GUIDE TO PLANNING AND RUNNING THESIS BOOT CAMP

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INTRODUCTION

This guide presents key information for designing, planning and running a Thesis Boot Camp program for graduate researchers. The term graduate researcher is used in this guide to refer to research higher degree (RHD) students: PhD, Masters by Research and MPhil candidates. The advice offered in this guide can be adapted for specific disciplinary contexts.

The core idea behind Thesis Boot Camp is to provide the time and the space for graduate researchers to make significant progress on the first draft of their thesis manuscript. It is not designed to provide advice on editing, restructuring, polishing a thesis, or direct instruction on the tenets of academic writing. It is about graduate researchers writing large sections of their thesis.

This guide is presented in three parts: preparation, program structure and program delivery. Sample communications, marketing and program delivery documents are also included in the appendices. Word versions of some of the individual elements included in this guide are available from Melbourne CSHE website: cshe.unimelb.edu.au/prof_dev/grad_researchers/thesis_boot_camp

PREPARATION

As with any program, the first step is to identify the aims of the program and the goals for participants. Thesis Boot Camps at the University of Melbourne have aimed to assist graduate researchers progress to thesis completion, and have set as a goal for participants to write up to 20,000 words towards their first full thesis draft over the course of the program. These aims and goals were set for a typical weekend program, as described later in this guide. Different goals can be set and these largely depend on the cohort, staffing and the length of time available for program delivery.

It is important to clearly communicate to students about what the program will cover, and the benefits for them in making progress with their thesis writing. It is helpful to have the support of supervisors of graduate researchers, and this is easier when they understand the aims of the program. Consider marketing Thesis Boot Camp to supervisors as well as students. The trademarked Thesis Boot Camp logo is attached in appendix B, along with information on how to use this logo for Thesis Boot Camp promotions and materials.

There is no 'correct' way to plan and market a Thesis Boot Camp, however, the following decision points can assist:

- Consider the maximum number of candidates for the program. Thesis Boot Camps have been capped at about 30 participants per program, partially in response to the capacity of the venue, and also to ensure delivery of appropriate levels of support to all participants
- Experience shows that students who are 6-12 months from completion achieve excellent results. Reasons for this include that this cohort:
  - have completed the research/data gathering aspect of their thesis
  - are intimately familiar with their material, arguments and research questions
  - just need the time and space to generate as much first-draft content as they can.
- It can be useful to have an application process for selecting candidates, and that this requires endorsement from their supervisor. Appendix C offers an example of a University of Melbourne Thesis Boot Camp application form.

If using an application process, then the next step is to assess the applications to determine which participants are best placed to achieve the Thesis Boot Camp goals set for themselves.

There is no specific way to select participants for the program. Factors to consider include:

- Stage of candidature
- Data collection has been completed
- Participant's reasons for attending the program (ie: some will say they are in need of a writing environment conducive to putting their head down and achieving maximum progress on their first draft, others will reflect that they need assistance with academic writing or are looking for taught workshops etc. As discussed above, Thesis Boot Camp does not usually include these elements).

PROGRAM STRUCTURE

Careful design of the program, and communication with the selected group about how to prepare for Thesis Boot Camp is important, so that participants can hit the ground running right from the start. It is useful to stress to participants that the aim of the weekend is to be writing, not reading or undertaking lengthy editing and referencing tasks. We therefore suggest limiting students to only two texts that they will require to use on the weekend. It is also worth advising students to avoid sections of thesis that rely heavily on the need for reference to external texts, such as literature reviews. Much of this information can be presented in the Participant Preparations (see Appendix D). These can be either sent to students electronically or provided to students in a briefing session before the Thesis Boot Camp.

Program Overview

Table 1 has a generic example of a Thesis Boot Camp weekend program based on those conducted at the University of Melbourne. Thesis Boot Camp can be organised for any amount of time, although the two to three day program can allow the time for students to make progress on their thesis.

