



# Twenty Tips for Senior Thesis Writers (and other writers, too)

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**1. Begin with something unresolved.** some question about which you are truly curious. In a course she once taught at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, Carol Gilligan talked about the imperative to orient your inquiry toward “a real question,” which she defines as a question to which you don’t already know the answer and to which it matters to you to know the answer.

Although it is important to “begin” your focused exploration with a governing question and to make that question clear early on in your thesis, you need not – in fact, probably can not – begin the entire research and writing process with a question. It takes a lot of work – reading, talking with people, thinking, freewriting – to generate and focus your governing question.

Your question derives from your noticing something counterintuitive or surprising or confusing. You make observations that appear to be in tension with one another and to point to some apparent contradiction, mystery, conflict, surprise, discrepancy, problem, oversight, or puzzle – something that makes you stop and say, “Huh. What’s the story here?” We could call these observations **competing observations** in that both are compelling yet neither prevails over or negates the other. These might be observations you make about an organism or ecosystem, about a character in a piece of literature, about two (or more) approaches to understanding and addressing some problem, about two (or more) interpretations or arguments, etc.

Your job is to formulate a question(s) that derives from these competing observations. For instance, you might think, “In looking at the perpetuation of poverty... or at how epigenetic phenomena lead to heritable traits ... or at how we understand what leads to the development of empathy in people ... we have tended to focus on x. And yet evidence (or experience) indicates that y might also play an important role. How can we better understand the role of y?” Or, “We used to talk about this issue in terms of the metaphor of x, but over time, the metaphor has shifted. What is the metaphor implicitly or explicitly in use now? How do we understand that shift? What are the implications of that shift?”

**2. Let questions guide your inquiry and the structure of your piece.** Make clear to yourself and your readers the unresolved question that you set out to resolve. This is your **governing question**, the question that governs your inquiry and ultimately guides and governs the structure of your piece. Show your readers what leads you to pose your question in the first place, what competing observations gave rise to the question.

Keep your eye on your governing question. You might want to put that question somewhere where you will see it every time you sit down to work – e.g., on a note you attach to your computer, on your bulletin board, or on the wall in front of your workspace. This will serve as your lighthouse, your beacon on the horizon that helps guide you home. You need not be bound to the original form of this question. You might need to revise it or supersede it several times as you move along. When it changes, your destination changes, and you will take a different tack or chart a different course. Make note of how your governing question evolves. The narrative of your inquiry is itself an interesting story.

Identify your **subordinate questions**. Just as the thesis as a whole is a response to a governing question, each chapter, each section, and each paragraph of the thesis is a response to a subordinate question – subordinate in the

sense of being in the service of the governing question. Subordinate questions are the questions you will need to address or resolve on the way to addressing your governing question.

Make clear to yourself and your readers the subordinate questions to which each chapter is a response. When you are having difficulty developing an idea or structuring your piece, make a **question outline**, i.e., an outline in the form of questions. Write out the questions to which each paragraph is a response; questions tend to beget more questions and to form a natural pecking order (order of priority) and nesting order (like Russian dolls, smaller ones being nested within larger ones).

**3. Freewrite.** In brief stints of time, write without censoring yourself at all. Freewrite to loosen your mind (analogous to stretching before running) and to let yourself follow the playful, associative, non-linear logic of your mind. Often we don't follow that associative logic very far because we dismiss it early on as entirely illogical and useless. While it is true that in our **final product** ideas need to be in the form of **linear logic** so that others can follow our thinking, we need to draw upon our **associative logic** in the **creative process**. Associative logic is the logic of dreams. It is also the logic at work when our mind makes a creative connection or leap, often seemingly out of the blue. This typically happens just before we fall asleep or just as we wake up, while we're in the shower, while we're driving, while we're walking, or when we're having a generative, free-flowing conversation that lead us seemingly – yet not entirely – far afield from where we started. When our mind is free enough to follow its wanderings and associations far enough, they often lead to something creative and useful. Freewriting – without stopping and without thinking about whether what we are saying is elegant or grammatical or concise or logical – promotes the generation of ideas and of creative connections between ideas. Think of freewriting as **soil, not seed**. Soil is the muck that nurtures a germinating idea rather than the perfect seeds that become the actual sentences and paragraphs of the final product. ((For more thoughts about freewriting, creativity, and associative logic, see *Writing without Teachers*, by Peter Elbow, and the handout “Writing Things Down Before Writing Things Up,” written by Sheila M. Reindl and available at the Bureau of Study Counsel of Harvard University and at [bsc.harvard.edu](http://bsc.harvard.edu).)

