



CENTRE FOR GRADUATE STUDIES PhD & MSc (Supervisory Skill)

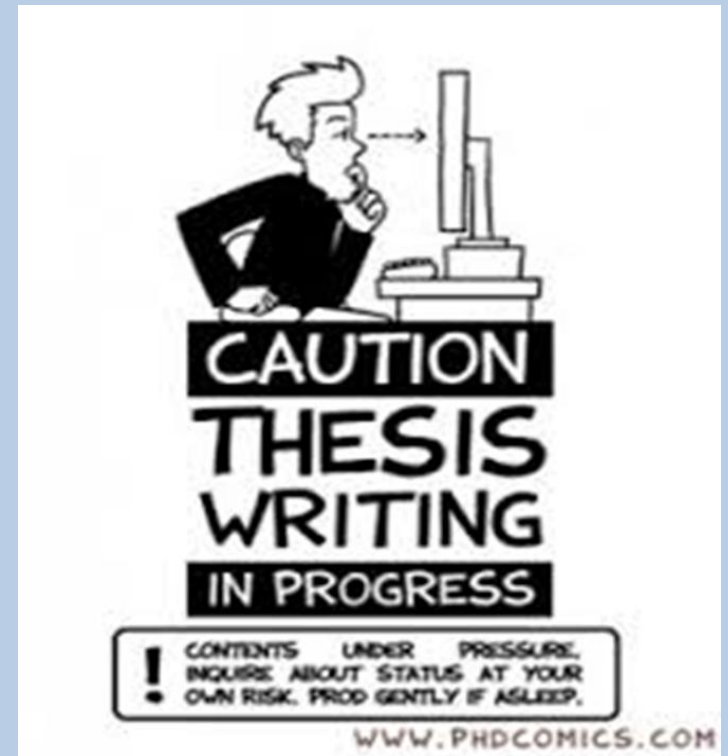
Assisting Students to Write

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11 November 2015

INTRODUCTION

Key principles in thesis writing:

- ✓ Writing is a **thinking PROCESS**:
 - to put thoughts on paper AND
 - to clarify thinking
- ✓ Writing is a **learning PROCESS**.
- ✓ Revision of writing → Quality
- ✓ Regular writing → Fluency



Familiar?

my students
do not plan
their writing

my students
do not know
how to write

I only guide
them in
content.
Writing? NOT
MY JOB!

SUPERVISOR

their writing
seems
disjointed

My students
regurgitate
what they read

GAP

STUDENT

I am writing so
much but it is
never
right/enough

I have no
problem
writing!

