible to overcome multiple barriers to doing your work? Yes, but it's a lot less likely to happen. Don't make things hard for yourself—there are no extra points given for the degree of difficulty, especially if it's self-inflicted.

Attention

39. The power of focus.

After all the pride we took in claiming to be expert multitaskers, it turns out we were kidding ourselves. Our attention can only be on one thing at a time, so when we think we're multitasking, we're actually rapidly switching our attention between one thing and another. This means that instead of saving time, we're spending it, since it takes time to regather our train of thought. (Of course, if one of the activities is almost automatic, it's okay. We can, for example, breathe and write, or walk and talk. We may not, however, be able to sustain a discourse on post-colonialism in Latin America while attempting to learn the Paso Doble.) So in order to maintain precious focus, read the book by Daniel Goleman and ...

40. Avoid interruptions – especially the ones you create yourself.

Turn off the phone and the status updates. Close your email while you're writing. And furthermore...

41. Sit down!

As soon as you're not sure what to do next, or you have to do some hard thinking (for more on our resistance to such work, see Cal Newport's *So Good They Can't Ignore You*), you say to yourself, "I'll just get something to eat." "I need a drink." "I'd better check the washing." Do not get up. Do not pass go. Do not collect \$200. Remember these words of a student in *Destination Dissertation*, "I could have done it much sooner if I had just sat down." Then you can...

42. Stand up!

Apparently sitting is almost as bad for your health as smoking. And your concentration starts to fade if you don't take a break. So don't just sit there for hours on end, glued to the screen. Get up, do a few jumping jacks and get the blood flowing to your brain. If you need help scheduling this, you can...

43. Use the Pomodoro technique.

If you do not yet know the power of the tomato, it's time to get acquainted. Set a timer for 25 minutes. Don't get up, check email or get a snack until the time's up. Take a 5-minute break, then get back into it. After a couple of hours, take a half-hour break. This will help curb your wandering. At the beginning of the day, when your attention span's longer, you might want to start with 50 minutes.

44. Focus@Will.

Kick things up a notch by subscribing to Focus@Will. This phone app (also available for the computer) plays your choice of music—for example, Classical Piano, Electro Bach or Café Creative (if you can consider that music)—that is scientifically designed to help you focus by giving your brain just enough to occupy its excess capacity so you can pay attention to the task at hand. You can set it for whatever length of time

you want. So it has the benefits of the Pomodoro technique with the additional advantage of helping your concentration. The downside is you have to pay for it.

45. Use if-then intentions to get (and keep) you on track.

These implementation intentions arise from the research of Peter Gollwitzer: “If I’ve finished breakfast and packed the dishwasher, then I’ll open up my document.” “If I’ve finished my lunch, then I’ll read the new article.” “If my friend asks me out at a time I’ve planned to work, then I’ll schedule the outing for a time I’m free.”

Energy

46. Sleep.

It's hard to concentrate when you're tired. There is, however, a radical solution to this problem. It involves going to bed early enough to get a good night's sleep before you have to get up in the morning. Staying up late once may get more work done that night, when you're on a deadline, but as a general pattern, it will reduce your effectiveness. Being tired also affects your decision-making capacity, leaving you more likely to make unwise choices. In addition to sleep, I want to let you know about another groundbreaking discovery that will affect your energy levels...

47. Exercise.

Oh, so you've already heard? We all know that our bodies were designed to move and that moving them improves our physical and mental health. So why aren't we doing it? Because we don't feel like it. But if somehow we actually manage to do it, we're so glad we did because we feel great! It also turns out that your body will thank you if you...

48. Eat the right food.

Don't worry about Paleo-this and Keto-that. Just eat some lean protein, dairy, fruit, veges, healthy fats, and some not-too-processed carbs (taking into account any food intolerances and ethical preferences or religious restrictions). Eat a little bit of (dark) chocolate everyday—not compulsory, but pleasant—and eat cake when you're at someone's birthday party. Of course, I am a doctor of Ancient History, not a medical doctor, so please make sure your health professional is happy before taking any of my general advice that may not be relevant to your own personal circumstances.

49. Take real breaks.

Compartmentalise your life: work when you're meant to be working; relax when you're meant to be relaxing. Take a day off a week when you're not allowed to work on your thesis and use it to do the things that rejuvenate you. Take some time each day to recharge. As Vanderkam says, you're unlikely to feel you have no time if you've just spent ten minutes watching the clouds or enjoying the sunset. (I doubt you'll get the same benefit from scrolling through your phone).

Expectations

50. Understand what you need to do.

The classic on this is Phillips and Pugh's *How to Get a PhD*, now in its sixth edition. Particularly helpful, I think, is that they tell you how not to get one, so you can avoid potential pitfalls.

