



Setting SMART Goals

Setting incremental daily and weekly goals will help you complete your dissertation, thesis, or other long-form writing project. Try the SMART approach for goal-setting. Write goals that are

Specific: Vague aims are your enemy. “Write a lot” or “just get this done” are good intentions, not specific goals. Determine exactly what you will write and how much or for how long.

Measurable: Define your goal in measurable terms—the number of pages you’ll produce, hours you’ll stay on task, or concepts you’ll address. Putting your goals in this form will help you gauge progress and stay motivated.

Achievable: Set goals that you can achieve in the time available—a section you want to start drafting, tables you want to format, a set of reader comments you will work through. If you reach your goal earlier than you expect, use the remaining time to set and work toward a next goal.

Relevant: Consider goals that are most productive and important for you at the moment. Are you trying to produce pages, no matter how messy, to revise later? Determine what belongs in a literature review? Get a text in good-enough shape to give to an advisor for review?

Time-limited: You’ll be most successful if you set small daily and weekly goals that lead toward your ultimate goal. Set an endpoint when you will review and evaluate what is and isn’t working for you and when you will set your next targets.

Further Tips:

Set goals you control and be flexible. If your goals depend on the actions of others (a book arriving from Interlibrary Loan, a draft returned with feedback from an advisor) or if a writing task/approach/location isn’t working for you, make a Plan B.

State your goals in positive terms. Write what you want to happen, not just what you want to avoid.

Prioritize. After you’ve made a list of goals, identify your top three. Focus energy there.

Work backward. Not sure where to begin? Start with the end result and work backward. What do you want to have achieved by the week’s end? Then move backward to your goals for today.

SMART Goal Examples:

- Map Chapter 2 introduction
- Separate out and clearly distinguish between c-Myc and n-Myc in literature discussion
- Reverse outline/reorganize literature review to better spotlight *my* research question
- Produce four pages of new writing that I can later develop, trim, and reorganize