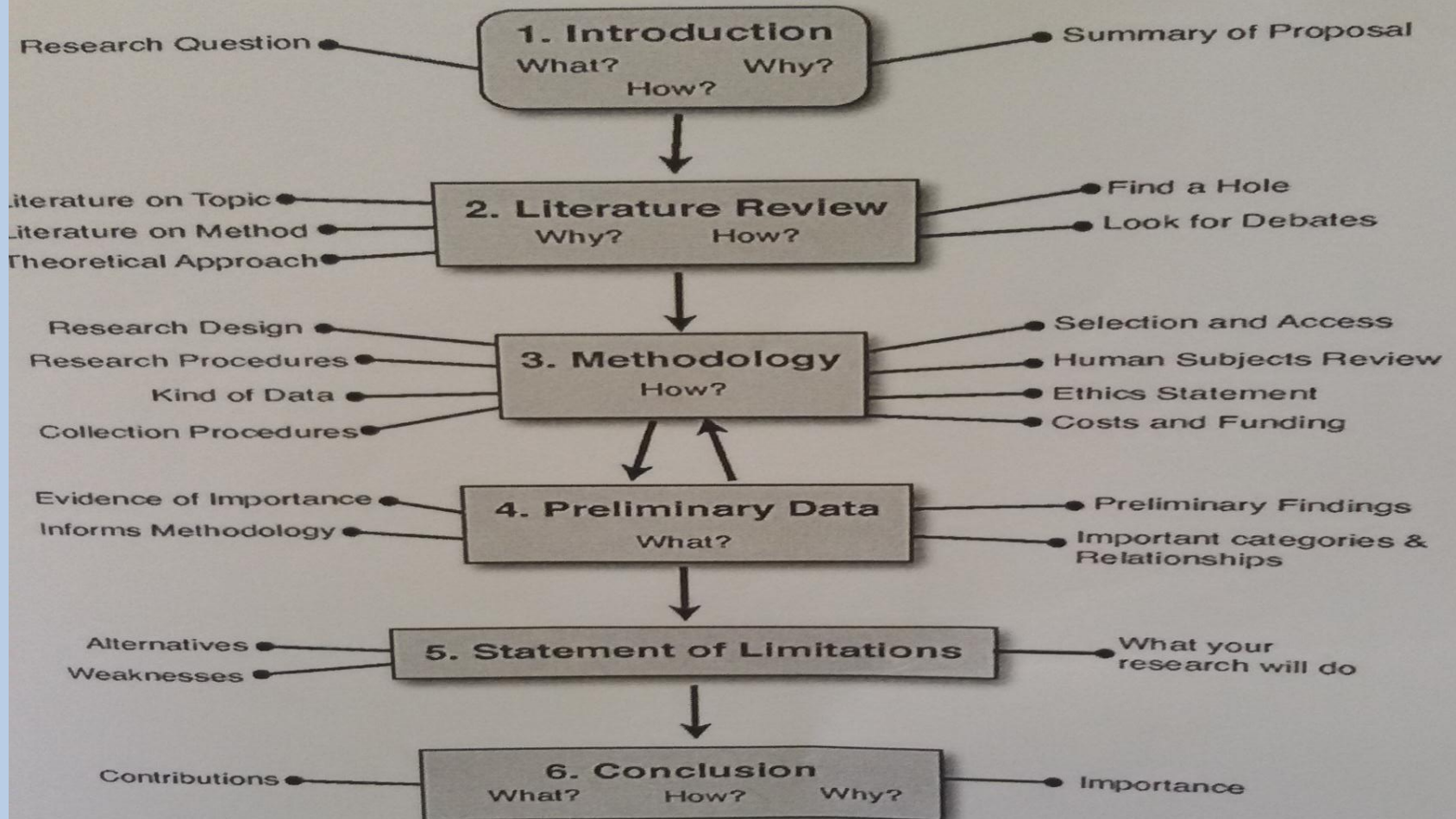
I don't know
what else to
write!

He said write
critically. What
does he
mean?

FIRST THINGS FIRST:

fundamental aspects of writing
that **supervisors need to convey to
supervisees**

Research Proposal Flow Chart



Supervisors must inform supervisees that they expect to see these in their writing:

- clear, concise objectives
- good level of knowledge & in-depth research work
- good thesis statement (reflecting the essence of the thesis)
- detailed description of analysis, evaluation, discussion & conclusion
- appropriate referencing
- appropriate formatting/thesis convention

WORDS, WORDS, WORDS

Skilled writers don't happen overnight!

