

## Podcasts: What Makes This So Hard? Insights into Thesis and Dissertation Writing

### UNPACKING THE MYTHS (13 APR 2020)

#### Nancy:

Hi, I'm Nancy Welch. I'm a professor in the UVM English department and I'm the coordinator of the Graduate Writing Center.

#### Kristin:

Hi, I'm Kristin Raub. I'm a fourth year PhD student in the Rubenstein School of Environment and Natural Resources where I'm doing my PhD. Um, the dissertation topic is Coastal Resilience at the Nexus of Food, Energy, and Water Systems. And so it's a bit interdisciplinary. So I've also actually got my certificate of complex systems also through the school.

#### Nancy:

So we are here today to introduce the first episode of what we hope will be a continuing podcast series on writing a dissertation or thesis. And for our topic today, we want to start with why writing a thesis or dissertation *really, is hard* and we want to name some of the particular features of this capstone, high stakes, end-of-program, project that make it a real challenge, not just for individuals, but just like, campus-wide, across disciplines. It's something that everyone feels and that doesn't always get named and talked about. So we want to do some naming of the challenges, and we also want to make sure that we end this episode by talking about what can help.

Um, so Kristin, I know that you have, um, been doing some looking around on the Internet for starters to see, uh, what words of wisdom are out there, about why this is so hard. Uh, tell us a little bit about what you found.

#### Kristin:

Sure. Um, so as a PhD student and also to preface, I've also got two master's degrees and this is not just for those in a PhD program. These are just pervasive across all grad school. Um, so as I have personally found myself... kind of... complying with the myth of writing must be done alone in a dark room, quietly crying to yourself, I really was trying to figure out how can I do this better?

I'm, so, I'm a nerd in all aspects of my life, so I like to research. That's what I've been doing. I found a blog post recently which articulates five different ways in which pursuing a PhD in particular, but all grad school, is really challenging. And it just really resonated with me.

So the first is in grad school, while it may not feel like it, there is ample free time. You don't really have a lot of structure, especially when you enter that ABD, that all but dissertation, or that all but thesis realm. You have so much time in these big, giant deadlines. What's really hard is to self-manage and there is a

whole suite of skills to be involved in that. But that's a skill you have to develop and it can be a pretty steep learning curve.

You also have this giant comparison to peers. You put yourself in this very intellectually achieving group of people. Therefore it's really, really easy to feel inadequate. You know, everybody's publishing and everybody's getting grants and funding and awards and this and it's really easy to put yourself into that trap. So again, I used to jokingly prescribe people 10 minutes of reality TV just to put themselves back on a level playing field, you know? But that's challenging as well.

Your progress is really hard to see. You know, oftentimes you're working on these really big drawn out deadlines. What's really hard to figure out... is... Okay, *I am* making progress... When you spent a month and you're working on the same thing, so how do you keep that? The positive side of things. You know, I'm personally just pushed back a deadline for a paper four or five times now, but I also have to remind myself, this isn't even for my dissertation, this is external work I'm trying to publish. I'm doing all these other things. But the positive is really hard to keep into the conversation.

I thought this one was interesting, which you don't see a lot, is the you being a grad student, there's an increased probability of personal emergencies, which typically because you're not an undergrad, as you age in life, your probability of having, you know, kids or family responsibilities or a health emergency pop-up kind of goes up and as, I mean, grad students are all different ages, but traditionally it's slightly an older crowd. So just knowing how to handle that. And is your advisor going to be responsive if you have to cancel a meeting or are they going to understand that you're writing progress is a little bit slow due to a personal emergency?

We're also are even talking about that a lot of the times those are really unseen and that can be really isolating as well.

And then finally, psychological barriers. I mean mental illness is something that is luckily being talked about more and more, but especially in grad school, you don't see somebody as anxiety or depression and grad school only exacerbates those things. So it's really, are you seeing those, how is that impacting your writing and your progress? And is anybody even talking about that? So anyway, of those five barriers, I think they all contribute and especially the dissertation is writing. So are you in a psychological space where that can help your writing? And there's, there's ways to help all of those.

