

I finished my Bachelor's degree in 1997. I'd won the university's award for the best degree of the year but I was totally fed up with academic work and university culture. I suppose I was the typical narky scholarship boy from a working-class family – I was separate from other students and bigoted about their laziness – 'dim, middle-class wasters'. I was also alienated by the literary theory which I was beginning to see that I'd been hoodwinked by – I'd spent a couple of years trying to get to the bottom of Lacan, Derrida, Baudrillard etc. and was convinced that there wasn't much there. Also, having been apart from other students I didn't have any idea that I'd been doing well with my marks. When I received my degree I was encouraged by the department to put in an application for a Master's degree by research – a couple of the academics in the department told me that I'd be wasted on teaching. I had already applied to do a PGCE and so I agreed to put in an application while I was doing that.

My PGCE was a far greater challenge than my degree had been and at the end of it I took a job in a middling comprehensive in Essex and turned down the opportunity to study (which seemed narrow and dull by comparison). I did two years full-time in teaching after my PGCE and enjoyed it immensely. However, as I was teaching GCSE and A-level, I soon got a taste for how repetitive the job could become. As I neared the end of my second year I started to rethink my career options. The teachers around me were horribly dispirited and I got the sense that if I didn't get out of the profession early on I might turn out horribly careworn and jaundiced. At this point academic interests started coming back to me. Going back to teaching English in a san

around all kinds of authors that might be useful and had a sketchy sense of how the thesis might break down into various sections.

The first supervision was a breakthrough of sorts. Linda urged me to formulate a number of research questions and to try and get the gist of the thesis into one sentence. It was this activity that turned the raw faeces into a potential thesis! Once I had a guiding question I had a yardstick by which to measure each of the sets of authors I was intending studying. I coupled this with an awareness of the word limit for the thesis. If I had a hundred thousand words to go at I felt I needed to account for the structure of the whole thing very quickly. Planning A-level courses (which last pretty much two years) helped me to clarify how I would apportion my time. I decided on ten chapters of ten thousand words. I allowed ten thousand words for the introduction and the same for the conclusion, leaving two halves of forty thousand words each. I aimed to complete the first half of the thesis by the end of June and then go on to finish the whole thing by Easter of year 2. I could not afford to faff around in my third year and risk not completing the thesis on time so I thought that I would devote a whole year to polishing and redrafting as well as using that time to run chapters by other people, attend conferences and try and get stuff published.

I completed a very rough first draft of the introductory chapter by week 4. I was convinced by L0.2 (u () 0.2 (L) -0.2 (0.2 (u ()) JTJ ET'2 (u () -0.2 (n) -0.2 (d)2 (u () -0.2 (n)-0.2

test the hypothesis against some texts. I spent a couple of weeks researching the background to my first chapter, read the books, planned what I had to say and wrote the chapter in about five weeks. One aspect of the PhD of which I am convinced is that you can't work slowly or the enormity of the undertaking tugs you down and stultifies you. In terms of research I've never been one for slaving over textbooks. I think you have to adopt an SAS or smash-and-grab approach to reading other people's stuff. If you stay confident in your own ideas and intellectual orientation then you can skim over what other people have had to say and collate their ideas judiciously. I'm very much of the opinion that if an idea or analysis is good then it will stick – the rest may as well serve for a good quotation or help build up a sense of a debate and nothing more. In the first five months I must have had well over a hundred different books out of the library. I fill my ticket about every two weeks and then start a new batch. Only two of those 100+ books have stopped me and made me read them in full. I think this approach keeps you regular on intellectual fibre – I can't imagine anything worse than stupidly engorging myself on mediocre stodge. It would constipate my thinking and stop me getting through the chapters at the proper pace.

Crucial to this process was my supervisor's enthusiasm as a reader. I'm not in contact with anyone else – apart from my girlfriend – who is particularly bothered to read my stuff so it makes a massive difference to have a discerning reader. As a teacher I was always sensitive to the knack of encouraging people through the right bala -0.2 (g)0.2(k) 0.2 (t) 0.2 (l) -T Qe) -0.20.2 (e) -0.2 (n) -0.2 (e)iesi(l) -T Q2 (g)0.20.2 ()]

evenings and never work at weekends – just as I refused to do when teaching. I think you have to regard the PhD as a job and don't go along with this idea that everyone has their own patterns and rhythms – you've just got to knuckle down and get on with it in a systematic way.