Table 1. Example weekend Thesis Boot Camp program structure

Program	
DAY 1	**FRIDAY**
4:00-4:15pm	Official welcome
4:15-4:45pm	Program (and participant) Introduction
4:45-5:15pm	Strategies for making the most of the weekend
5:15-8:00pm	Intensive writing (dinner available breakout room, 6pm)
8:00-8:30pm	Group debrief, housekeeping reminders, plan for tomorrow
DAY 2	**SATURDAY**
9:30-10:00am	Morning Coffee/Social Time/set up
10:00-1:00pm	Intensive writing (staff member available for consultation in breakout room)
1:00pm	Lunch available in breakout room
1:00-4:00pm	Intensive writing
4:00-4:45pm	Active break/stress buster
4:45-8:00pm	Intensive writing (dinner available breakout room, 6pm)
8:00-8:30pm	Group de-brief, housekeeping reminders, plan for tomorrow
DAY 3	**SUNDAY**
9:30-10:00am	Morning Coffee/Social Time/set up
10:00-1:00pm	Intensive writing
1:00pm	Lunch available in breakout room
1:00-3:30pm	Intensive writing
3:30-4:00pm	Active break/stress buster
4:00-8:30pm	Intensive writing

Introduction notes:

The session at the start of the program presents basic information about the structure of the weekend program.

This includes:

- Functions of the various rooms available during the program
- Necessity for the main writing room to be a silent working space
- When/if one-on-one consultations will be available
- Keeping basic OHS principles in mind (look away from the screen once in a while, stretch/move around on a regular basis)
- Lunch and dinner times are scheduled for the whole group, and should be used as an opportunity to have a break from intensive writing
- Security and safety - leaving the venue late at night in groups.

Strategies for making the most of the weekend:

Consider providing guidance for graduate researchers on managing writers block, and using strategies such as the Pomodoro Technique (http://pomodorotechnique.com/). It is also worth reiterating that while the outcome of Thesis Boot Camp is to produce a large block of writing, the product of all this hard work will require substantial editing and polishing before it is shared with others, for example, a participant's supervisor. Once the intensive writing sessions have commenced, the aim is to have as few interruptions as possible, with messages to the group (announcing meal times etc.) written up on a white board.

After the more structured Friday evening, the program is arranged mostly in four hour writing blocks, which allows for sustained and intensive focused writing. There are two 'enforced' breaks: one on Saturday afternoon, and the other on Sunday afternoon. The breaks can include a yoga lesson, a walk to the Potter Gallery on Swanston St, or anything that allows the participants to take a break from sitting and writing.

PROGRAM DELIVERY

Venue

Three to four rooms within close proximity are required for a weekend Thesis Boot Camp:

- A main writing room that will accommodate all participants with a desk space for themselves. This room should also include a whiteboard to communicate with students and minimise interruptions to writing, and have reliable heating/cooling, as well as sufficient power points to allow for recharging of laptops
- A catering room that is easily accessible, but not too close to the main writing room in order to avoid noise disturbing the writing room
- A room for relaxation/phone calls/hanging out (this could be the catering room)
- A small room for individual or small group consultation.

RESOURCE	PURPOSE	NOTES
Whiteboard	To communicate with participants, rather than interrupting them	Keep a running tally to help motivate participants, for example set up columns, where participants can write their name when they've hit 5k, 10k, 15k, 20k words
Catering	This can assist to keep students focused on their writing.	Sufficient catering for the weekend is important. This includes lunch and dinner, and coffee/tea, snacks are available throughout the day.
Powerboards and extension cords	Charge laptops at regular intervals through the weekend	
Milestone markers	To mark participants progress	Oversizes colour blocks can be used to signal progress: Green = 5,000 words, Blue=10,000 words, Red= 15,000 words, Yellow= 20,000 words.
Mugs	For refills of tea/coffee/beverages over the weekend	Spare mugs available in case participants forget to bring one along.
USB sticks	To save work over the weekend.	Have a few USBs on hand for participants.
Spare laptops	Just in case there are any problems with participants' computers	While it is impractical to provide a laptop for every participant, it may assist to have one on hand in case of a malfunction.