**4. Do focused, or prompted, freewriting.** Sometimes freewriting works better with a focus and/or a running start. Consider using the following sentence stems as prompts for your freewriting. Complete the sentence and continue writing from there.

1. When I started this project, the thing that really interested me was . . .
2. The questions I find myself thinking about these days are questions like . . .
3. What I really want to know is . . .
4. I want to figure out how . . .
5. I have a hunch that . . .
6. I am confused by . . .
7. I feel angered or annoyed by . . .
8. What stands out to me about all the stuff I've been reading is this idea that . . .
9. What I've been reading makes me wonder . . .
10. Dialogue between me and the experts (this exercise comes from writing teacher Eileen Farrell):
  - This author/professor/theorist/expert says . . .
  - And/but I say . . .
  - He or she also says . . .
  - And/but I say . . .
11. If I had to put my project/paper so far into the form of a single question, it would be . . .
12. The observations I make that lead me to pose that question are . . .
13. What makes my question hard to reckon with or difficult to resolve is that . . .

14. One way in which I could attempt to reckon with that difficulty of how to resolve my question is . . .
15. If things were as neat and tidy as I'd like them to be, I would be able to make the argument that . . .
16. One way in which things aren't so neat and tidy is that . . .
17. One way in which I might address that messiness is . . .
18. I'm stuck. I'm stuck because I can't figure out . . .
19. I can see that my method of approaching my question has some real problems, or at least challenges, including . . .
20. One way I could possibly address that methodological/approach/design issue is . . .
21. I realize I need to define some terms. If I were to try to define the term \_\_\_\_\_, what occurs to me is that . . .
22. [A letter to a friend or to your reader] Dear \_\_\_\_\_, I'm trying to write this paragraph/section/chapter about \_\_\_\_\_. And do you know what? . . .
23. Let me state what I think I know so far, even if it seems obvious or self-evident (in the belief that sometimes it's actually easy to overlook the obvious and that sometimes the seemingly obvious deserves another look):
24. Of all these seemingly obvious, self-evident things, the one that keeps catching my attention is . . .
25. If I think of "theory" as simply another word for "explanation," I would say that one of the explanations that people have offered for the thing I'm researching is that . . .
26. But that theory or explanation doesn't seem to account for . . .
27. If I could say what I really want to say, . . .
28. If I could approach this project in the way I really want to, . . .
29. If I could write about the question that really interests me, . . .
30. What I wish I could convey to my audience is . . .

**5. Work in fifteen-minute to twenty-minute stretches.** We tend to approach big jobs by thinking we need big amounts of time. We say to ourselves, "I need to write this paper. It's 1 o'clock now. I'm free until dinner at 6 o'clock. That's five hours. I should get a lot done." But in fact, we barely make a dent. We brush our teeth, do our laundry, check our email, pay a few bills, straighten our room, make a list of errands, hang out with our friends, go on Facebook. But we spend very little time on task (the task of writing). That's because few of us can work for five solid hours on one thing, especially something as difficult and anxiety-provoking as writing.

Especially if you are having difficulty getting started or staying with writing, try to work for very small stretches of time. Most of us can do anything for fifteen to twenty minutes. Work for fifteen to twenty, break for five to ten is not a bad guideline. You might be surprised at how much you can get done in fifteen to twenty focused minutes. It is much better to work for fifteen to twenty minutes and get something done, however small, than to keep thinking for five hours that you should be working and be so daunted that you get nothing done and then feel discouraged, demoralized, and guilty.

**6. Employ the S-O-S strategy:** specific, observable steps. (\*The notion of specific, observable steps is drawn from Jane Burka and Lenore Yuen, authors of *Procrastination: Why You Do It, What to Do About It*. The "S-O-S strategy" is a term I coined.) Think in terms of specific, fifteen- to twenty-minute tasks that you can picture yourself doing and completing. "I am going to take fifteen to twenty minutes to write down a list of a questions that my thesis will need to address"; "I am going to take an inventory of all the things I can say, all the things I wish I could say but don't know if I have the evidence to support, and all of the hunches I have"; "I am going to skim this article to see if its methods section is relevant to how I'm approaching my research"; and "I am going to write a memo to myself about what makes my question a hard one to answer" are examples of such tasks. "I'm going to work on my thesis for five hours between lunch and dinner" and "I'm going to work on my literature review this weekend" are examples of plans that are neither specific nor observable: with such a vague intention or general goal, there is nothing specific you can picture yourself starting, doing, and finishing.

**7. Take the “So/And Even So” Approach.** Whenever you find yourself saying "I have only fifteen minutes, *so* I can't do anything productive," try saying, "I have only fifteen minutes, *and even so* . . . I could jot a few notes about what questions I might address in this paper/skim the beginning and end of this chapter to identify the question the writer's addressing/make a list of some of the challenges or criticism someone might make of my project/brainstorm how I might address those challenges or criticisms."

