Some Basic Steps in Writing Your MA Thesis

The first step in writing a good thesis is to create a really bad first draft. Give yourself permission to start by writing a huge, blobby mush of proto-thesis, in which you put down everything you have to say, any way you possibly can and in any order; assume that you will figure out what you wish to say—what your key arguments are—along the way. You can always revise—in fact, there’s never been a thesis writer who didn’t need to revise; it’s just part of the game. The good news is that revising is much easier than getting it all down in the first place.

How do you get from proto-thesis to reasonably good second draft? The trick is to gain distance from what you’ve written. Here are the basic, time—and experience—tested strategies:

1. Find kind and honest peers to swap work with and get constructive feedback from.

2. Write to yourself in a “nonacademic” voice, prompting your writing with starters like,

   • What I now see I wish to say is . . .
   • I think the strengths of my draft are . . .
   • Here’s where I think my draft stinks: . . .
   • In writing my first draft, I’ve learned that . . .
   • Here’s what I need to do to get to a decent second draft: . . .
   • What I wanted to say in the first place was . . .
   • I still love this field and wish to go into it because . . .
   • I need to do more research and/or reading in the area of . . .

3. Write two kinds of outlines:

   • Write “descriptive” outlines of your proto-draft in order to see clearly what you’ve done.
   • Write “prescriptive” outlines to show yourself how best to rearrange, add, remove, clarify, and strengthen so as to create a solid second draft.

4. Leave it alone for a while. Write every day, but don’t necessarily work on the thesis every day.