

# The Three Month Thesis

a short guide to writing fast

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## a short guide to writing fast

This is a guide for anyone who's ever found themselves struggling to stay awake in a lab, in a library, or in front of a computer at 4 AM

It's for anyone putting in hour after hour of work, but still feeling frustrated by their progress. It's for anyone who's stared at a computer screen wondering where to start, or worked for weeks on a chapter but still can't quite seem to finish the thing

It's for anyone who's suffered from procrastination or lack of focus, or just wishes they could spend less time at the desk

This guide is for you; if you want to find better ways of working that will help you finish faster, write quality and keep a balanced life.

It's all about understanding a few effective principles. If you get stuck- and it happens to everyone- the chances are it's one of the principles listed here that you're neglecting. Refer back to the short guide and you should find an answer

Good luck!

James Hayton

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# Default habits

Success is down to what  
you repeatedly decide to do

Everyone has default habits. Those things you do without thinking. A lot of the time they're helpful, like remembering to brush your teeth.

Sometimes, though, they can be destructive without you noticing

Because research is often long-term and frustration is the norm, the damaging effects of your routine can go unnoticed, because there's no immediate massive pain to make you stop and rethink what you're doing

If this is the case, then it usually takes some traumatic event to make you think about your habits

In the meantime, stress can build unnoticed, slowly eating away at your sense of well-being. External sources seem to be the cause of stress- your boss, your colleagues, your equipment, your research. Actually, it could be your routine which makes you vulnerable to it

Really, this whole guide is about your default habits: your patterns of thought and behaviour. After all, success is down to what you repeatedly decide to do.

You can manage and change habits without waiting for a mental breakdown, as long as you're willing to look- and that's often the hardest part

# Challenge Your Assumptions

The assumptions you make about a situation affect the way you deal with it. How do you expect the thesis writing process to be?

I'm sure you know other students who have written, or are writing their thesis. Maybe they told you it would be a nightmare... But that doesn't mean it has to be a nightmare for you

In fact, if other people find it tough, that's just a good reason to prepare yourself to approach it differently

If you truly believe you'll struggle, then you will. Let go of that assumption now. It is possible to write fast. It is possible to enjoy it. If you are productive and happy, carry on, but if you're not, you need to look at what you're doing and be prepared to think and act differently

The aim is not just to get through thesis writing

The aim is to spend *less time* writing, but be productive, happy and confident during that time. The aim is to keep control of your life, write quality and be successful. These aren't bonus targets, they're basic

Put effort into these other goals, and you have a better chance of achieving them. It's about demanding a higher standard for yourself and your work. Assume anything is possible

# The Value of Time

How much is your time worth? You can always earn, borrow, steal or forge more money, but time; you never get back

One month of your time, or a year, or 10 years is a huge investment. Whatever you do, ask yourself how much of your time it's worth

I've heard of PhDs taking over 10 years, which I think is insane. If this is you, what are you thinking? What are you getting out of this that's worth 10 *years*?

In 10 years, the computer you started working on will be an antique by the time you finish. It only took 7 years from JFK's famous speech in 1962 to put men on The Moon. The only reason not to be finished after 10 years is because you don't want to

The simple, unavoidable fact is that eventually we run out of time. Terminally. The only decisions that matter are how we chose to spend that time

Put a value on your time, and decide how much it's worth investing in completing your thesis. Do that, and the other elements can fall into place

Nothing is more valuable than your time. Saving time isn't about working harder or longer hours, but working smarter with focus on the things that matter

# External circumstances

“Brick walls are there for a reason; they let us  
prove how badly we want things”

- Randy Pausch

Are you in control of your work?

Or do external circumstances determine your success or failure?

The principles on the following pages can help guide you through the thesis writing process, but there's one thing they can't do, and that's to take responsibility for your destiny

Whenever I advise students, I don't just look for the problems they have, but the way they feel about their work and the challenges they face

When I hear reasons why people can't do certain things... “That won't work for *me*, because I don't have the discipline” or “but my supervisor thinks *this*, or won't let me do *that*”... It's often lacking a feeling of control that causes feelings of frustration

The simple fact is that 90% of your circumstances are within your control. Often we make assumptions about obstacles which simply aren't true

The most important factors usually aren't external, but internal. It's about what you **choose** to think, feel and do



# External circumstances

You'll always be able to find obstacles, if that's the way you think

But if you are **resourceful** enough, **imaginative** enough, and if you *want it enough*, there is always a way forward

Whenever you come up against an external obstacle, look at your reaction to it first. What do you feel? What do you think? What do you do?