The “So/And Even So” Approach can also work when you are feeling tired, sad, lonely, scared, discouraged, overwhelmed. It is my version of an approach that comes from a friend who used to coach beginning adult runners. He told them they didn't need to run every scheduled running day but that on those days they just needed to suit up – put on their running clothes and running shoes. If they said to themselves, "I'm tired/busy/sad/lonely/, *so* I can't run today," he asked them to say, "I'm tired/busy/sad/lonely, *and even so*, I could suit up." The runners found that once they were all suited up, they felt that they were already on their way, and taking a run was not as daunting a prospect. Similarly, if you put yourself in a position to do your work and take even a small step in that direction, you might find that you can, and even want, to keep on going.

When you find yourself saying things such as "I'm sleepy, so I can't work on this"; "I haven't called my best friend in a week, so I can't work on this"; "I have rehearsal in half an hour, so I can't work on this"; "I really want to see a movie, so I can't work on this"; "I'm scared I'm going to fail, so I can't work on this," try replacing the "so" with "and even so": "and even so, I could work for fifteen minutes on tracing the line of thinking that leads me to pose my questions"; "and even so, I could brainstorm for fifteen minutes about questions I might want to address in my paper"; "and even so, I could skim this chapter to see if I can get the governing question that the writer sets out to address"; "and even so, I could read for fifteen minutes to see how this author defines this tricky term"; "and even so, I could write about my fear and how I might proceed in the face of it." (Writing can be a way of keeping yourself company in your fear, discovering what that fear is about, letting the fear be there without letting it stop you. When you can **have** your fear rather than **be** your fear, you are not overwhelmed by it.)

**8. Keep track of your ideas and thoughts as they develop.** Just as you need to save often when you're working on a computer, you need to **save often** (in your brain) when you're reading and studying. The way to save your thoughts is to jot them down. Otherwise your ideas might get deleted, especially if you have a power surge (get caught up in another idea) or a crash (fall asleep). (Interestingly, the *Macintosh Users' Guide* of my old PowerBook 160 made this save-frequently analogy in the other direction. A section called "Save Your Work," read, "Since work that exists only in memory is lost when you shut down the computer, you need to save your work so you can come back to it later. If you don't save your work, it disappears – like thoughts that are lost unless you write them down.")

**Write notes to yourself.** One way of saving often is to keep a thesis **journal or memos folder** on your computer. Use your thesis journal or memos folder for freewriting (prompted or unprompted) (see tips #4 and #5 above). Also use your journal or folder to write your notes in the form of brief memos to yourself about your latest **response** to, or **further questions** about, or **musings** on a particular question. Keep a memo document open whenever you are writing at your computer (no matter what you're working on). This **open-window approach** allows you to catch those fleeting thoughts that fly through your mind in the middle of whatever else your doing.

**Create two thesis journals or folders:** one on your computer (i.e., a folder for memos – see above) as well as one for hand-written entries (i.e., a notebook, big envelope, manila folder, or big piece of paper on the wall) to record thesis thoughts that come to you in moments when you're not at the computer. Great ideas often come at unexpected times. You might end up jotting some of your best ideas on dinner napkins, the backs of old envelopes, scraps of paper, and receipts. Just make sure you have one place or "bin" where you keep them all together. Some people keep one such bin for the introduction, another for the conclusion, one for each chapter, and one miscellaneous file for what writing teacher Larry Weinstein calls "gems without a setting." (For more on gems without a setting, see "Worksheets for Senior Thesis Writers (and other writers, too)," written by Sheila M. Reindl and available at the Bureau of Study Counsel of Harvard University and at [bsc.harvard.edu](http://bsc.harvard.edu).)

**Believe that some notes are better than no notes.** As you read or listen, **jot down even brief notes** about what is standing out to you, puzzling you, or bothering you. These need not be extensive or grammatically correct or stylistically elegant notes. They can be just a couple of words – enough to help you register and recall an idea. Their purpose is two-fold: to help you do something active with the material to make it your own and to leave you with enough of a record of your reading and thinking that you can recall it later.

**9. Keep track of others' ideas.** In your notes (and in the final product), make clear which words and ideas and lines of reasoning are yours and which need to be attributed to someone else. When you are noting someone else's words or thinking, write down the information you will need to accurately cite the source of the material in the future or to return to it again down the road. Keep that information firmly attached to the material even as you go through different drafts.