**Nancy:**

Great. Right. And because the dissertation or thesis is writing, um, I'd also like to mention two big myths about writing that further can create challenges for people as they are looking at writing a thesis or dissertation. So one of those big myths, um, about advanced academic writing in general, and a dissertation or thesis in particular, is that writing should get easier as you move through your academic program and career. That is a myth. It is not true.

In fact, as Keith Yordsoy of Cornell University writes, and we'll provide a link to a very helpful and illuminating short ebooklet that he's written, but as Yordsoy writes, graduate school is actually marked by a series of transitions, such as the first papers that you did for coursework, um, mock and then real grant applications, your qualifying exam or dissertation proposal, and then the dissertation or thesis itself.

And at each stage, each transition, the genre or kind of writing, changes, and gets harder and more complex. And you also at each stage, each transition are, um, dealing with audiences that are becoming more specialized and demanding, and the stakes for the writing, um, the real-world stakes for the writing go up. So if you find that writing gets harder, that's because *it is* getting harder for all of those reasons. The genres more difficult, the audiences are more demanding and discerning, and the stakes are high.

Um, another myth is that, um, good writers go it alone. Kristin touched upon this with the idea that somehow you're supposed to go into a dark room by yourself, cry, and come out with a completed baby or dissertation manuscript. But in fact, and I think as researchers in the lab sciences may know this just from their day to day lives, writing as collaborative, conversational, uh, whether you have co-authors, are conversing about and getting feedback from an immediate audience, or whether you're sitting and imagining your audience for this particular chapter, this particular targeted, uh, journal article.

And yet when you reach the thesis or dissertation stage, you, um, may be at a point where immediate audiences and conversationalists for your program, have fallen away. There it's harder to find people other than maybe the kind of the higher stakes audience of your advisor or committee. It's hard to define those people to, um, to talk with. You... uh, it may be that the people who were your cohort, your colleagues when you started the program, are now all over the world doing field work. Um, and it's just you now. And so, um, in addition to the fact that your time is, you know, your own and as Kristin said, that that can be a burden, that work of actually cultivating friendly, low stakes, supportive readers becomes harder. Um, you are often much more alone at the end of your program than you were at the beginning of the program yet you really need those audiences and that support system.

So Kristin, can you think of any other myths that we should be naming or tackling, or should we move into what might help?

**Kristin:**

Well, another big myth, which I personally am very glad I broke a long time ago, is that your first draft must be perfection. And for me personally, the first draft is just the hardest thing to write. I much prefer being an editor. So it's just, I think the Writing Center, which we can, I guess naturally segue into this, is I often use the Writing Center just to get my ideas out. Once I have that first draft organized, then you can start that process of getting feedback and feedback is so important, which again breaks it other myth that writing must be done entirely by yourself. So first drafts are just first drafts, they should hopefully be awful and you're just going to make them great ever since.

**Nancy:**

So maybe we should talk a little bit more about, um, how the Graduate Writing Center can support writers at UVM at this stage. I know, um, for example, Kristin, that one guide that you really like to, um, work with writers on, is the Smart Goals Guide. Can you tell us a little bit more about setting Smart Goals?

**Kristin:**

Sure. So as I like to describe that, basically on your to do list, everybody either has a big giant checkbox that says, write dissertation, or write thesis. And Smart Goals to me, is about breaking that into as many small, manageable, time-restrictive, um, goals that you can. So Smart Goals stands for Strategic, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound. So if you can make goals that have each of those qualities, that is something you can put on a to-do list. So to me, I love my daily to do list. I have a little planner, so I like to sit there and I kind of map out my week with little goals that I can sit there and achieve. So right now I'm working on the second chapter of my dissertation. So sometimes it will be spend one hour coding two papers for my systematic literature review. And that is something where it's two. So that's measurable. I know if I've done two, I cap it at an hour, so I know if that hour has passed and I know exactly what goal I'm working towards with those things.

I'm not saying do systematic literature review, I'm saying do these two papers in this hour that I have and it's something that I can then check off and feel accomplished about. So really it's a, we have a whole handout, and this is something we have, and also, at the Writing Center, if you don't understand our handouts, the writing consultants are here to work with you to make sure that this is a process that can work for you as well, and to develop the skill. It's not something I'm expecting anybody to get overnight. Um, but just that's something where I sit there and I map out my month, my week and my day about what goals am I making that will get me to my bigger, larger goal of, you know, finished dissertation. But that's something that I can do in a measurable way that I can actually feel accomplished about, which is what we all need more of as grad students.