51. Count the cost before you start.

Before people started writing their own wedding vows, the marriage service asked whether you took the other person, "For better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, forsaking all others, for as long as you both shall live." There will be tough times (as well as some good ones). A PhD is not meant to last a lifetime, but it is meant to be demanding. It's better to think about what the challenges will be and work out plans to overcome them before you start. That way, when things go wrong, as they almost certainly will at some stage over a period of several years, you won't be fazed, you'll just do what needs to be done. Or you can not start at all and save yourself the time and trouble (and probably make a lot more money, given the parlous state of the academic job market).

52. You can only go from where you are.

I say this to myself fairly often, despite the farmer telling the lost city folk who'd asked him for directions, "Well, if I wanted to go there, I wouldn't start from here." Where you are now may not be where you wanted to be at this stage, but the only way to get back on track is to move forward, step by step, as Anne Lamott says in *Bird by Bird*.

53. The thesis is not the be-all and end-all.

There are more important things in life than a PhD. But don't give up just because you're feeling down (or stuck or stupid). Your marriage is more important than your PhD. Your children are more important than your PhD. Your health is more important than your PhD. But is your PhD the problem? Like having children, doing a PhD can bring to the surface issues that were previously hidden. Take a leave of absence and work things out rather than pushing the situation to breaking point.

54. It's a PhD, not a Nobel Prize.

This is the title of a famous article by Gerry Mullins and Margaret Kiley. It means you are demonstrating your proficiency as an independent scholar, not (necessarily) changing the world one footnote at a time. Thousands of PhDs are awarded every year. Yours doesn't have to be one of the best, just not one of the worst. Having said that...

55. Pay close attention to your editing.

Only a masochist sends the examiners something sloppy. When those esteemed members of the academy notice spelling mistakes, poor formatting and inconsistent

footnoting on the first few pages, they start wondering if the research is equally lackadaisical. So make sure you leave enough time to edit your work, or even better, get someone else to proofread it as well.

56. Don't hesitate to have top scholars examine your thesis, if they're willing to do it.

If you're in a system that uses external examiners, you're better off, as Mullins and Kiley say, to choose senior scholars who have supervised and examined a lot of theses. It may feel intimidating, but the benefit is that they know the standard to expect from a beginning scholar. You may find that an inexperienced examiner lacks confidence and therefore feels obliged to point out every flaw, real or imagined—it's more about them than you.

Support

57. Don't avoid your supervisor.

It can be uncomfortable to have a meeting when you haven't done what you're meant to. You promise yourself you'll fix everything up and *then* you'll meet. But the day never comes. Feel the discomfort and front up. Then avoid future discomfort by doing the work. If you actually are stuck, talk it through with your supervisor—that's what they're there for! In fact...

58. You don't have to do it alone.

There's no point struggling away with some problem, all on your lonesome, when there are other people out there who can help you. This applies to your work, but it also applies to your mental health. If you continue to feel down and you're struggling, go to your GP or your university's counselling service. There's no need to be ashamed (lots of people go through it), and there's no need to suffer in silence (something can be done). Even better, reduce the chances of it happening in the first place and...

59. Create a supportive environment.

It is not good for humans to be alone. And when you're doing your PhD, it's good to have a team—someone you can call when you have technology issues, someone who can give you a hand with the kids, someone who always cheers you up, someone who can tell you how to get access to resources or funding, someone who can give you some tips on thesis printing. (You can even pay for some of these things—a little bit of money directed in the right way can make a huge difference.) If you have a range of relationships, you're not putting too much pressure on any one of them, and you can return the favour. Some of these will come naturally if you...

60. Take advantage of a cohort, natural or created.

It's great to be part of a group of people in the same general discipline at varying stages of the journey who can give each other feedback and share the tricks of the trade. You can even go a step further and create an accountability group to keep you on track. This is especially important if you're mostly working off campus. See www.phd-stayontrack.com for some resources. And while creating community is great...

61. Limit your exposure to toxic people.

A little bit of radiation from your microwave won't kill you (at least, I don't think so), but an atomic bomb certainly will. Likewise, very draining people need to be regulated. Give proportionately more time to those who encourage you, and those who respond to your encouragement.

Writing

62. Reading is easy; writing is hard.

Certainly, if you want to get a PhD, you'll need to do a lot of reading. But you don't get a PhD based on what you've read; you get it for what you've written. So make sure you actually do some writing. Similarly...

63. Talk is cheap.

It's lovely to sit around, discussing your brilliant ideas, but again, the PhD is not awarded for those, unless they are written down. But...