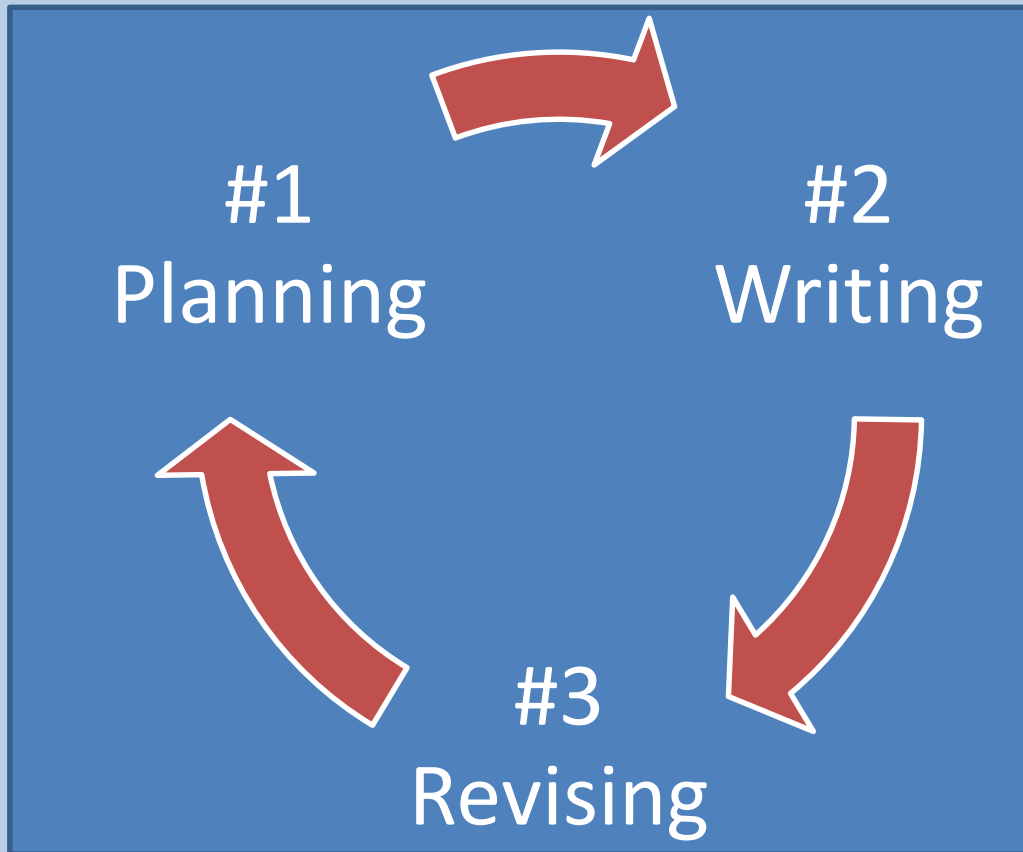
SUPERVISORS can help students with/by:

- planning WHAT to write – use of visuals first may be helpful
- conveying your expectations that they will write drafts after drafts after drafts....
- accepting sections/chunks first
- NOT bothering about the need to have correct grammar, spelling first BUT do emphasise the need for it eventually
- accepting that writer's block may happen (appreciate this, as a supervisor!); and talk this through.



**A REMINDER
TO
SUPERVISORS**

ON TO THE WRITING PROCESS



How can
the
supervisor
help?

What
should the
supervisee
do?

#1 Planning

- Supervisors need to help supervisees PLAN their writing (*Some people are natural planners. Many are NOT.)



Planning: helping supervisees to start writing

Get them:

- to develop the 'writing habit' – write on regular basis & between 500-1000 words per day
- to write about any aspect of their research journey including reflections, frustrations, etc. (NOT just 'content')
- to ALLOCATE time to write (vs finding time to write).

- to do an outline of what they intend to write; discuss the outline with them.
- to structure their writing into an argument
- to prepare a slide show of chapter outline (either before or after the discussion)
- to not be a perfectionist (and **for you to not expect perfection**)!

Planning: Making the outline (for chapters – when supervisees get THAT far!)

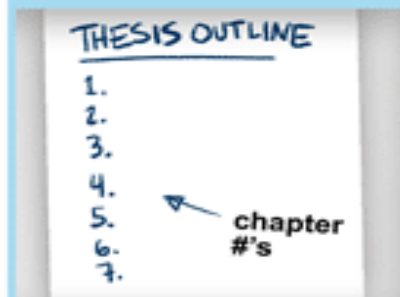
Get supervisees to:

- List the main points that will be considered for each chapter.