**Nancy:**

And we'll link to the Smart Goals Guide in the program note as well. Um, I will also say that for my own writing, and this was something that I developed, uh, many moons ago when I wrote a dissertation, I find that doing post-writing memos, um, or keeping a kind of notebook coach is very helpful. So, uh, so first, just the, the backstory to this long ago when I had finished all of my qualifying exams and I knew, wow, tomorrow morning I'm supposed to get up and start writing a dissertation, and I thought I won't get out of bed. Like I will stay in bed all day with that thought hanging over me. And so the night before I sat down and I wrote an entry in this, you know, blank notebook to myself saying, okay, tomorrow morning I'm going to start with this and this. And I ended up keeping the notebook through the entire process.

And in fact, even into the, um, probably the first quarter of my academic career, you know, so I would write little midday break notes about what I had accomplished, what didn't, what didn't end up working, what I thought might work instead. And then end of day, okay, here's what I did, here's where I've left off, here's what I want to pick up on next time. Um, and so whether you do it as a notebook or just write a short memo to yourself after every writing session, particularly if the next time you're able to sit down to write isn't until two, three, or more days after, that little memo to yourself about where you were, where you left off and what do you can foresee doing next can really help you get back into the writing. We talk to about more about how the Graduate Writing Center can assist with helping people get back into and stay in the writing. Can you say a little bit more, Kristin, about the kinds of appointments that we have and how they work?

**Kristin:**

Sure. Um, so as I like to say, if it is words, we can help here at the Graduate Writing Center, and that is especially true for all things dissertation, which means not even just writing, but also that planning process just to preface. Um, so we have a whole different slew of appointments and writing options. So I think what, what one thing that, um, Nancy's tip is really relevant for is the concept of warmup time, which is huge for dissertations. Obviously when you're writing you have lab responsibilities and teaching and life things. So sometimes there can be long gaps between your different writing sessions. So really it's important to remember where you are to produce that spin up time.

So at the writing center can do is help you schedule in those times to your schedule. So for example, we have lots of different options. We have Sunday writing retreats, which are wonderful. Those are three hours every Sunday where you can go in and there is coffee and snacks and it's three hours of quiet writing time. You can preschedule and there's also a writing consultant. They're available to consult with you if you need to or not. If you just want a quiet space.

We have Write Space appointment. So again, that concept of accountability. So if you know, you just need an appointment and you just want to tell your advisor, Oh sorry, I can't meet, I have an appointment. You can come in to one of our little quiet rooms and write for an hour or sometimes more if it's available. Um, and again you have access to all of our handouts and snacks and candy and tea.

You can make repeating appointments with a consultant. So especially as you're nearing the end of your dissertation when your draft gets really long and it can be really helpful to meet with the same person on a weekly basis. Again for that accountability as well. Then come in and establish a relationship and work through different portions of your dissertation. Or as I mentioned, if your dissertation is getting really long, we also have our Review and Meet option. So typically if you're coming in we can get through, I don't know, maybe five or 10 pages of text depending on how dense it is in just a standard one hour appointment. But if you have a longer draft, you can send in about 25 pages for review appointment, which you don't come in and consult with. We will, the consultant will read your draft alone and then you come in for a second appointment and then we can actually have a more in depth conversation about where your draft is and how that's progressing.

Um, so those are the different kinds of appointments. But then as for what those physical meeting one-on-one with a consultant appointments look like, it's really whatever you need it to be. If you want an outside perspective, we are really great at that. So our consultants range in all different fields. So just because you're in Rubenstein does not mean you need to come meet with me. I don't know if I mentioned that I'm also a graduate writing consultant. Um, that doesn't mean that you have to come in and meet only with a Rubenstein person. And quite honestly I prefer sometimes meeting with people outside of my home department cause I feel like that objectivity really gives them an a really excellent perspective on my writing. And is it clear and can they get the main point and if somebody else from a different field can get it to me that means my writing is actually doing what it needs to do.