64. Sometimes you just need to talk it out.

If you're finding it hard to get your thoughts clear on paper, explaining them to someone else can help. It doesn't need to be your supervisor—another student or even a friend can listen to you. Then once you've got it worked out, write it down!

65. Don't binge-write...

It's true that many successful academic writers, as Helen Sword says in *Air & Light & Time & Space*, write in seasons, putting aside a week or two to immerse themselves in a project and make a lot of progress. I myself have appreciated the times when I've been able to get away for a couple of days, free from other obligations, and just focus on writing. But I think it's rather dangerous for inexperienced writers with a history of procrastination to use this as the primary way of generating text. If you're having trouble making progress, then scheduling time to write as part of your regular routine is the most direct route to success. If you can then supplement this with a solid week or two at a country retreat, all the better.

66. Unless you're already 2 or 3 years in.

Inger Mewburn, "The Thesis Whisperer," has turned her PhD and successful blog into a couple of books and a position as an Associate Professor at a prestigious research university. One thing she has had success with is thesis boot camps. People set aside a weekend and aim to write ten or twenty thousand words. It turns out that this is possible, as long as you've already done most of the research. But why wait until you've got 3 months and 60 000 words to go? I found it much more comfortable to have a year left and a bit of tidying up to do. In fact, I didn't have to do much tidying up, due to my iterative way of working. To start with...

67. Get it down first, then fix it up.

Don't wait to know everything before you write anything. If you put down your thoughts, quotes from primary and secondary sources, your data and anything else that seems relevant (preferably into a framework of headings), you have something you can edit later. But when it comes to editing...

68. You don't need to be strict about the order.

Some people like to get all the content right first, then get the sentences and punctuation right, and then worry about fixing up the footnotes. It makes sense, as that way you don't waste time perfecting the opening and closing sentences of a paragraph that ends up getting cut. But I like to fix things as I go, because sometimes when I open my document, I'm not feeling particularly brilliant or creative. If that's the case, I can still make progress by working on the more mechanical aspects that need to be done at some stage. For example, about halfway through my own thesis, I integrated all the chapters into one document with the correct formatting, styles for the headings, margins and so on (the university had run a course on this, which was very helpful). So keep pressing on, by whatever means seems easiest at the time, and when you finally sort out that tricky section, the thesis (or paper) is ready to go. In fact, like some others, I think clearing away some of the debris helps you to see clearly enough to deal with the content that's been troubling you. And that's why I like to record my hours, not my words—sometimes a really successful day's work leaves you with a thousand fewer words than when you started, and that should still be recognised and celebrated.

Thinking

69. Challenge the voice in your head.

It says, "It's too late to get anything done today, better to start fresh tomorrow." You say, "I may not be able to get as much done as I'd hoped, but I can still make some progress, and that will give me a head start tomorrow."

70. Examine your beliefs.

When our kids were young, we encouraged them to ask themselves a couple of questions before they said anything: Is it true? Is it helpful? You can do the same when you're talking to yourself: Is this task *really* impossible? Are you *really* stupid? Does getting one negative comment mean that you'll never be able to write anything good enough and that the whole thing is a complete waste of time? (In case you're wondering, the answer to all three questions is "No.")

71. Beware the three P's of pessimism: Permanent, pervasive, personal.

Let's say you fail a Maths test. Pessimistic thinking says you will you never succeed at Maths (permanent). Not only will you never succeed at Maths, you won't succeed at English, French or Art either (pervasive). It is not because a section was included that you had specifically been told would not be in the exam, but because you are stupid (personal).

72. But pie-in-the-sky optimism can be dangerous too.

If you have the idea that your PhD (or your life) will be smooth sailing all the way, and that you will never encounter the storms of bad reviews, ill health, or difficult supervisors, then you may panic at the first squall and abandon ship. What you need, as Dweck says, is both the recognition that there will be challenges to overcome (pessimism), and the confidence that you will be able to overcome them (optimism). So there are two principles to keep in mind...

73. You have less power than you think.

When they were young, my nieces loved the film *Jumanji* (the first one). Robin Williams plays a boy who was sucked into a board game and has lived in the jungle for almost 30 years. One of my favourite scenes is when the children's aunt is driving along listening to a self-help tape which says something like, "You control everything that happens to you," and a giant vine reaches out and grabs hold of the car. You are human, not divine, and you cannot control rampant flora and fauna, the weather, the traffic, or other people's reactions to you. Having said that...