Staffing

It is necessary to have a minimum of two staff to tag-team throughout the program. They do not necessarily need to be the same two staff through the whole weekend, but it may be beneficial to maintain a consistent approach.

Other staff that could be involved in the Thesis Boot Camp program include:

- An additional staff member to assist with room set up/pack up, and coordination of catering, etc.
- Counselling Centre staff who can assist participants with mental health/stress management techniques, one on one assistance if required during the program or who may be prepared to arrange for participants to follow up with this support after the program
- Academic Staff who have recently successfully transitioned from their own PhD and are able to provide positive support, or who are experienced supervisors and can provide writing assistance during the program
- A building supervisor who may assist with set up and pack up, security, first aid and building access.

Costs associated with a Thesis Boot Camp

The main costs associated with Thesis Boot Camp involve food and drink, and staffing. Costs associated with a building supervisor, if needed, will also need to be included and may be substantial. Costs can be reduced by finishing each day at 5pm, and asking participants bring their own food.

Other things to consider

Mental Health

Graduate researchers often have many balls in the air – their research, family, work and 'other' lives can create stress and anxiety. Thesis Boot Camp is generally a positive experience for participants, but for some people it can see the culmination of all of the stressful things in their lives when they find themselves staring at the blank page on their screen.

As a duty of care issue, having a staff member available who is prepared to assist distressed participants (e.g., they may attend a mental health first aid course) available during the program can be a good idea. Unless program staff are formally qualified for such, it is recommended that they do not attempt to provide counselling. It is useful to consult with the Counselling and Psychological Services at the University.

If there is a distressed participant, the following basic first steps can be followed:

- Remove the participant from the writing room to a quiet room, and chat about what is causing them anxiety/stress
- Help them to decide whether they will continue the current program – and follow up by phone to ensure that they've arrived home safely if they choose not to stay
- Provide them with details for booking an appointment with the Counselling and Psychological Services Centre.

Appendix A

Example Marketing and Communications materials for Thesis Boot Camp

A5 Flyer

Write 20,000 words in a weekend? Impossible? Not at Thesis Boot Camp!

Are you in the 'writing up' stage of your thesis? Finding it tough maintaining momentum, carving out time to write or beating procrastination? Come along to Thesis Boot Camp to boost your motivation and your first draft word count!

Places are strictly limited, so ensure you submit your application by the deadline.

Find out more: www…

A4 Flyer/web text

Thesis Boot Camp

Drop and give me 20! …20,000 words, that is.

Are you a late-candidature graduate researcher struggling with the writing-up battle? Do you put off writing tasks until tomorrow? Or are you finding it tough 'going it alone' on the writing-up journey?

Yes?

We have just what you need – Thesis Boot Camp!

Dedicated solely to getting words down on paper (or a computer screen), this program is designed to help you get over that final hurdle or to kick-start your writing progress if it has stalled.

Sign up to join other graduate research comrades at the same candidature stage in a no-excuses, no-time-for-procrastination, take-no-prisoners intensive writing weekend. Not for the faint hearted, Thesis Boot Camp recruits will battle through third-year blues, writer's block and thesis fatigue to achieve significant progress on their manuscript.

Introductory sessions will include motivational talks, goal setting and strategies for writing quickly and well. Support staff will be on hand and catering will be provided to ensure an encouraging, distraction-free environment. Attendees will be required to complete pre-program planning activities and to commit to their own tangible aims for the weekend, such as completing a thesis chapter draft or similar.

Are you up for the challenge?

Eligibility

You are an eligible Thesis Boot Camp recruit if you:

- Are a graduate researcher at the University of Melbourne
- Are in the final stages of completing your graduate research degree. That is, you have completed data collection and are currently 'writing up'
- Are willing and available to attend all sessions and to commit to the ethos of dedicated writing required at Thesis Boot Camp
- Have your supervisor's endorsement.

