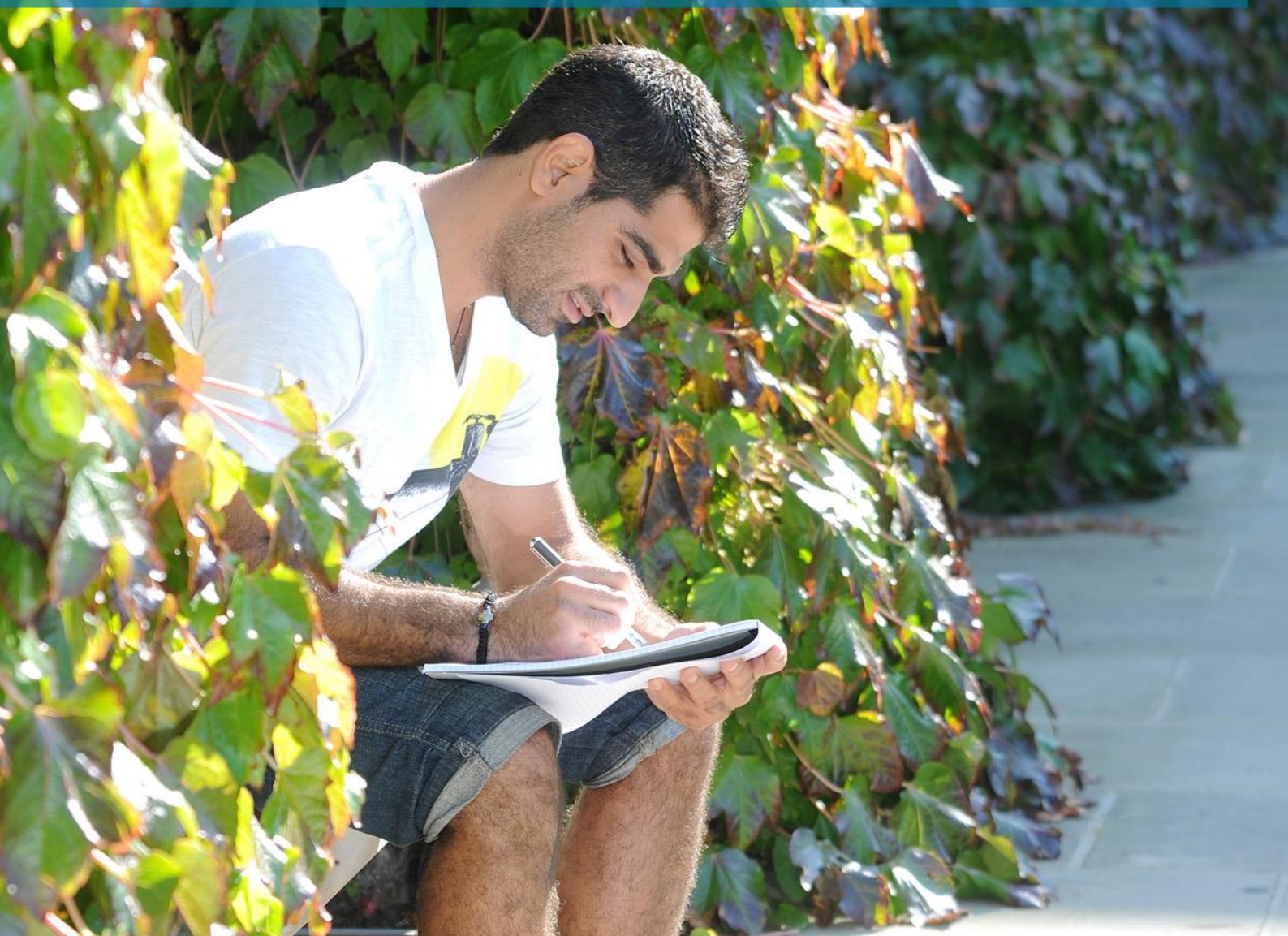


Surviving your PhD:

