Feature Story

IIC GRADUATE STUDENT SHARES HER WISDOM ON WRITING A THESIS

By Maria Kuntz, IIC Graduate Student

On Committing to a Thesis:
There are a lot of reasons to do a thesis, and probably just as many not to do a thesis. It seems that most IIC students are choosing internships over theses, but here are a few reasons you might consider writing a thesis.

1. You plan to do a doctorate or another master's degree and original research would improve your application.

2. You'd like to work as a researcher or writer in public policy, grants administration, tech or many other industries.

3. You already work part-time to full-time and squeezing in an internship just isn't feasible.

4. You are passionate or at least very, very interested in some question, problem or issue and you can see yourself committing a lot of time to studying it.

5. You are organized, self-motivated and can create structure for yourself.

On Organizing and Planning
Getting organized is key to success. The thesis will not magically happen, it will not write itself and you cannot absorb theory through pillow osmosis – though that would be nice. A former boss told me that theses and dissertations require only a modicum of intelligence and a lot of sweat (she had a Ph.D.) I’d say most of us have more than a modicum of intelligence, but without organization and structure you’ll never gain traction and momentum.

On Writing & Editing
I would say inevitably there are writing struggles. Some days are just easier than others and some days the words flow effortlessly. Here are some quotes that helped me maintain perspective and that kept me writing even if I had just put my head on my desk and cried from fatigue (yes this really happened).

1. The first draft of anything is shit. ~Ernest Hemingway
   Well, he got that right. It does not have to be perfect and trust me it isn't. There is always time for editing, but first you need to have something to edit.

2. It's just words on paper. ~ Adrienne Gonzales, Ph.D., personal friend
   Sometimes you just need a little perspective. This friendly reminder was the mantra I recited every time I sat down to work. Don't take yourself too seriously and just get some ideas on paper. Again, there's always time to edit.

3. If I waited till I felt like writing, I'd never write at all. ~Ann Tyler
   TRUTH. A few days after I defended my thesis, I met a gentleman at a conference who had competed a Ph.D. he told me that every day he scheduled to write from 9-11 p.m. (Same as me!) He said that no matter what, he sat down to write at 9 p.m. and did his best to try to write something, anything. If after 15 or 20 minutes he was coming up short, he stopped for the night and started again at 9 p.m. the next day.

On Thinking
Make time to think. No seriously, make time to think. Great writing doesn't just happen. Spontaneous brilliant thoughts don't just happen either. We've got to make time to think. You may need to find a place that is good, grab a fidget or a comfy chair, go for a walk in the mountains or around Wash Park - but make time to mull over what you've been reading and analyzing. We've got to give our brains time to make new connections and see relationships between ideas and concepts that are new or at least new to us.
On Tools
There are lots of tools that can make writing your thesis or other large research project more doable. I’m telling you up front so that you can start using them now, because trust me, they make a huge difference!

1. Endnote or another citation software
   Endnote allowed me to connect PDFs of articles to the bibliographic information and you can import the citations in a variety of writing styles (e.g. APA) as you write and the software will build your bibliography as you go.

2. Drive, Dropbox, or another cloud based storage solution: Save your data, your drafts and all of your files in one manageable place (stay organized) that is backed up to the cloud or an external drive, or both.

3. Note taking system: Have you ever had thoughts pop into your head in the middle of the night, or first thing in the morning or while just hanging out? Make sure to have a notepad near your bed, in your purse or backpack or use your phone’s note app to jot down ideas.

4. Formatting Rules: Regardless of your discipline’s formatting standards, the University has additional standards for completing your final thesis. Do yourself a favor: find them before your defense.

Get Support
1. Support network: We all need support, but the most meaningful support comes from those who know what we are experiencing. Connect with other graduate students, professional colleagues, and friends from outside of the University who’ve completed similar research projects. These people will provide perspective when you’re stuck, laughs when you are grumpy and encouragement to see you through the end. Plus, you’ll have a team of fans waiting to celebrate with you when you are done. Let them know how you’re progressing and share your successes. The right people will want to know.

2. Awareness: Many graduate students will at some point encounter or experience a bout of what has been termed imposter syndrome. Look it up, read a few articles, and know that you are not an imposter. If you’ve come this far, you’re right where you are supposed to be and you are smart enough to complete and take full credit for your awesome research.

Conclusion
Completing a thesis has been an amazing experience. I have learned so much about myself through the process and I have grown both professionally and personally as a result. Remember, you don't have to be a genius to finish one, but being a little organized, maintaining a health perspective on your work and surrounding yourself with supportive friends and colleagues will help you along the journey.