The workshop is limited to 30 participants and we expect to receive more applications than there are available places. Please note that we therefore cannot guarantee participation in the workshop for all eligible applicants.

Program Details

When

Three sessions across one long weekend as follows:

- Friday June 22nd 4:00-8:30pm
- Saturday June 23rd 10:00am-8:30pm
- Sunday June 24th 10:00-8:30pm.

*Also include the Trademarked Thesis Boot Camp Logo (See appendix B).

Appendix B

The University of Melbourne trademarked
Thesis Boot Camp Logo

The Thesis Boot Camp name and logo are trademarked.

You are free to use the Thesis Boot Camp event, under the following conditions:

- You do not alter the logo, or incorporate it into another logo
- When using this logo, please acknowledge that you are borrowing it from The University of Melbourne, where Thesis Boot Camp was initiated in 2012 by staff of the Melbourne School of Graduate Research. Thesis Boot Camp by similar programs known as Dissertation Boot Camps developed in the United States of America and the 'Rabbit Hole' program at the Emerging Writer's Festival, Melbourne, in 2012
- Please contact us at melbourne-cshe@unimelb.edu.au to request permission to use the trademarked logo and so we can add you to our list of Thesis Boot Camp locations – we're curious to see how far our logo and concept travel!

Appendix C

Example Thesis Boot Camp Application Form

[you might choose to use Eventbrite or another online tool for your registrations]

Thesis Boot Camp Application Form
Date
Venue

THE UNIVERSITY OF
MELBOURNE

APPLICATION FORM

To be completed by the applicant and then submitted to
CLOSING DATE
Receipt of your application will be acknowledged by email.
Applicants will be notified of the outcome to their application during the week of

1. Applicant Details

Title		First Name		Last Name	
Preferred name to appear on name tag *(if different to above)*					
Telephone			E-mail		
Do you have any dietary requirements? Please Specify.			Degree (PhD, MPhil etc)		
Department/School			Faculty		
Please provide name and contact details of someone we can get in touch with in an emergency.					
If applicable to your thesis, have you collected all your data?	☐ Yes ☐ No		How many words of your thesis have you already drafted? How many chapters does this constitute? (approx.)		
When do you expect to submit your thesis? (month/year)			When did you commence your degree? (month/year)		

2. Applicant Research Profile		
Check any/all of the following that apply to your research	☐ Humanities & Social Sciences ☐ Creative & Performing Arts ☐ Science, Engineering & Technology ☐ Medical, Dental & Health Sciences ☐ Interdisciplinary *List the disciplines:* .... ☐ Cross-faculty *List the faculties:*	

3. Please provide a description of your Research Area/Interests as relevant to your thesis (max. 150 words). ***Please note that this description will be shared with other Thesis Boot Camp participants.***

4. Brief Statement: Why would you like to participate in Thesis Boot Camp? (max. 150 words)

5. What do you hope to achieve during Thesis Boot Camp? (max. 150 words). *Please be specific. For example, you may wish to complete a draft of one or more results chapters.*

6. Do you want assistance with your academic English?	☐ Yes ☐ No

7. Applicant Statement and Signature

☐ *I would like to participate in Thesis Boot Camp, which I acknowledge is an intensive and dedicated writing environment.*

☐ *I agree to attend all sessions of the program (4-8:30pm Friday 13th, 10-8:30pm Saturday 14th, 10-8:30pm Sunday 25th)*

☐ *I agree to complete prescribed preparatory tasks in order to gain the most benefit from Thesis Boot Camp. I acknowledge that failing to complete preparatory tasks will result in the cancellation of my place at Thesis Boot Camp.*

Applicant Signature		Date	

8. Supervisor's signature

Supervisor Name		Signature	
Telephone		Email	

Appendix D

Example Materials for Participant Preparation

In the past we have included a couple of preparatory emails to participants suggesting things to do in the lead up to the Thesis Boot Camp. You might choose to send this as one email, or several communications in the weeks leading up to the Thesis Boot Camp.