74. You have more power than you think.

Some people seem determined to be at the whim of their genetics, their environment, their deadbeat supervisor. They have little-to-no sense of agency. They have a shopping list of reasons why things cannot be done. If you dare suggest a way forward, they present yet another excuse. We can't control everything, but we can

control some things, and we can organise our environment in a way that either sets us up to fail or sets us up to succeed. This brings us to the question of...

75. Willpower.

Which is easier to have when you don't need it. If, for example, you want to lose weight, it is better to get rid of the jar of M&Ms you keep on your desk than spend all day trying to resist them. If you want to spend less time surfing the web, then you'd better get rid of that screen not so helpfully installed on Windows 10 that gives you dozens of so-called news stories, specifically designed to derail you as soon as you log in to start work. Pay attention to key moments, as Peter Bregman suggests in *18 Minutes*, and set up your environment to make it easier to succeed than to fail.

Goals

76. It's all about the process.

Goal setting is important, but goals need to be supported by what you do each day. So focus on the lead measures—those things that will help you achieve your goals, the things you can control. The lag measures are the ones that come after you've done your work. Of course, if you consistently achieve your lead goals, but you're making no progress on what you're aiming to accomplish, then you may need to re-evaluate your processes. Perhaps what you thought would help isn't actually helping. For example...

77. Be effective, not just efficient.

Banish busy work. It's certainly a good idea to perform a task in the most economical manner, but not if it doesn't need to be done at all. So pay attention to...

78. Pareto's Law.

Roughly speaking, 80% of the results come from 20% of the work. (Just like 80% of the time you wear the same 20% of your clothes—get rid of some of the remaining 80% and give it to charity.) If you can improve that ratio, by focusing on what's most important, you'll be a lot more successful.

79. Reward yourself.

The closer to the action you want to reinforce, the better. When I first started, I'd go out to dinner whenever I sent off a journal article for publication. I wanted to celebrate the achievement of completing something, rather than waiting 3 or 4 months for a "Thanks, but no thanks." Of course, if it was accepted, I was happy to reward myself again. Use small rewards that make you smile or give you a lift for achieving your goals for the day (or the hour, if you need to!) and larger rewards for more significant milestones.

80. Have alignment between your goals.

It's Planning 101 to break down large goals into smaller steps. Sometimes there's also a particular order in which they must be completed. You need to keep both the end goal and the intermediate steps in mind, as well as working out how to handle unexpected delays. For a Project Canvas (or framework) that considers not only the "What, How and When," but also the "Why," the "Who" and the "Where," see *The Project Revolution* by Antonio Nieto-Rodriguez.

81. Overwhelm.

It's a sad, but common, predicament. You have so much to do that you don't know where to start. So you don't start at all. Unsurprisingly, this does not help. If this is you, break some tasks down into the smallest possible steps and do the one that is the least repugnant to you. A small win is still a win. This helps build positive momentum rather than washing you down the sinkhole of despair. This is just one reason to...

82. Think small.

In their book of the same title, Owain Service and Rory Gallagher give plenty of examples of the big difference a few small changes can make. Of course, the key here is to choose the right levers, which may take some experimentation. Another way of achieving this is to...

83. Remove obstacles.

In his book *Essentialism*, Greg McKeown talks about improving a system by improving the performance of the least-functioning part. This has the additional benefit of choosing one thing to focus on—the one thing that’s going to make the biggest difference. Yes, there are many improvements that could be made, but which one will give you the most bang for your buck? Do that.

84. Done is better than perfect.

Procrastinators can have a tendency towards perfectionism. If the stars (or the pens on their desk) are not correctly aligned, they are unable to start. If every article published on the issue (and related subjects) has not been read, they are unable to write. I myself am rather perfectionistic about spelling and footnotes. But there’s a difference between aiming for a defined finish line (no errors of punctuation in the text), and an open-ended one (the most elegantly written article in the history of History). A point comes where the argument is sound, the prose is clear, and the major sources have been cited. Send it off!

85. Be aware of different roles which can derail you on the way to your PhD.

Foss and Waters call these incomplete-scholar roles. It might be the housekeeper, the model employee, even, strangely enough, the good student. The solution is to enact the scholar role by writing regularly.

86. Don’t think, “Can I...?” Think, “How can I...?”

As Tara Mohr says in *Playing Big*, the second is more creative and produces more options. One of those options might just be the solution you’re after.

87. But there’s still a limit to what you can do.

Since you have a flexible schedule, why not get a puppy? Become president of the local arts group? Start a new job? Have a baby? Why not? Because these things will pull your attention away from your studies. Starting something new requires emotional and mental energy, and you need all the brain power you’ve got to focus on your thesis. Sometimes surprises happen, and it’s certainly possible to have a baby and still finish your thesis—I know someone who had two during her candidature—but there’s a difference between dealing with challenges thrust upon you and making life difficult for yourself. In fact...