WRITING YOUR THESIS OUTLINE

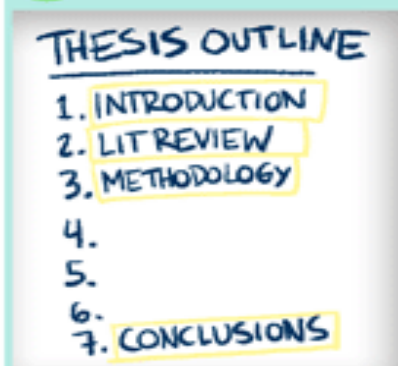
NOTHING SAYS "I'M ALMOST DONE" TO YOUR ADVISOR/SPOUSE/PARENTS LIKE PRETENDING YOU HAVE A PLAN

STEP 1 Aim for a respectable number of chapters:



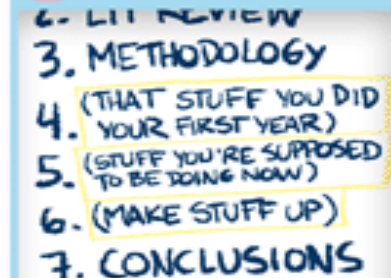
5 = "That's IT??"
6-7 = "Not bad"
8+ = "Are you crazy??"

STEP 2 Fill in the "freebies":



You're half way done!

STEP 3 Make up titles for the "meat" chapters:



(It'll be years before you actually have to work on that later chapter, and by then your thesis topic will have changed anyway)

STEP 4 Voilà! You just bought yourself another two years



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- Make a detailed outline, so that it ends up with a list of points that corresponds to subsections of the thesis.
- Provide feedback on the outline so that supervisees know they are on the right track (or feel comforted)
- Come up with an initial draft of the Table of Contents - usually keywords become the headings and subheadings of the thesis.

At this stage:

- the logic of the presentation can be considered; however, this may change over time.
- the completion of the outline indicates an important milestone in thesis writing.
- you may ask/allow supervisees to give their theses a rest for a day or two and return to them with fresh perspectives.

#2 Writing: Making a schedule

As supervisors, insist on a schedule.

- Ask supervisees to prepare a reasonable schedule for producing writing/chapters.
- The schedule should be broken down into chapters indicating when they are due.
- Ensure that supervisees meet the deadlines that have been set and encourage them to schedule daily writing goals.

Writing: Preparing to write the thesis

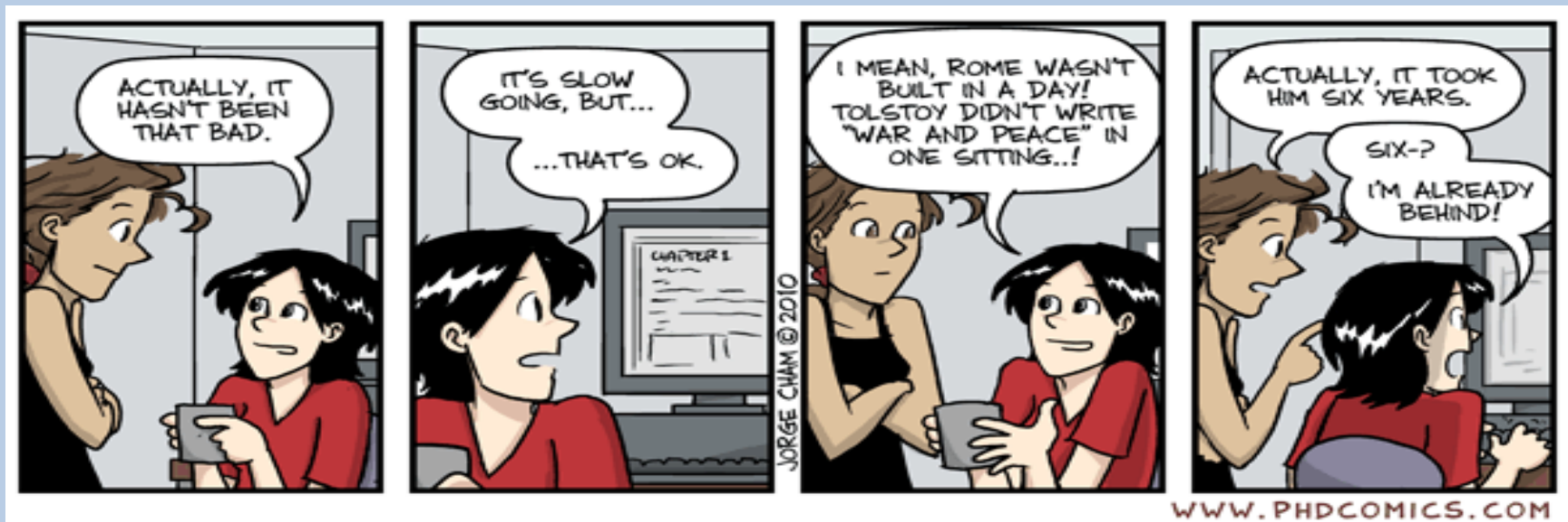
Alert the supervisees that:

- Chaos is to be expected. Mergers may be required. Deletion of parts of writing (for which a lot of time has been invested on) may be necessary.
- The thesis may be organised using any efficient way the supervisees may be comfortable with.
- You may have certain preference on work submission – **explain this to them very early on**. If they too have a preference, discuss and negotiate.
- Backups are to be made since errors, computer crashes, break-ins/thefts, and virus invasions do occur.

Writing: Starting to write the thesis

Ensure that supervisees:

- start from the very beginning; the writing begins even before the “doing”!
- that they are not to wait for the so-called ‘writing-up’ time (writing DOES NOT happen at the end of the research!)



**INFORM YOUR
SUPERVISEES
WHAT REVISION
ENTAILS**

#3 Revising

DEEP LEVEL CORRECTIONS

Change in ideas /
organisation of
content

“see again” from
fresh (new),
critical
perspective

Re-organise ideas,
review
arguments, refine
purpose

Proofreading /
editing

**Surface level
corrections:** grammar,
spelling, punctuation,
sentence structure,
words/terms used etc

Of drafts & revision....(????)

- that **the first cut** is precisely just that!
- supervisors need to provide **critical feedback**, which helps the writing process
- revision is a **process of discovery** (to learn about new links in their ideas and how to re-organize their argument)
- drafts are necessary to fit in various needs in the writing (to make the writing clear).

The Revision Process

a) Revision is necessary – educate the supervisees that revision...

- ✓ does NOT come at the end
- ✓ corresponds to the number of drafts one produces
- ✓ Should also be based on peer feedback

b) Questions supervisors can use to guide supervisees in revision process:

- ✓ Does the argument and purpose remain clear throughout the thesis?
- ✓ Is it considerate to the reader? Is enough information provided to the reader to follow an argument?
- ✓ Does the writer have a sense of the current views of the topic so that the argument remains within the context?
- ✓ Does the introduction of the thesis clearly state the ideas and explain its significance? Does it attract the reader?

- ✓ Does the body of the thesis cover the major points?
- ✓ Are the transitions/connections from paragraph to paragraph clear?
- ✓ Are the major points supported by sufficient amount of evidence and analysis?
- ✓ Does the conclusion follow logically from the introduction and body of the thesis?
- ✓ Are figures, diagrams, formulae, charts, and tables located near to the text to which they refer?

c) Other elements to consider in the later stages of the revision process:

❑ Balance - examine the balance within each chapter:

- ✓ some sections are too detailed?
- ✓ a trivial point is given more attention than an important one?
- ✓ Details are given too early before the larger picture?

❑ Redundancy:

- ✓ unnecessary words are deleted?
- ✓ why use unnecessary words in the first place?*

(* The nature of language is that it is economical. If a person uses redundancy, then 'other' messages are communicated. On the other hand, there might be a reason for this!)

❑ Support:

- ✓ the thesis answers the research question?
- ✓ can the audience follow the thread of discussion?
- ✓ are claims supported in the thesis?
- ✓ any strong arguments provided to defend the position taken?
- ✓ vivid examples provided to support the points?
- ✓ examples are reliable, representative, and convincing?
- ✓ opposing viewpoints are considered & acknowledged?

❑ **Paragraph development:**

- ✓ topic sentences (main idea of a paragraph) link to an argument?
- ✓ topic sentences establish a link with the content of the previous paragraph?
- ✓ topic sentences provide enough information to help the reader understand?

❑ **Shifting order:**

- ✓ Could some things be shifted or moved around in order to enable the reader to follow the argument better so that the thesis reads better?