1 Successful applicant emails (as well as emails for those who were unsuccessful in applying this time).

2 Pre-Thesis Boot Camp requirements – such as pulling together a 'survival kit' as below, providing information on catering, alerting participants to acceptable, and not-so-acceptable Thesis Boot Camp behaviour (e.g., not going AWOL, suggesting that they discuss Thesis Boot Camp, and their goals for it with their supervisors, prompting participants to consider whether they need to refresh on aspects of theory prior to the program, and additional goals, should they complete those they've already set (as below).

Dear Thesis Boot Campers

Welcome to Thesis Boot Camp!

Your Boot Camp 'kit' will need the following survival items:

1   Laptop Computer and charging cable(s)

Thesis Boot Camp is about getting as many words written as possible. While you may choose to write by hand on paper for some of the time during the program, you will need a laptop to get the most out of the weekend. If you do not own your own laptop, think about borrowing one from a friend or family member, the library or student union.

Note: You will be able to charge your laptop during Thesis Boot Camp, although you may not be able to leave it plugged into mains electricity continuously. Please therefore ensure your laptop is fully charged before each day of the program to ensure you do not experience any interruptions to your work.

2   Create Your Map

Thesis Boot Camp will be an intensive writing environment – you want to make the most of your time and avoid getting 'lost' along the way. To make sure you stay on track, you'll need to prepare your own map or writing plan BEFORE commencing the program. We will invite you to talk about elements of your plan during the early sessions of the program.

Set yourself some SMART goals for the Thesis Boot Camp - What's a SMART goal?

- **S**pecific – what are you going to focus on writing?
- **M**easurable – How many words or chapters do you want to write?
- **A**ttainable – On average, Thesis Boot Camp participants can write anything from 5000 words to 25000 words over a weekend program

- **R**ealistic/**R**elevant – Thesis Boot Camp is about writing – not referencing, editing, or note taking. You do want to focus on producing writing that you will be able to follow up with some rigorous editing, but not have to start all over again, so consider targeting your writing carefully, and producing meaningful prose
- **T**imebound – the program will be [XYZ] hours long – set yourself a challenge to write more than you usually would, but keep in mind that not everyone will produce 25,000 words.

Elements to think about for your Thesis Boot Camp 'map'

1   Central research questions

You should already know these. Write them down. Think about them. Tweak them if they've changed over the course of your thesis. Make sure they're still relevant and you've unpacked all their terms and nuances.

Thesis outline

Take a look at your last thesis annual progress report. Did you include a thesis chapter outline? Is it up to date? During the next week or two, it is essential that you map out your thesis. Even if it is just a single page including the titles/subject of each chapter, it's important you start to consider your thesis as a single document with an overarching argument. This is your 'road map' – you can see where you've been and where you need to go.

Bring this to Thesis Boot Camp. It will help you clarify your thoughts and to keep focused on the things your chosen Thesis Boot Camp chapter needs to accomplish.

2   Chapter outline

Now repeat the process with your chosen chapter(s). Depending on your writing style you may choose to note down just a few lines of a plan, or you might plan subheadings over several pages. Questions you should ask yourself include (but are not limited to):

- What are the main points this chapter needs to cover?
- What resources/evidence will I need to draw on to demonstrate these?
- How does this chapter relate to my overall argument?

We highly recommended that you work on a single chapter at any given time at Thesis Boot Camp. If you finish a chapter, you can then move onto the next chapter. Much time can be wasted flitting between chapters, and you want to avoid this at all costs.

An example of a Thesis Boot Camp Map is attached. Note, however, this is just an example. You should tailor your map to your own discipline, research topic and writing style.

3   Key texts only

If you were stranded on a desert island and had to write your chosen Thesis Boot Camp chapter, what three books would you take with you? This is how you should think of Thesis Boot Camp - you should NOT be lugging a library in your backpack.