Often, we don't take time to think about how we respond. If you feel frustrated, angry, depressed, you can never be at your most effective.

So a better approach is to step away from the source of frustration, spend some time thinking it over, then come back having decided on a course of action

There are always options. You can choose how to think and how to react, as long as you believe there is a better solution than getting frustrated

Taking responsibility isn't about blame for when things go wrong, it's about making conscious decisions to **take immediate control** of your own circumstances

# External circumstances

“I believe that it’s in your moments of decision that your destiny is shaped”

-Anthony Robbins

Spend time deciding what you are going to do

Do you find yourself procrastinating? It’s because you haven’t decided what to do, so you’ll find something to fill the time. Often it’ll be based on your default habits

If you want a feeling of control, make more decisions. Don’t worry about whether they’re the right ones. Just decide

It helps, of course, to know what your aims are so you can make decisions accordingly, but above all, decide that you’re going to succeed. After all, writing your thesis isn’t the hardest thing you’ll ever do.

And so, having decided to succeed, read the following pages, and let nothing hold you back.

# Effective targets

Targets are often overlooked, but they give you a framework for making decisions. The way you set your targets has a huge influence on whether you'll achieve them.

Whether thesis writing or looking at your life as a whole, there are **three levels** of targets to use. If you're missing any one level, you could be in trouble

Setting real targets isn't just about writing goals down, but about truly seeing yourself completing them, and visualising the process too. If you can't imagine it, it'll be difficult to actually do. Imagination costs nothing. And it works.

## 1. Long-Term Targets

These give you your overall direction and motivation. It could be "finish thesis by the end of September" or "own my own house by the age of 30".

It doesn't matter how big the dream, but it must be focussed on the **result**, not the action you have to take; so "**finish**" thesis, not "**write**"

Make it real. Imagine what it will feel like to submit the thesis, with the final printed draft in your hands, the smell of the warm paper fresh from the printer, and the pride you'll feel at a job well done. It's going to be fantastic

# Effective targets

## 2. Medium Term Targets

Your long-term target might seem impossible, but the key is to break it down into medium-term steps- achievable milestones en route to the final goal

This could be on a yearly, monthly or weekly basis depending on the size of the long term goal

Of course, you can adapt the medium term targets as circumstances change, but they must stay focussed on the long-term goal

## 3. Short-term Targets

What are you going to do, **right now**, to move yourself in the right direction?

When you decide what to do each day, keep your long and medium term targets in mind. If what you do doesn't move you towards those goals, then you need to **rethink your strategy**

Do you know what your medium and long term goals are, and when you plan to achieve them? Do you think about them before deciding what to do each day?

# Limited time

“Work expands so as to fill the  
time available for its completion”

-Parkinson’s Law

Whenever you set targets, you also need to limit the time available. The tighter the schedule the better.

What this does is to force you to focus on the most important task right now. Whenever the time available is open-ended, it’s far too easy to get caught up in pointless detail

Sometimes, finishing a chapter can be the hardest part. It’s easy to end up worrying over irrelevant details, spending time working, but moving no closer to finishing

The aim is not to “spend time on” your thesis. **The aim is always to finish, no matter what it is you’re doing.** Even if you’re working on a first draft, make sure it’s complete

Every section or chapter you give to your supervisor must be complete, for the simple reason that they’re less likely to recommend huge changes to work that looks finished

# Limited time

Fortunately, as long as you can recognise that this is what you're doing, then you can do something about it

Just taking 20 minutes to write down everything you need to do in order to finish your chapter can help you to refocus on what needs to be done

Any minor details you want to spend huge amounts of time on, finish the chapter first then ask yourself if it's worth it

For every extra detail, imagine it costs \$30 per hour to do... Still important?

Your time is valuable. Treat it as such.

Some supervisors will give you a to do list with every idea they have written on it, but often they'll forget what they wrote and won't actually expect you to do them all anyway. So, make time the limiting factor, and cut down on your to do list

Of all the things you could possibly do, some will produce better outcomes than others. So it makes sense to decide what those courses of action are

# The 80:20 Principle

Whether you're deciding what to include in the thesis, or how to go about your research, bear in mind the following rule of thumb

## **20% of the input accounts for 80% of the value**

OK, so the ratio varies, but the principle holds. If you had just 10 minutes to tell somebody the most important aspects of your work, what would you choose? Likewise, if you only had three months to finish your research, what would you do?