Reflections and practical tips from a traumatised ex-PhD student

Dr Linda K Kaye



Edge Hill
University





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Introduction

This resource is intended to be fun, yet informative in providing a series of reflections based on my own experiences of doing a PhD in Psychology. Although there may be slight variations to this experience across disciplines, this resource should be largely relevant for all subject areas. My intentions for sharing these reflections are two-fold: firstly as a way of communicating the ‘lived experience’ to those of you who may be considering starting a PhD. Secondly, I hope this will be a way of sharing tips and tricks to those of you already embarking on your PhD journeys. I have focused this resource on considering the most common challenges of the PhD experience. However, I acknowledge that we are all different, and there are likely to be other issues not covered in this resource.

The first part focuses on *motivation*. This has a huge influence on your successes in your PhD journey, and so some attention is given to considering how to keep motivated. This can, of course, vary from person to person, but this part of the resource presents some words of advice both from the initial stages of the PhD journey when choosing a topic, to the final stages of writing your PhD thesis.

The second part outlines *perspective taking*. This includes some tips I found particularly useful when working on my PhD. Among these include ‘tricking yourself’, which can easily be accomplished by reconsidering the labels you give your electronic documents, and the sub-headings you use within word processed documents. These are very simple, yet very effective (in my experience) techniques of avoiding becoming overwhelmed by the prospect of writing a 40,000+ word thesis.

The third part of this article focuses on ways of *getting words on the page*. It is often difficult to actually express your meaning in academic terms. Knowing what you want to say but not knowing how to write it is a common but fully treatable condition prevalent in a large percentage of PhD students. This part outlines some helpful strategies in helping you to be successful in writing.



Part I: Motivation

Motivation is the key to success in undertaking a PhD. To keep opening the dreaded document on the computer labelled 'thesis' is a daunting task for even the strongest-minded person. Being motivated to keep going is often difficult and so it's important that the motivation comes from inside (intrinsically), rather than externally (extrinsically), as ultimately this is a much stronger form of motivation. This section will identify a number of tips to consider when choosing a topic for a PhD and for maintaining the motivation once the research process is well under way. These tips will, hopefully, be useful in providing you with some ideas for your own practice and will stay with you as pointers for later research pursuits (which, at this present time, may seem like a long way off!).

Picking a topic

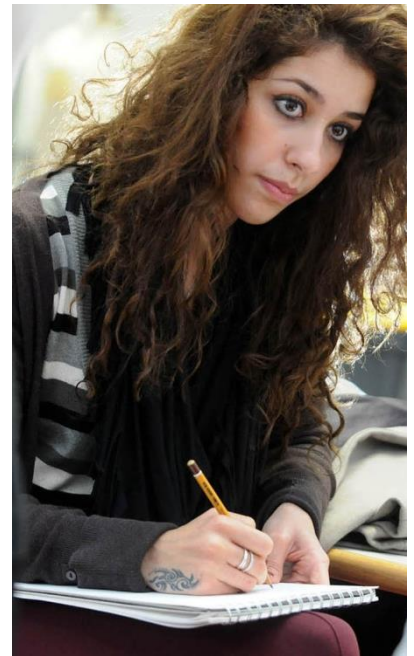
Step 1: Remember you will be researching your topic for at least three years, so it's important to choose a topic in which you hold a keen interest. There's no point picking a topic out of thin air and hoping for the best, because after about three months you will be bored of it and wish you'd spent your tuition fees on contributing to that new car or designer handbag you had your eye on. It is important you choose a research topic in which you have an intrinsic interest, a passion for, perhaps. For example, if you feel strongly against pregnant women smoking, then consider doing research on this issue. Maybe you could explore women's attitudes towards smoking while pregnant or explore the factors which inhibit failure to quit smoking while pregnant. In fact, the possibilities are almost endless.