88. Recognise that things will go wrong.

Even if you finish in regulation time, a PhD will take 3 or 4 years. A lot can happen in that time. You get sick, parents age, relationships begin and end. There will certainly be enough to cope with without you exacerbating the situation. So, if you have any choice in the matter, keep the rest of your life as stable as possible and build in some slack. And on the subject of not making things hard for yourself...

89. If you get the opportunity to do some teaching, take it, but don't redesign the course.

If you want to be an academic, it's good to have some teaching experience. Just remember that you won't be an academic unless you finish your PhD. So do a good job, but keep things in proportion. Fortunately/unfortunately, presuming you already have a basic knowledge of the area and access to someone else's course material, the students won't notice the difference between an hour's preparation and a day's.

Creativity

90. Park on the downhill slope.

Make it easier to start each day by finishing well the day before. Don't fully finish off a section, instead finish at a point where you know what comes next. Or jot down a few points for the following section. This is also called...

91. Priming the pump.

Would you like to get work done while you sleep? Take a leaf out of Stephen King's book (*On Writing*, not one of the scary ones), and send workers to the basement overnight. If you're stuck on something, before you go to bed, rehearse the details of the problem, and then let your subconscious go to work. In the morning, when you look at the material again, you'll probably find some kind of solution.

92. Don't fill up every moment of your time.

Brains love novelty. Unfortunately, they are quite happy to accept novelty in the form provided by your smart phone. On the plus side, if you starve them of a constant stream of stimuli, they will come up with new ideas and connections. That is why people still get good ideas in the shower (unless, of course, they have those waterproof wireless headphones). Apparently, you can even stimulate creative thinking by doing something boring beforehand, like reading the telephone book out loud (if you can find one) or watching a pot of water boil. For more, see *Bored and Brilliant: How Time Spent Doing Nothing Changes Everything*.

Practicalities and Parting Words

93. Save your work.

Save each day's work in a separate file with the day's date in reverse order e.g. Masterpiece20190731. That way, you can freely edit your work, deleting what you don't need, without the fear that something precious will be lost. If you realise that the quote you excised was, in fact, vital to your argument, you can go back to last week's version and cut and paste it right back in. It goes without saying that you also need to set up some backup in the cloud for the inevitable computer crash. And I would caution against choosing a password that not even the administrator of the site can retrieve, because it will be this crucial password that you will most certainly forget.

94. Begin with the end in mind.

The time to discover that, in order to get the job you want, you need to have published a couple of journal articles and to have taught at least one course, is not two weeks before you are due to submit. Neither will you be able to instantly make connections with other scholars in your (sub)discipline. Find out what the expectations are in your field and start working on them from the beginning. And for a guide to succeeding in the academic job market, see Karen Kelsky's *The Professor Is In*.

95. Set aside time each week to invest in long-term goals.

I like Laura Vanderkam's suggestion in *Off the Clock* that you spend the first couple of hours on a Monday morning doing something that is important, but not urgent. It gives you something to look forward to after the weekend and, unlike leaving it to the end of the week, ensures that it actually happens.

96. On the getting of wisdom.

Wisdom is knowing what advice to apply to a given situation. Is now the time to speak up, or to be silent? Is now the time to take a break, or to push through? Is it a case of seeking the wisdom of many counsellors or of too many cooks spoiling the broth? Let experience be your teacher and find what works for you.

97. Know thyself.

Some humans (and I am one of them), have a sad tendency to stop certain habits, not because they don't work, but because they do. So, for example, I had a habit app on my phone. One habit was flossing my teeth, which I did for 436 days in a row, despite only ever doing it sporadically prior to that. One might think this was evidence that using this method of accountability was effective for me. But I decided that I no longer needed the app. After all, since I'd done something for more than a year, surely it had become a permanent fixture. I'm sorry to say that within a week, the flossing had fallen by the wayside. I am evidently the kind of person who needs external reinforcement, even if I am only accountable to myself. (In her book, *The Four Tendencies*, Gretchen Rubin calls this the Obliger personality. The others are the Upholder, the Questioner and the Rebel. Upholders don't tend to procrastinate too

much, but you might like to think about how your dominant tendency could affect your progress.) So...

98. Don't sabotage your success.

If you set up structures which support you in writing your thesis, don't dismantle them once they start working. Realise that the more ingrained your procrastination, the more easily you will fall off the bandwagon. Keep the railings up! But if (when) you fall...

99. Don't give up!

Dust yourself off, get back on, learn from the experience and keep going. The one who perseveres to the end will be saved (or, at least, awarded a PhD).

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