Dedicate the majority of your effort (80%) on the small fraction of your work (20%) that matters the most

## **20% of the action will produce 80% of the progress**

- Limit your time available,
- Apply the 80:20 principle,
- Concentrate on what matters the most right now and
- Whatever you aim to do, finish

# The habit of constant success

Success is an addictive habit, and a useful one!

Every target you meet will feel good. Create a habit of success by achieving something every single day. The way to do this is to set targets you can actually achieve. Every aspect of your thesis can be broken down into small steps

So you should never write anything like “write literature review” on your to-do list. Instead, that should be a medium term target with a defined finish date

Break the literature review into individual, specific tasks or points you want to make. The more you can break it down, the better

Ideally, make your list up of tasks which will take no more than 2 hours to finish. If anything is going to take longer, break it down into smaller steps

Then each of these you can check off your list as you achieve them one by one

It's important to stay focussed on each task until it's complete. The more incomplete sections of work you have, the more stress you'll end up feeling

**Always leave yourself something easy to do to start the day from the night before.**

The earlier you have your first success of the day, the better you will feel, and that's really what it's all about 😊



# Consistent, visible progress

As well as specific targets, which change as you meet them, set constant, unchanging ones too

One of the most common problems you might come across when writing, is the feeling of inconsistent progress. Some days you'll produce a lot, other days, almost nothing. It can be incredibly frustrating, and lead to a feeling of a lack of control

So, you need a baseline target you can achieve **every single day**- easy enough to succeed every time, but large enough to make significant progress. I recommend you aim for a minimum of **500 words per day**

If this is your minimum, the *average per day* will be higher, and you'll make rapid progress. It feels good to meet your targets, but it feels **fantastic** to beat them

More importantly, if you can see that progress as a reward for your effort, you can finish each day happy with what you've done. It takes the pressure off, lets you stop while you still have something to say- making it easy to start again tomorrow

Use the grid on the following page to visualise your daily word count. Print the page and stick it on the wall above your monitor. Do it now. If you don't have a printer, make your own by hand- it's easy enough

It's a small thing, but often the smallest things make the biggest difference. It feels good to mark your progress, and anything you can do to feel good about your work is worthwhile

				Date
,000 words				
,000 words				
Each box = 500 words. Print this sheet, put it on the wall somewhere you can see it, and fill in your progress at the end of each working session. You can use the column on the right to set target dates for each 2000 word row. Write a minimum of 500 words per day and it will quickly add up! Once you pass 20,000 words, just print another sheet. Good luck!				

# Start With "Why?"

Imagine your thesis complete, and arriving on the desk of a busy academic you have never met. It's an interruption of their time, and as you know, most academics have little to spare

The first question they ask will be, "why is this important?"

It doesn't matter how competent your research is if it's not important. So you had better be sure you know the answer before you start writing

It's a very simple question, but an important one to ask yourself. It's good practice to try to explain to friends and family members what you do and why it matters (of course it helps if you believe in the value of your work)

If you can show interesting reasons why your work matters beyond your niche, you'll engage with the examiner on a deeper level than if you go straight into technical detail

Start with a broad view, why it matters to the world at a very simple level. Why should anyone care? Then go into more technical detail-showing that you are competent. Then describe what you've done, and how you have contributed

Any open questions can then be related back to the wider field, giving your work extra relevance and reinforcing the "why"

# Adding Value

It is rare that any examiner will wish your thesis was longer, unless they enjoy reading it. So, you should always focus your effort on the **quality of content**, rather than making it longer

Every single section, every reference and every diagram has to add some value to the thesis. “More” in itself, isn’t a worthwhile target

I use literature reviews as an example because they’re difficult and everyone has to write them

Do you need to make it longer by citing more articles, or do you look for papers to fulfil a **specific need**?

It’s a classic mistake to take a stack of papers matching a keyword, then try to cite them all

You should only cite a paper...

- **To support one of your arguments**
- **To provide extra information**
- **As sources of reliable data**
- **To provide context or comparison for your work**

Everything you add has to add some value- if it doesn’t, then you’ll actively make the thesis worse

# Organising Ideas

Your thesis is made up of layers of ideas. The way you organise them is key. Do you just sit and write, or do you clarify the idea in your head first?

Some people advise just sitting and writing- get anything down on the page as long as you are making progress... You can always edit later, right?