Um, sometimes it can also help with the planning process. Like I personally use the writing center, especially when I'm very early in a draft. Um, especially when I'm planning out my introduction. Oftentimes I just like to come in and talk and then the writing consultant will take notes on the board, kind of tell me what they think they're hearing. And it really helps me outline the main points I'm trying to hit.

Um, additionally, the writing consultants have all developed a very unique vocabulary about all sorts of different writing techniques and tricks and challenges. So to me, I really find it helpful, helpful when I can come in and somebody else can say, "Hey, I think I see this thing happening in your writing. Let's maybe work on this." And then it allows me to then go, "Oh, I see it," and then I can then use that to that trick and tool. Or the handout they provided me. And use that throughout my draft as well. If you can help with this, the answers always been yes.

**Nancy:**

Umm, great. Right. Yeah. And um, and I think that whether you are thinking about making an in-person or online appointment, um, a standing regular appointment with the same consultant, a review and meet appointment, Sunday graduate writing retreat Write Space, um, all of this is meant to help you allocate time for your writing. Um, I think it's, Paul Silva is the name of the author of the book, *How to Write A Lot*, um, that I know that, uh, a number of faculty in psychological sciences encouraged their graduate students to read. Uh, you know, but one of the points he makes is that, um, binge writing, uh, the hope that, okay, maybe in two weeks I'll be able to, you know, lock myself in a room and just, you know, binge right forward for two and a half days, um, that, that's not actually, uh, what leads to successful, productive writing.

Um, but instead it's allocating regular time, even if it's a half hour a day, 20 minutes, while, um, you've got an, an experiment running. Um, but just like regular time with your writing so that it's always present with you that that's what leads to productivity and success. We also aren't trained to allocate time for writing though. People would never dream, I don't think of, um, you know, saying if you know, an advisor or your PI asks you to come in for a meeting, if you were scheduled to teach a class, you wouldn't cancel the class to go to the meeting. Uh, but when it comes to writing, we're so used to canceling it. And so, you know, just another tip is to actually, um, you know, you might even name your writing time, you know, so you might name your writing time, Tina for example. So somebody says, "Hey, can you meet?" "No, I'm sorry, I've got an appointment with Tina." Um, if it feels too weird to say no, I've got an appointment with my writing. Uh, but if you, um, you know, once you begin making appointments at the Graduate Writing Center, you're allocating that time for your writing and your making sure that it's becoming a part of your day to day experience. And, and what you are all about/

Uh, so in the coming weeks we, uh, are hoping to record more podcasts and podcasts that featured the stories of current and recent UVM dissertation and thesis writers and delving deeper into the question of why this is so hard and what can help. And so when we think that doing that through, uh, the particular stories of UVM grad students or, or alumni in the context of their fields can also, you know, help enrich our own sense of what can help.

Um, I will just quickly throw out one more tip and that is, um, from Rebecca Stern who, uh, received her PhD a few months ago and was a graduate writing consultant as well. And whenever somebody would ask her how her dissertation was going, she trained herself to say, "It's going really well. I'm making a lot of progress." And you know, she said that it just completely changed the nature of the kinds of conversations she was having with people about her project. And it changed also, you know, her outlook and made visible as Kristin suggested, the actual progress that she was making.

**Kristin:**

Cool. So I think, um, on that note, the main point of this initial episode and our future episodes is that, you are not alone. I think we're really trying to break that overarching myth. Um, as I've found out, having been in that spot myself is that there are so many books and resources and really wonderful people that are willing to have these great conversations and share advice. So that's the point is if you don't have the time, like I did to go out and read six or seven books and scour the internet, we're trying to distill this down in a way that is useful for you in your very busy schedules. So that being said, in the meantime before, if you, before these next podcast episodes come out, if you are interested, you could make appointments with the Graduate Writing Center by going to [uvm.mywconline.net](http://uvm.mywconline.net) to make an appointment. Or you can visit [uvm.edu/gradwriting](http://uvm.edu/gradwriting). Also, there's a appointment link right on that page. Or there's also links for, to all of the guides that we mentioned in today's episodes, plus many, many more.