Ideally, you will have notes or an annotated bibliography to work from during Thesis Boot Camp. If you DO need to bring books with you, choose a maximum of two or three key texts. No more. Thesis Boot Camp is about WRITING, not reading. You can plug in exact references after the program.

Again, this is the same with journal articles. Internet access will be discouraged at Thesis Boot Camp. Any electronic resources should be chosen wisely and saved onto your laptop and/or a USB prior to arriving at Boot Camp.

Key message: Use the next week to think about which texts are essential to your survival pack.

4   Things that make you comfy

We do our best to provide you with a comfortable environment for the duration of Thesis Boot Camp. Remember, however, that you will be sitting down for many hours over the weekend (though we highly encourage regular stretching and you can take a spell in the breakout room, too!). Remember to bring along a water bottle, earplugs and your own mug.

Thesis Boot Camp is definitely not a fashion parade, and you won't be judged on what you wear. So feel free to come along in your comfiest trackpants, hoodie and ugg boots, or whatever you like to wear when relaxed. If you tend to feel the cold, bring in a blanket or a shawl. We try to keep a comfortable ambient temperature but it can get cooler in the evenings when you are sitting down and your body is at rest.

Also feel free to bring in a cushion or similar for your chair, or something for your feet to rest on if you think you'll need a more ergonomic set up. (If you really do need a specific ergonomic chair or other equipment, please talk to us about bringing your own. We can accommodate many things, but keep in mind there'll be around 30 people coming to Thesis Boot Camp with you, so we'll do our best, but may not be able to cater to every individual detail).

Appendix E

Example evaluation survey questions.

This sample evaluation survey was created for a campus-wide Thesis Boot Camp, therefore some questions may not be relevant to a single department or faculty program.

The simplest way to collect evaluation data is to make your survey electronic, for example, to create a Survey Monkey survey.

Note: comments in [square brackets] are suggestions or directions on creating your survey.

Introductory page

Thankyou for taking the time to complete this survey - it will help us to continue and improve Thesis Boot Camp in the future.

[If you are at a University, you may have a Privacy of information statement to include on surveys, noting how the survey data is being collected, used and stored]

Survey Questions

1   What is your degree?

[pick list or radio buttons]

PhD

MPhil

DEd

DPsych

Other (please specify) [text field]

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2   Which year did you commence your degree?

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3   Which year do you hope to submit your thesis?

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4   Where did you hear about Thesis Boot Camp?

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5   What did you hope to achieve at Thesis Boot Camp?

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6   Did you achieve your Thesis Boot Camp goals? If not, why not?]

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7   What did you think was the best part of Thesis Boot Camp?

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8   Were you dissatisfied with any aspect of Thesis Boot Camp? If so, please provide details [text field]

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9   Please rate the following statements about the optional activities available during Thesis Boot Camp:

Saturday Active Break
[Likert Scale: Very dissatisfied, Dissatisfied, Neutral, Satisfied, Very Satisfied, N/A]

Individual/small group consultation with XX <staff member name>
[Very dissatisfied, Dissatisfied, Neutral, Satisfied, Very Satisfied, N/A]

10   If you participated in any of the optional activities, did you find them relevant or useful? Why/why not? [text field]

11   Thesis Boot Camp…

Was well organized
[Likert Scale: Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Agree, Strongly Agree]

Provided me with an opportunity to meet with other graduate researchers

Made me feel supported to complete my thesis

Helped me to make significant progress towards completing my thesis

Inspired me to continue good writing habits after the program

Met my overall expectations for the program

12   Would you recommend Thesis Boot Camp to others? Why/why not? [text field]

13   Do you have any suggestions for improving future Thesis Boot Camps? [text field]

14   Do you have any other comments you would like to make about Thesis Boot Camp? [text field]

Thank you for taking the time to complete our survey - Your comments are valuable to us.