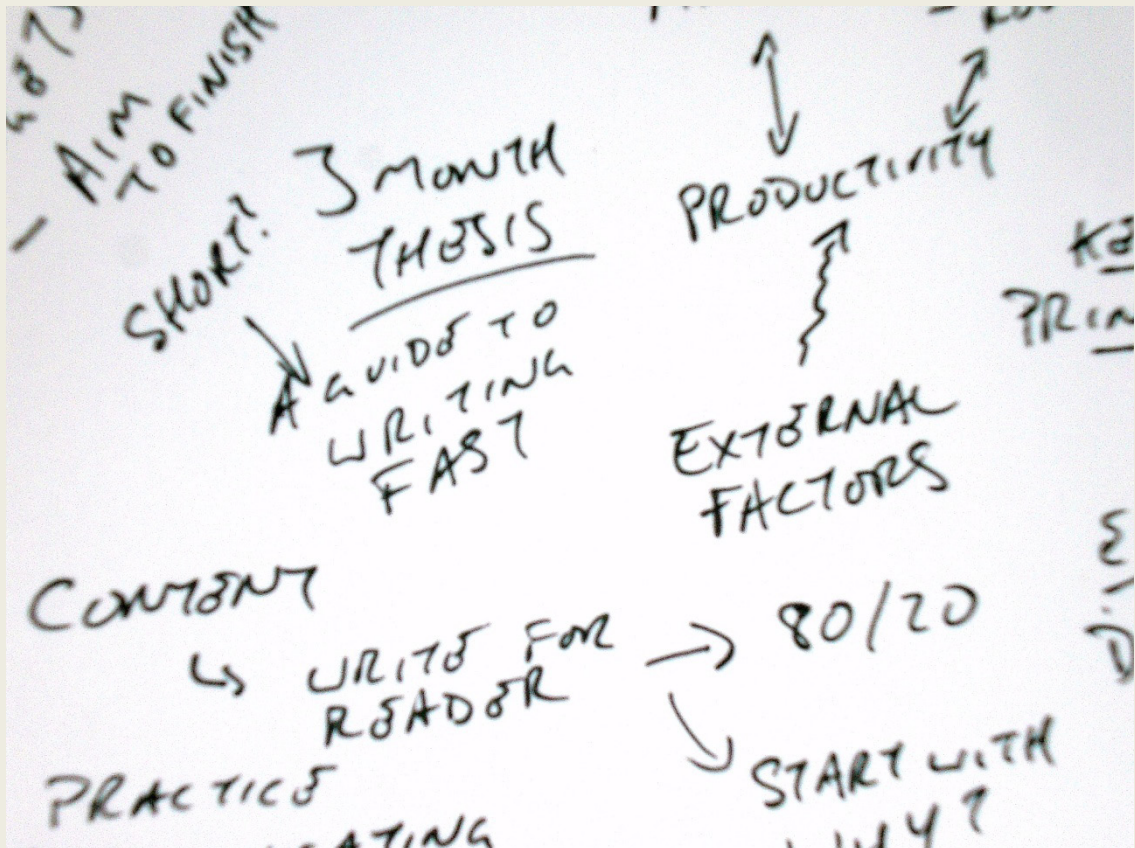
The problem is that it's false progress. You might write 2000 words, but then have to edit the whole thing. Worse, once it's on the page, it's hard to rearrange the structure of ideas

It's far better to make a rough draft using pen and paper. Get all the ideas out of your head and onto the page, then take another sheet and plan the structural flow from one idea to the next

You don't build a house by starting with bricks, then rearranging if you don't like it, so don't do that with the thesis. Use at least 2 drafts on paper, first pouring out the ideas you have, then putting them in order. You'll find it's faster to write and there'll be less editing

If you end up with a half-complete chapter, with ideas which don't seem to link together, it's probably from missing this first stage. Start again. It's liberating, and you can copy and paste into a new, clearer structure

# Organising Ideas



Start just by getting ideas on paper, using ink, then put the ideas in order, then start typing. Brainstorming while typing is like redesigning a house once half the walls are up

# Mindset and Routine

Every writer knows the effect of their mood on productivity. There are some days when it's easy, and others when you'll struggle to write a paragraph in a whole day's work

It's an incredibly important factor, but one that most people leave to chance

How do you create that easy "flow" state on demand?

Athletes use rituals and warm-ups before going out to compete (or even just to train), to prepare their body and mind to consistently perform to the highest standards possible

It's too important to leave it to chance. When you sit down at the computer, are you ready? Have you done anything to prepare for the work ahead? Or are you following default habits?