Step 2: Once you have identified your topic, do a simple database search to get a feel of 'what's already out there?' to see what you could contribute to the area. Where are the gaps and limitations in the existing research literature? What can you add to people's understandings about the research issues? These are all questions which you need to be asking yourself when making an informed decision about your topic. If in doubt, seek advice from potential supervisors who have research experience in your area of interest. Send them a quick email asking what their opinions are on researching X, Y and Z in the area of interest. Of course, you may not get a response. After all, academics are incredibly busy people who may file your email entitled 'PhD topic enquiry' under 'trash'. Don't give up hope. There will be plenty of academics out there who will be more than happy to respond to a keen potential PhD student. Your mission is simply to find them.....

Step 3: Having finally received a response from a friendly academic who has given you some helpful advice on your chosen topic area, you need to sit down (or even lie down if it's all got too stressful by this point) and seriously contemplate whether this is really for you. Doing a PhD is a commitment, and

requires a huge amount of determination. You need to be mentally strong to achieve it, so if you feel this is not your forté then now is the time to reconsider your career options.

If you are sure that a PhD is for you, then you need to get a PhD proposal together. If you have developed a rapport with the friendly academic from step 2, then you may find that they will offer to look over your proposal and provide you with more useful advice. It's worth a try anyway. If not, then try obtaining contact with your personal tutor from your undergraduate studies, as they could be a helpful resource at this stage. Once your proposal is together, and you have found a suitable place in which to research it, all you have to do now is wait.



Keeping motivated

As mentioned in the previous section, it is important that you pick a topic you are passionate about since this fire needs to keep burning for at least three years, which you will come to realise is a very long time. There will come a time (or many times in fact) during the PhD process that your motivation will lapse and you'll wonder what on earth you are doing with your life, wasting it staring at a computer screen with a pile of unread journal articles on your desk. This is where you need to reignite the passion you felt at the very beginning of your PhD journey. This is why I stress to you just how important it is to pick a topic which you are enthusiastic about, since you can use this as a catalyst for promoting your motivation to keep going. Think back to the excitement you felt when you received a reply to that 'PhD research enquiry' email. Consider the passion you had when you were looking into areas of interest and realised you had a burning research idea which nobody else had explored yet. If you can reignite that passion and enthusiasm then it can all be useful in keeping you going through the whole of your PhD journey.

Another way of keeping the fire burning is to involve yourself in events that allow people to ask questions about your research. I am, of course, referring here to conferences and workshops which I'm sure you will see advertised at various points along the way. Presenting, or even organising your own events, is a great way of engaging people's interest in your research. Listening to people's comments and questions and observing their interest in your research helps you realise that your research is interesting, and that you are actually doing something worthwhile with your life.

Reflection is a great way of observing where you are now, in relation to where you've been and where you are going. Keeping some form of reflective journal or diary can help you keep track of the progress you're making. Looking at this document from time to time can be incredibly rewarding, as you can see

how far you have come since you first started the PhD journey. This can act as a useful motivator for you and can help you feel worthy of doing what you're doing.

Part 2: Perspective-taking

Over the three year period, you will be required to undertake numerous difficult tasks (often more than one at any given time). These include collecting data, inputting data, analysing data, writing literature reviews, writing and doing conference presentations and, of course, writing up a hefty thesis. The length of your thesis will largely depend on your general subject area, but will typically be a minimum of 40,000 words. At this point, you may feel the need to take a short lie down to prevent hyperventilation. I ought to add here that I, the author, accept no responsibility for any undesirable outcome you may experience having read these last few sentences. I do sincerely hope however, that you have not suffered any detrimental symptoms in relation to these issues. To reduce the likelihood of any potential further detriments, I will hereafter refer to the 'thesis' as your 'research diary'. Replacing 'scary' words, such as 'thesis' or 'viva voce', with less alarming ones makes things seem a little less overwhelming. This is a simple, yet highly effective strategy which we will explore in the following section.