❑ **Accuracy:**

- ✓ facts accurately presented?
- ✓ any misleading statements?
- ✓ any statements with gross generalizations?
- ✓ sufficient detail provided to maintain readers' interest?
- ✓ citation presented appropriately?

❑ Concluding:

- ✓ the last paragraph ties in nicely with the rest of the chapter?
- ✓ chapter ends on an inspiring note? creates a lasting impression? ends abruptly?

❑ Use of published material/sources:

- ✓ original thoughts acknowledged?
- ✓ direct quotations used appropriately and effectively?
- ✓ proper citations are provided to avoid plagiarism?

When the final is not really the final...



PROVIDING QUALITY FEEDBACK



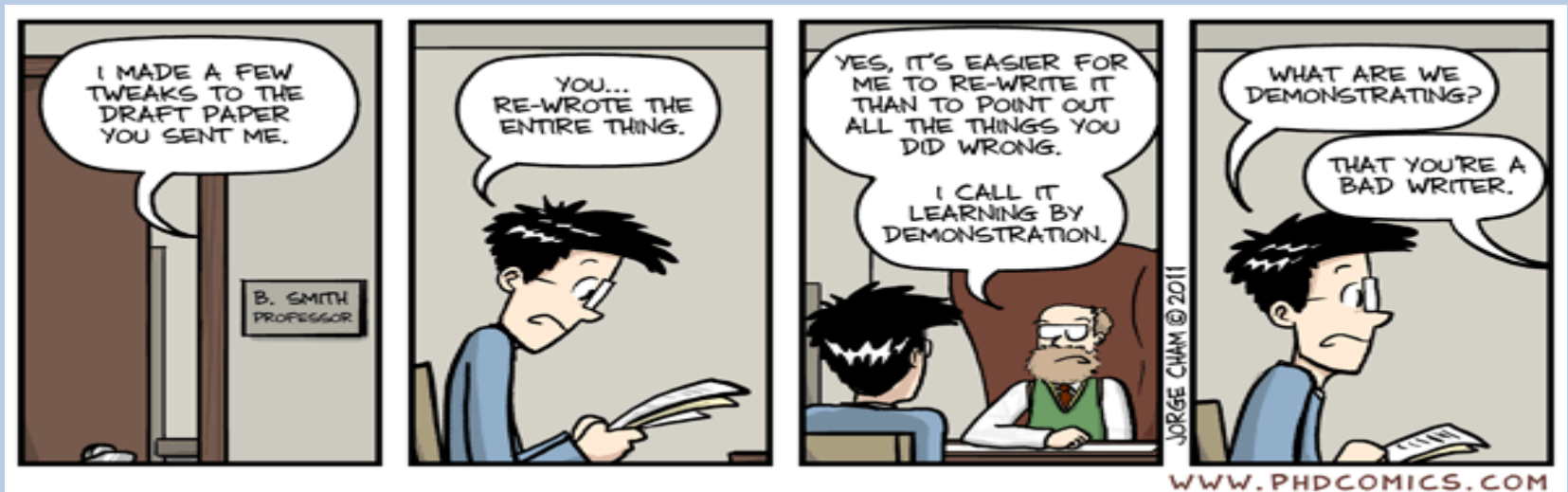
Why is feedback important?

- It provides direction for the writer to improve writing
- It tells the writer if writing goals have been achieved.

Problems with feedback:

- NO feedback!
- Feedback that is only at surface level, too little, too few, negative, nothing positive
- Not well directed / well communicated
- Illegible writing / Incomprehensible acronyms

- Conflicting feedback from supervisory committee/co-supervisors
- Feedback that does not encourage learning/ self-reflection
- Feedback that KILLS motivation.



LANGUAGE MATTERS



- WEAK written/reporting/thesis language is as much a reflection of the supervisor as it is of the thesis writer.
- It is the job of the non-language specialist supervisor to:
 - introduce the new scholars to academic discourse (the style etc)
 - point out the important role that language plays in the delivery of research work that they do
 - point out language issues (and highlight the nature of weaknesses) to the supervisees
 - Get/persuade supervisees to get language help.