If the first thing you do is check email, does it help you get into a working state of mind, or does it lead you down a path of distraction and procrastination?

How long does it take before you achieve something each day?

If any of these questions feel awkward to answer, it's time to honestly reassess your routine

# The On/Off Principle

Are you working, or simply “at work”?

Physically being at your desk means absolutely nothing if you aren’t achieving anything. All you’re doing is wasting your own time when there are far more enjoyable places to be

At any given time, when sitting at your desk, are you “on” or “off”?

Are you concentrating on one thing, with focussed effort to finish it quickly, or are you part-working, part-instant messaging, part web-surfing?

Too often, we think of the working day as a number of hours to fill, rather than what we want to achieve. It’s impossible to concentrate intensely for 8 hours, so we end up in this half-on half-off state, but without the benefits of either

Dedicate short bursts of time to achieving one thing, then get away from the computer. I use 25 minute intervals with 5 minute breaks, then take a longer break after 4 intervals. It works, but relies on deciding what to concentrate on and doing nothing else

If you could spend 4 hours a day truly concentrating, couldn’t you get more done than in 8 hours of web-surfing? It means you could go home early, too



# 2 hours to change your life

## Try this tomorrow...

As soon as you get up, start thinking about what it is you **are going to achieve** by the end of the day. Do not check email. Have your shower, do whatever you do, but start to focus on what you are going to do as soon as you get to work and how you're going to do it.

Whatever it is, imagine it **already done**

Use your time on the way to work to think it through in detail, using all the senses you can

How long will it take?

Is there anything you need to do first?

Is there anything that might stop you?

This is your relaxed time, but use it to get into a working state of mind

You should know what you're going to work on **before** you turn on the computer.

Set a timer and work in 25 minute bursts with 5 minute breaks where you get away from the desk to refresh your brain and stretch your legs. If you get the urge to do something else, write it down and carry on

Don't check email until you've done 2 hours work

# Contrast and Balance

In any creative field, and thesis writing is certainly creative, the brain needs time to relax. You need contrast in your weekly schedule. If all you do is sit at a computer, you'll be miserable and ineffective and feel that the thesis is taking over your life

The **first things** you should make time for are those that you enjoy doing. They aren't a bonus, they're **compulsory**

There are two possible approaches. One; you say "I don't know if I can meet my friends tonight because I have to work on my thesis". This is a passive approach (not good).

Two; you can say "I have to finish these 500 words, because I am going to meet my friends tonight". This is proactive. You are in control

It uses the same principles of **limiting time** (spent on the thesis) and **making decisions** I talked about earlier

Getting away from the computer when you aren't working means you can be more effective when you are there

If you're on, you need to know what you want to achieve, and by when. If you're off, relax! Decide whether you are on or off, and commit time to both if you want a balanced life

# Contrast and Balance

Look after your basic needs, be comfortable, eat well, sleep well.

Everyone has different demands on their time, but the busier you are, the more attention you need to pay to your physical and mental health.

There's no justification whatsoever for self-neglect, and never assume that it's necessary to get the job done. If you regularly feel run down, get colds and lack energy, it's a warning sign that you need to take more care of yourself.

Maintain part of your life protected from your thesis. For me, it was sport, and the commitment to coach 4 times per week and train for competition. Whatever it is, cherish it and keep it as a compulsory part of your routine.

If you don't want the thesis to take over your life, all you have to do is decide to create some boundaries. It's easier to do than you think

# Moving On

Finishing your thesis is a transition point in life. Whatever you choose to do next, things are going to change

You are now the expert in your own particular niche. Nobody else in the world has done exactly what you've done. You have the ability to conduct your research independently, in a way you couldn't have done when you started

So now it's time to move on, whether in academia, industry, or in some completely unrelated field

What to do with your life is a tough choice, but the only rule is to pick a direction. Don't drift into an academic career just because you don't know what to do, or because it feels familiar

Postdocs can be great, but you need to know why you're doing one and where it's going to lead you?

Permanent positions are hard to come by, so if that's the direction you choose, **by when** do you plan to get one? Keep in mind the 3 levels of targets I mentioned earlier, short-, medium- and long term, and add limited time. You can apply this method of setting targets to just about anything you want to achieve

# Moving On

If you want a permanent contract by the age of, say, 35, pick your specialist niche, however small, and become the best in it. It's the only way to avoid drifting from postdoc to postdoc

If you have this defined target, it helps you make decisions about what job to take. It can help you focus on finding the best mentors and facilities for you, and publishing the best and most original research.

