

Reading for a PhD

I'm often asked what is enough reading to do for a doctorate. Well, it depends... I have supervised a couple of students who got lost in the reading. They loved doing the reading so much, that they just carried on and on and on and never moved to constructing their own texts. But to be frank, the much, much, much more common problem I have encountered is students who have just not done enough reading.

So, how much is enough? In this piece I will outline a few considerations.

First off, it's worth noting that where we in South Africa say we are *studying* for a degree, in the United Kingdom people often speak of *reading* for a degree, so you might hear someone say "I'm reading for my degree in microbiology." I like this turn of phrase because it shows that reading is the central focus of any higher education studies. You cannot get a doctorate without hours of reading.

According to national legislation, a PhD takes 3600 notional hours. These hours are notional, some will need more and some will need less than this, depending in large part on how familiar you were with the relevant literature before you started, but this is a useful average to work from. For a 4 year PhD, this works out to 900 hours a year and for a 5 year PhD this equates to 720 hours a year. Then if we allow 4 weeks per year for holidays and weeks where your teaching workload is simply too heavy to even get to the PhD, this means 48 weeks a year where you work on the PhD - which is 18 hours *every week* for a 4 year PhD or 15 hours *every week* for a 5 year PhD.

It's not that PhDs are difficult so much as that they demand utter commitment and resilience!

But how should you be spending these many hours? That differs from discipline to discipline. In many applied fields in the Natural Sciences, for example, a great many hours are spent in the laboratory or the field, while in most Humanities and Social Science fields, by far the most time will be spent reading and writing, with a much smaller percentage of time collecting and analyzing empirical data.

The Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (2012) states that a doctorate "is a contribution to the frontiers of a discipline or field". So it is absolutely vital that PhD scholars have a strong sense of where these frontiers are. What are the current debates and theories about the phenomenon you are studying? What research has been done before your study came along?

If you're not steeped in the literature on your phenomenon, you're in absolutely no position to make a contribution. And those hours of work I mentioned - most of them are spent on

reading and writing for yourself to figure out what's happening in the field so you get a sense of where your contribution fits to build or to challenge those frontiers.

So exactly how many texts do you need to read? Well, that's like asking: How long is a piece of string? It just depends. Do you have a strong grasp of the theory you are using? Do you know what the current thinking is about the problem you're addressing? Do you know what the key debates in the conversation are? If you answered yes to these questions, then chances are you've done enough reading. If you answered 'No' then you need to hit the books again.

A cruder measure of whether you are reading enough would be to look at the reference list at the end of a PhD. The length of this also varies extremely from discipline to discipline and even from thesis to thesis. In Physics, the number of citations might be as low as 40, in the Humanities, you're probably going to have well over 200 items on your reference list.

Now remember, a reference list is only a list of those texts that you have used in your thesis. It is not a list of all the texts you have read. Quite a bit of the reading that you do to figure out what's happening at the frontiers of the field won't make its way into the final document. Also, some of the readings on the reference list, you may have looked at just once but most you would have read over and over again.

You're also going to be doing different amounts of reading at different stages of the research journey. Some weeks you'll be steeped in the data and not even look at the literature at all. But a very, very rough rule of thumb is that you need to read at least a couple of articles or chapters every week.

Now here's the good news. Reading and writing are both *practices*. They are not skills that you either have or do not have. If you believe that you're not good at reading and writing, it simply means you haven't done enough reading and writing.

Here are a number of additional resources that might help you to build those reading muscles:

- I strongly recommend watching the video on how to keep [reading journal](http://postgradenvironments.com/2017/09/11/keeping-reading-journal/) to help you with this process. <http://postgradenvironments.com/2017/09/11/keeping-reading-journal/>
- [Writing resources book](http://postgradenvironments.com/2017/02/24/supporting-academic-writing-practices-postgraduate-studies/) - see especially the section on keeping a reading map. <http://postgradenvironments.com/2017/02/24/supporting-academic-writing-practices-postgraduate-studies/>

- Two minute tips - these short videos outline how your relationship to the literature changes at postgraduate level.
- <http://postgradenvironments.com/2018/08/06/2-minute-tip-1-joining-the-conversation/>
- <http://postgradenvironments.com/2018/08/06/2-minute-tip-2-relationship-to-texts/>
- <http://postgradenvironments.com/2018/08/06/2-minute-tip-3-direct-and-indirect-quotes/>

- [Just Write video](#) - this video shows the indivisible link between reading and writing at postgraduate level (Remember the mantra: “For every reading there must be a writing.”). <http://postgradenvironments.com/2017/02/23/just-write/>

Let me end here so you can go off and get on with some reading!

Sioux McKenna

Director: Centre for Postgraduate Studies



Enhancing
Postgraduate
Environments