Tricking yourself

The prospect of writing a 40,000 word document (or perhaps more, if you are an unfortunate soul in the social sciences or humanities) can be incredibly daunting. Many a scholar has turned pale at the prospect of 'the thesis' (or 'the beast' which was a common label among my peers in my days as a PhD student). Don't think you are alone in worrying about getting something down on paper to make up all those words. 'Thesis-itis' is a very common condition, known to prevail in almost all PhD students. Like any condition, the worst thing you can do is ignore it. It won't just magically disappear if you pretend it doesn't exist. It's important that you take steps to cure it. Essentially, this can be achieved purely by the perspective you take on it.

If you conceive it as 'a thesis', that's not going to help at all. You're basically telling yourself that you've got a shed-load of work to do, in not enough time. The stress that can accumulate from thinking in this way is also counter-productive too. You're just going to end up on the vicious circle with no hope. A handy hint is to simply trick yourself. How do you do this? Well, for a start, we have already discussed that we shouldn't use the name 'thesis'. Consider it as eight small essays instead¹. You have successfully completed your undergraduate study and no doubt submitted a rather good final year dissertation. Surely, this should give you confidence that you are capable of doing eight more little essays. You're

¹ Eight is used as an example. If your thesis is six chapters, for example, then consider it as six little essays instead.

clever, right? Otherwise you wouldn't have graduated, or been accepted to do a PhD...? Okay, so eight little essays are absolutely no problem at all.

The next practical step is in the way you structure and label your documents. *Do not label your document as 'thesis'!* This is about as useful as you sticking your head down the toilet and flushing it. This will just reinforce to you that you have a huge piece of work to do. Remember that you are doing eight little essays, right? Therefore, you should have eight documents, all with their own nice neat titles. On the subject of titles, this is another opportunity for you to trick yourself.

Just like the word 'thesis', the label 'literature review' can be cringe-worthy. You shouldn't give yourself the opportunity to succumb to its evil forces. Instead, a handy little trick I learnt was to give your thesis, chapters and subheadings nice names. Table 1 includes some useful examples.

Table 1: Examples of document titles

DO NOT USE:	REPLACE WITH:
Thesis	Research diary
Chapters	Diary entries
Literature review	What I read
Methodology	What I did
Results/findings	What I found
Discussion	What I reckon
References	List of stuff I've read

It's such a simple strategy but from personal experience, I found it so effective. When you write about your research in simple terms (ie in English instead of in jargon) it makes things seem so much more straightforward. You can consider your own little word tricks for your empirical chapters (or 'diary entries') if you think it will help you get on with writing your 'research diary'.

Part 3: Getting words on the page

Overview

Actually starting to write, as well as effectively articulating yourself on paper, are often the more difficult aspects of the PhD journey (as well as academic writing more generally). Even the most eloquent and well-spoken individual finds themselves stumped when translating their thoughts into written form. A lot of the skill involved in being a good writer comes from practice. But here are a few tips to help you when starting out, particularly in relation to writing your PhD thesis (oops, sorry - 'research diary'!).

Literature review

Those eagle-eyed and perceptive readers among you will realise that I contradicted my own rule, in using the heading ‘literature review’ here. As I pointed out in part 2, try to avoid using these scary terms when starting out with writing your thesis. A literature review, as its name suggests, is basically your narrative on what you have read. You may find the following steps useful when making a start on writing this section of your PhD thesis.

Step 1: Create separate folders (electronic and/or hardcopy) for each sub-topic area of your research. For example, if your research is examining postgraduate students’ coping strategies and emotional intelligence on academic achievement, then the main sub-folders should include one for the available literature on students’ coping strategies and one on emotional intelligence. Of course, you may find overlaps here (e.g., an article which examines a combined influence of coping strategies and emotional intelligence on achievement). Just use your own judgement in these circumstances.

Step 2: Create a document which briefly outlines each relevant research article. This will probably take the form of a mini abstract but should also include your own observations on how it relates to your research. These observations will be useful later when presenting a rationale for your research.