Remember that, as Abigail Lipson and Sheila Reindl point out in "The Responsible Plagiarist: Understanding Students Who Misuse Sources," acknowledging others' work is about being responsible not only to academic rules but to a set of relationships: "As scholars, we have a responsibility to our sources (to acknowledge our indebtedness to them), to our readers (to let them know what our sources were and how they informed us), and to ourselves (to declare our own contributions). Proper documentation traces a family tree of intellectual kinship, in which we place our own ideas and text in context" (p. 12). They observe that attributing and citing others' work is part of our responsibility as members of the community of the mind.

**10. Let your reader in on your reasoning,** your thinking, your understanding. Let your reader know what you want him or her to take away from or learn from a chapter and from your thesis as a whole. Don't just present data. **Show** your reader how you want him or her to make sense of the data, what you want him or her to see as meaningful about all that data. Show your reader the **inferences** you make, the things you see as you read between the lines. Think of your thesis as a museum: you are the museum guide giving your audience a guided tour. Don't just let them wander around, trying to make whatever sense they might of what's in there. Point their attention to what you'd like them to see and to the connections you'd like them to make between things. Help them to see and understand what you have come to see and understand.

**Use chapter titles and subheads** as important signposts for your reader and as ways of challenging yourself to clarify and summarize your thoughts and the connections between your thoughts. To name is to know.

Make sure your reader can tell which ideas, which words, and which lines of reasoning are yours and which are someone else's. Both by attribution within the text and by formal citation, **let your reader know where you are making your own contribution and where (and how) you are drawing upon the contributions of others.** Different disciplines have different conventions about attribution and citation. If you have questions about how to handle issues of attribution and citation, consult with your adviser or others in your field; find a manual that speaks to the conventions of your field; and look to model writings in your field in the form of professional publications, dissertations, and honors-level senior theses.

**11. Make a point.** Many senior thesis writers tend to rely on summarizing, describing, narrating, and categorizing and never get around to making a point. While an elegant and clarifying summary, or a careful and sensitive description, or a well-chosen and illustrative narrative, or a new and intriguing categorization might be a contribution to your field, chances are you will be expected to develop some sort of argument or point, that is, to use your summary, description, narrative, or categorization in the service of an analytic response to some unresolved question or problem. If you find yourself relying on summaries, descriptions, narratives, and categorization, ask yourself, "What larger question is this in the service of?"

**Show the subtleties of your thinking.** Many students rely on variations of "and" to connect their ideas: "and"; "in addition"; "also"; "next"; "another example"; "later"; "plus"; "besides"; "yet another thing." It is as though they knit one very long piece with a basic knit-one-purl-one stitch and then decide after it is long enough that they will cast off, add a few tassels or a bit of fringe, and call it a scarf. That is fine when we are just learning to knit or to write, but to construct complex garments and arguments, we need to make more complex connections between things.

Don't say "and" when you mean to form a more precise connection: "even though"; "seems like, but"; "is insignificant unless we consider"; "is based on the problematic assumption that"; "does not adequately address the question of"; "goes even farther and demonstrates that" "despite its problems is nonetheless useful for"; "but this definition differs in one critical respect"; "addresses that question but does not address the matter of." An analogy or metaphor can also help you clarify a connection between ideas.

**12. Reckon with the complexity of your question.** You don't necessarily need to resolve your question completely. Sometimes it is enough to talk clearly about **how and why things remain complex** rather than to clear up the complexity.

**13. Let readers of your draft know the questions *you* have about the draft.** While you might sometimes want to give your adviser and friends carte blanche to respond to whatever strikes them in your drafts, sometimes specifying some of the questions you have helps you feel less vulnerable to getting feedback. As a rule, it's helpful to you and your readers to append a memo to a draft. You can take the first shots at your work so that you keep your dignity, saying, in effect, "I know this draft has its problems." And you help your readers by guiding their attention to what is most important to you. You can ask people to tell you what they see as your governing question, or to name three things they learned in reading your chapter, or to tell you what they liked most and what they had the most trouble with, or to tell you where your argument is weakest and where it is strongest, how the tone works in a particular place, etc.

**14. Overview and read other senior theses.** Read senior theses from previous years. Ask your senior thesis adviser if your department keeps some senior theses available for students' use. Check with the library to find out whether and where senior theses from all departments are kept. (At Harvard, the Harvard University Archives (in Pusey Library in Harvard Yard) houses theses that have received a grade of *magna cum laude* or higher; Lamont Library keeps on Level 1 the most recent two years of theses which were awarded the Hoopes prize.) While it might be useful to read a thesis that is similar to yours in content area or topic, it can be especially helpful to read one that is similar in method or approach (e.g., a thesis that relies upon interview data, or quantitative data, or government documents, or ethnographic data, or a portrait of a community).