I completed my fourth chapter by week 7 of term 2 – the time of writing. I will write chapter 5 by the end of April and will revise and add to the introductory chapter by the end of June. By that time I will have completed 50,000 words and will be on course to finish the draft by Easter of year 2. I've then got a year to make my arguments and research watertight and have the opportunity to put myself about a bit without messing up my thesis writing.

At the end of the summer I was offered extra teaching on a third year course in addition to the first-year teaching I had been doing the previous year. I seized on this as an opportunity to do something that was a fresh challenge for the year ahead so as to keep my spirits up.

I started my second year with the decision that not all my writing had to be a draft of a chapter. I wrote an essay on an author that I enjoyed but had difficulty shoehorning into my plan and thoroughly enjoyed the process, rediscovering some of my enjoyment in research and igniting new ideas for the PhD. I think at this point I was becoming less retentive and more capable of immersing myself in the project which, in a way, is what you have to do if you are to do justice to the complexity or elusiveness of what you are writing about.

year. For a start there is the added responsibility of delivering material that has a direct bearing on someone's degree, not like in the first year where it's all up in the air still. And I was also reminded of the huge leaps that students make between their first and third years: it was no longer a matter of simply reading the week's material and automatically being a step ahead. Now I had to spend a good day a week doing secondary reading in order to be properly prepared. How I might have fared without this extra pressure is a moot point: would I have grown listless without the extra pressure or was it weighing me down. Perhaps a bit of both.

Anyway, January gave me serious cause for reflection. I'd had my head down and been charging at this thesis for 16 months and realised that I didn't have the energy to carry on the same cycle of research: gather material, read intensively, sift material, plan essay, write essay, redraft every six or eight weeks. And if you reach that burn out point then I think you have to do something drastic or the whole thesis will just grind to a halt. So I decided to stop accreting and just begin sorting and reworking everything I'd got into five more manageable chapters. I'd found that stuff had cross-pollinated unexpectedly and that the original chapter headings were inflexible and inadequate. Perhaps this is the turning tide that a lot of people mention with regard to PhDs where the waxing of the project has by necessity got to become its waning. I think it is instructive at this point to weigh up just how many words you've come up with and relate that to the size of the PhD as it should be. Without realising I found that I'd accumulated about 130,000 words and so was at the right point to begin hacking it all down.

I started by overhauling two chapters, shuffling other sections and generally rewriting so that I ended up with five big chapters. My biggest breakthrough at this point was to print the whole thing out and take it to the binders. It only cost a fiver yet it gave me a huge sense of achievement to have this project in one place and with an early hint of the satisfaction of the final binding.

After smugly thumping this bound draft down on the table a few times I then read through and realised the enormity of redrafting the thesis. At this stage I decided to abandon making notes in notepads and took to carrying the draft thesis around with me and adding quotations or ideas to the body of the thesis. This was a

helpful tactic and put a halt to too much displacement study – everything was now focused on the finished product alone. I spent some ten full days reorganising my work and smoothing out the creases before I was in a position to think about printing out another draft.

At this point I encountered another obstacle which was that, in spite of all my best efforts, I'd failed to keep my bibliography up to scratch and had also been remiss in keeping to the MHRA style guidelines for references and layout. So I had to spend another five days ploughing through, correcting spacing, reference layout, headings and so on. These five days were incredibly mindnumbing and I'd recommend anyone beginning a PhD to nail all the pedantic presentational points early on so that they become habit.

After another proof read I was now able to hand the second draft of the work in (this being the start of May). Reading over I felt disappointed about the fact that it read as if written at different moments and there was no uniformity in tone and language and a few of the seams were showing. I guess this is where you have to remind yourself of that dictum about academic work only ever being abandoned, not finished. I've been amazed at how infinitely perfectible this work is but it's right to have a deadline that you must keep to whatever your relationship with your work.

After all this I had my blood up for an academic career. At numerous points over the second year I'd toyed with the idea of going back into schools as the prospect of beginning another career – with all the skills and speak and cv-building that go with that – was rather daunting. It's been a steep learning curve seeing how professional and intensive academic work is – a far cry from my original rose-tinted ideas of laidback mornings and red leather armchairs. Nevertheless, I am still intent on having a stab at becoming an academic although school work might be a fallback position if it proves impenetrable.

In terms of submission, I'm going for two years. Linda went through the thesis very carefully and it was agreed that it had reached a good endpoint so I've worked on revisions and it will go in at the end of September. This has freed me up to take a