Example

Overview of study: Smith’s (2008) research aimed to examine the link between violent videogame play and attentional skills in players and non-players. He found a positive correlation between violent gaming and attentional skills in players but no significant correlations in non-players.

Observations: This study was cross-sectional, so I am going to extend this by doing a longitudinal study

‘Figure 1: Example of how to start formulating your literature review’.

Step 3: Now you have a document with a series of outlines of all relevant research articles you can go through and identify common themes and/or inconsistencies across them. Once you have pinpointed the general trends in the literature you can start grouping studies together which present similar findings/ideas. You can then use these ideas to present particular points in your literature review, and use the groupings of studies to support these ideas. Any inconsistencies you find can be discussed as separate points as you progress through your literature review. In fact, any inconsistencies are often a good case for conducting further research, and this is where you can come in.

Record yourself

It can often be quite difficult to express onto paper what you actually want to say. The meaning can get totally lost in the academic jungle of jargon and conventions. One way to help overcome this is to invest in a dictaphone or use another type of audio recorder (e.g. on your phone). Simply recording yourself talking about what your research is (in English, not in jargon), or what your study is trying to find out, can help you express the true meaning of your discourse. You can then transcribe your audio recording and then edit the text to an academic style and include your scientific jargon. See Figure 2 for an example.

Example

Audio recording: "My research is trying to show how playing videogames can be bad. It is looking at how the violence in games can cause aggression."

Written transcription: "My research aimed to show the influence of violent game content on measures of aggressive attitudes and behaviour."

'Figure 2: Example of how your verbal narrative translates into written form'.

Set deadlines with supervisors

Many PhD students find it difficult to maintain the motivation to keep writing. This is perfectly understandable because, really, how many people do you know (other than your fellow PhD colleagues and perhaps supervisors) who write continuously for three (or more) years at a time? It's not exactly a natural thing to do, and humans aren't designed to be able to focus on a single entity, doing monotonous tasks, for long periods at a time. So next time your supervisor accuses you of not pulling out all the stops to get a chapter (sorry, 'little essay') finished, just remind them that you are, in fact, human and not a robot².

One way of helping yourself to stay motivated is to set deadlines. Having a concrete time period can often help you work out macro and micro timescales to help you get your writing done in manageable chunks. If you feel particularly confident, you could even suggest asking your supervisor if you could arrange mutual deadlines with them, so you are working to another person's agenda as well as your own. If you feel this would be counter-productive however, and make you more stressed about getting things done, I would recommend avoiding this strategy. Some of you may find this to be a useful tool in your writing toolkit though, so give it a try and see what works for you.

² Please note, if you strongly suspect that your supervisor may in fact be a robot themselves, please ignore this tip. The author assumes no responsibility for adverse consequences which may result from the content expressed in this resource.

Conclusion

The underlying objective of this resource is to reassure you that whether you are in the primitive stages of starting a PhD, or knee-deep in thesis corrections, the PhD journey is, most often, a challenging one. Regardless of your subject area or research topic, there will be times when you feel like it's all too much. You must not, under any circumstances, see this as a reflection of you as a failure. A PhD should be challenging, otherwise every Tom, Dick and Harry would have one. You are a very clever and determined academic, with every capability to succeed in this venture. Just keep going. The tips and tricks I have outlined in this article are by no means extensive, and are presented simply as suggestions. If you feel they are not for you then that's perfectly reasonable - after all, we are all different. The key is to see what works for you, and if it does work, keep doing it!

About the author:

Dr Linda K Kaye is a Senior Lecturer at Edge Hill University (UK). She started her PhD at the University of Central Lancashire (UK) in October 2007, and finally passed her PhD viva on 24 August 2011. As well as undertaking her own research on the psychological and social impacts of playing digital games, Linda has a keen interest in promoting positive experiences for the students she supports.

Contact us

The Higher Education Academy
Innovation Way
York Science Park
Heslington
York
YO10 5BR

+44 (0)1904 717500
enquiries@heacademy.ac.uk

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