If you have the drive and passion to become the best in your niche and you wake up in the morning excited by your research, go ahead and good luck to you. If not, do something else

The world is a fantastic place filled with opportunity. Pick one, without fear of making the wrong choice. The only wrong decision is not to make one! Your plans can change, of course, but you need to have one before you can change it

Most stress comes from situations you haven't made decisions about, so avoid drifting through the next few years by making some

You should also think about what you value the most; freedom, time, money, family, adventure, career success, challenge... and decide on ways to maximise those aspects of your life. It's not easy, but realise that decision is always the first step to getting what you want out of life

# In conclusion

**The world looks slightly different for a day or two once you hand in the thesis...**

After years of work, and all the ups and downs you will have faced, handing over the final draft of your thesis will feel incredible

Don't wait till then to be proud of your work. Doing a PhD is something that most people could never do, and your work is unique even among your peers

Be happy and be proud of your work, and the rest will take care of itself.

# About the author

I completed my PhD in Physics at the University of Nottingham in 2007, after 4 years of procrastination. It took a near breakdown to make me rethink my default habits, but I was able to change them and get through

One of the most useful changes was to take walks around campus when things weren't going to plan . It made a HUGE difference to my outlook, and my success. So often it's the small things that make the biggest difference

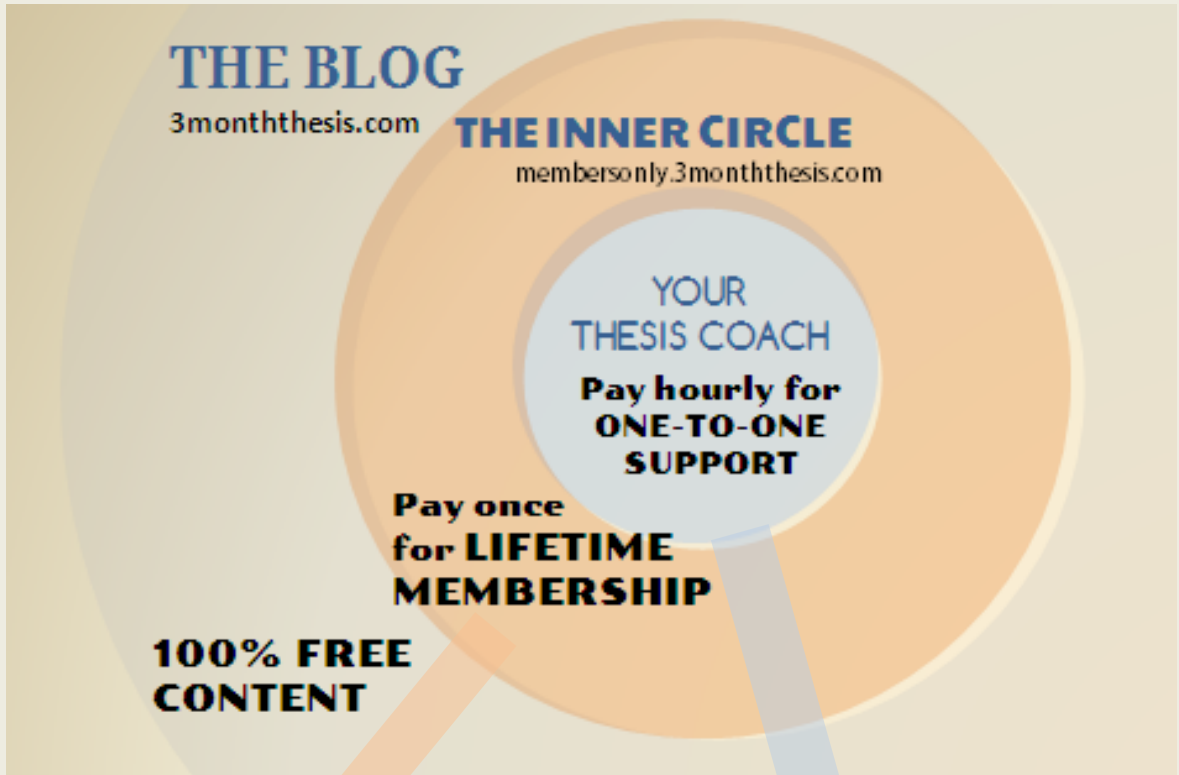
I wrote my thesis in 3 months, and enjoyed the process while others with better results struggled to write a paragraph per day. My thesis remains one of my proudest achievements to date

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