

MRP BLUES (NOT): A few reflections

BEGINNING:

- There will be a great deal of variation. Some of you will join the programme knowing what they want to write about, and who you want to work with – some will even have had preliminary conversations with potential supervisors before getting here. Others will know what you want to do but not know who to go to, while some of you may have vague ideas that will have changed from the time you put down their topic on the MA application form. Your supervisor is there to help you arrive at some sense of your interests. The courses you take should also help you to focus their ideas and start building reading lists, even writing essays for those courses that could possibly have a bearing on your thesis. It's an excellent opportunity to experiment with your writing, take risks, some of these papers might be rough drafts for sections of your MA paper. Some of you may want to take a variety of courses that will not necessarily bear on the thesis, this is just as fine and you do not want to be restrictive.
- M. Jacqui Alexander talks about the itinerary of an idea. Think of your thesis as setting out this itinerary. Ask yourself, what is the question I want to attempt to provide an answer for? How have others tried to answer this? How far did they go? How will I try to do this differently? What will I need in my toolkit to help get me there? Whose shoulders do I stand on while extending myself in new directions?

REALITY CHECKS:

- Allot time for margins of error, bureaucracy. Pin the submission deadline on the wall, so you have dates to work with.
- Be realistic. Understand the scope of the project. Many students come through the door with ideas that would fill three PhD's, let alone one MA paper. Work hard at whittling it down to a manageable project that allows you to pursue exciting questions and still get the work done in a reasonable time frame and in a very focused way.
- One way of doing this and making the entire process seem less daunting (especially if this is the longest paper you are writing so far), is to break up the thesis into its component parts. This seems somewhat mechanical but it works for me, since it really 'operationalises' the thesis writing endeavour – eg. an MA thesis is about 60 pages, has an introduction, two or three main sections, and a conclusion. All have to work coherently at the end of the process. Doing it this way also puts paid to those grand ambitions you had, to write three doctoral theses worth of research in your MA year!
- Find your second reader. Meet with your supervisor, let that direct the conversation as to who the second reader might be. It helps if you are already taking a course with them! Approach them early, and send them an outline of your topic. If that goes well, after you finalise topic focus, have the student send the chapter outline to the second reader for input, before the writing begins (most

- prefer to have input at start and end of the process only, it's important to clarify this).
- Some students will want to do fieldwork. Here, again, it is important to craft the scope of the fieldwork in a way that is doable. Consider this as a preliminary foray towards possible larger studies or engagements in the future. You should aim to get your ethical review for field work completed in the spring term, and to plan to be doing reading and fieldwork simultaneously in the summer. Try to attend ethic review workshops so you fully understand the process. It may be helpful to come up with a plan B version of the fieldwork that can be done if circumstances derail the original project. Defining a doable scale to the fieldwork is crucial, and needs to be able to fit into time budgets of the summer. In terms of creating a timeline, work on refining your methods in the spring, and to pursue the readings for background and conceptual chapters, and not to wait until fieldwork is 'over' before doing other elements of research and reading.
 - **Before** the summer begins, aim to come up with an updated proposal, time line, and chapter outline for discussion.. By the end of the meeting you should both have a final outline and idea of what each chapter will address/what will be in each chapter. This really helps once you start writing, and you can revisit it when/if you get lost. Once you have it, it also allows you to focus on writing other sections when some aren't going so well. It is fairly easy to switch from topic to topic; I find if these conversations are focused and you have done the work to come up with this outline etc., and you have thought about it long and hard enough, then you are less likely to think of 'switching' to something else. This doesn't mean the outline should absolutely not change, it inevitably does, but it really helps you to focus and to see how to craft and sustain an argument over the course of 50 or 60 pages.
 - Resources. Ask your supervisor for assistance with some initial secondary material/debates you should seek out in order to complete their projects. At the same time, remember you are here to develop these skills! In other words, this is a research endeavour, and as graduate students you are expected to work independently and go out and build bibliographies yourselves.

Once the writing process begins:

- Try to schedule regular meetings with your supervisor – these can be in person or sometimes via e-mail. The most useful are meetings scheduled after work has been submitted, as it makes the discussion far more meaningful and in relation to the writing. Of course you may occasionally have writers' block – we all do – and want a meeting to deal with this. It helps to set clear deadlines for each chapter from the start (deadlines to get chapters to supervisors, meeting dates to discuss chapters booked in advance and appointments kept), which gives you a guidepost and endpoint to work towards. It is then up to you to let the supervisor know if something has changed, if a deadline cannot be met and to ask for a realistic extension etc. (and vice versa). Setting this schedule is really important, and avoids mix-ups and complications (eg. turning in a chapter two weeks after the expected time may throw off a supervisor's schedule, you cannot then expect it back immediately).

- Discuss expectations with your supervisor early on so that you are both on the same page; not everyone will work in the same way. For instance I make every effort to turn the work around very quickly, with detailed comments to help the students to rework. I often tell my own students to keep writing and submitting chapters, and to return to and rework the whole document only *after* I have provided all comments. When the last chapter is submitted, we have a discussion when it is handed back to ensure we are on the same page about the revisions required for the whole thesis, and the student then goes to make the necessary changes. This can be flexible, for instance a conceptual chapter might require substantive work and is important for the student to return to immediately as it sets the context for the entire thesis.
- At the end of the day, when you are coming closer to the deadline, you may feel overwhelmed, or that you cannot finish it. This is entirely normal!! You are not alone, trust me!! Writing can be a very lonely exercise. This is why finding a topic you can live with, that speaks to you, is one way of ensuring you are committed to it for the duration of the process. Speak to your supervisor about these feelings of inadequacy. Also it really helps to form a study group with a few people (even one), to make a community, share your experiences of writing, sitting and working in silence together.

At the end of the day, remember, you are here to get through this intact! And hopefully to end up in a place where you can look back and say it was a good year. I had a good experience. I enjoyed it!!