**15. Accept that anxiety and anxiety-management are part of the writing process.** Upon the completion of his doctorate, a former graduate student commented that 80% of the time and energy involved in writing a dissertation goes to anxiety management. You can't wait until you are not afraid or not anxious to begin writing. You need to find ways to write even when you are feeling anxious. Writing in your thesis journal about your fear or anxiety can be a way of keeping yourself company in your fear, discovering what your fear is about, letting the fear be there without letting it stop you from doing what you need to do. Consider using the freewriting prompt, "I fear that...." And then try, "I want to find a way to go forward in the face of that fear. One first step I could take is to ...." You might also try, "I am stuck. I am stuck because...." In addition to writing about your fear or stuckness, working in fifteen- to twenty- minute stretches, taking frequent breaks, getting regular exercise, meditating, using the S-O-S strategy, using the "So/And Even So" Approach, and talking with people are all ways of managing your anxiety.

**16. Take frequent breaks.** To sustain your focus and concentration, you need to pace yourself. Pacing requires **timely and attuned breaks** – timely in that you take a break before you reach your breaking point (i.e., the point at which you are so exhausted that you collapse or are so frustrated that you avoid getting back to the task) and attuned in that it hits the spot of what you need to recharge or restore yourself at that particular point in time.

Many people say, "But my 'little' breaks inevitably last for hours." You can avoid the potential for dangerously long breaks if you **a)** develop a **repertoire of refreshing activities;** **b)** experiment with **breaks of different sizes;** and **c)** develop a sensitivity to **when** you need a break and to **what kind** and **what length** of break you need at any given point. Your repertoire of breaks might include talking with a friend, meditating, dancing in your room to a favorite song, reading your email, making a phone call, getting something to eat or drink, taking a walk, taking a brief nap (notice how long of a nap is "just right" for you), reading a novel or a newspaper, doing the dishes, getting fresh air, doing some artwork, starting a letter to a friend, getting exercise, or running an errand. **When you take a break, ask yourself what exactly you need right now.** Do you need a change of activity (e.g., to do something physical rather than something sedentary or to work on an art project rather than a problem set)? Do you need a change of environment (e.g., to get some fresh air or to work in a friend's room)? A change of

perspective (e.g., to talk with a friend or to watch a movie)? Sleep? Company? Nourishment? Distraction? The taste of chocolate? Entertainment? Notice which sorts and sizes of breaks are most responsive to particular needs. Sometimes only a long break will do. **But frequent, brief breaks can be surprisingly restorative.**

If you take an unattuned break – a break that is not attuned to what you need at that moment – the break will not hit the spot. If what would restore you is a breath of fresh air, no amount of watching television will hit that spot. If what you need is to distract yourself with a television show, no amount of chocolate will hit that spot. If what you need is the taste and richness of good chocolate, no amount of running will hit the spot. If what you need is a run, no amount of talking with a friend will hit that spot. If what you need is the company of a friend, no amount of fresh air will hit that spot.

**17. Attend to your senses.** The enterprise of studying and writing can sometimes be one of the most depriving experiences known to humankind. It's sensorily depriving – we are not seeing something that's visually interesting, smelling something wonderful, tasting something delicious, feeling a soothing or stimulating touch, or hearing beautiful sound. Studying is socially depriving: we are typically alone. And it is kinesthetically depriving: we are just sitting. We're effectively in a deprivation chamber.

Try to attend to your senses not only when you take a break but when you create a context for studying. Sit where you can see something appealing. Make a cup of hot, fragrant tea or hot chocolate to smell and taste. Wrap yourself in something warm and cozy. If you can study with music playing, listen to music that will hit the spot in this moment of studying. Study with a study buddy, simply keeping each other company in the process. And get up and move from time to time.

**18. Think of your work in terms of a relationship, a process of continually connecting and re-connecting.** Things get out of perspective when they fall out of relationship: we cannot tell how big or small things are unless we see them in relation to something else. To keep your work in perspective, or to bring your thesis back to scale once you've lost perspective, try to stay in relationship with, i.e., connected with

**your curiosity and your caring** (also known as your interest, your passion, your desire to understand or to know) – by remembering what drew you to your question in the first place.

**your question** – by freewriting, being playful with ideas (see tips #4 and #5 above).

**your coaches (i.e., teachers), colleagues (i.e., fellow students), and loyal fans (i.e., friends)** by talking with them about your ideas and about your experience of trying to write.

You might find the following three metaphors of connecting and reconnecting helpful:

**Engaging, disengaging, and reengaging gears.** Imagine your mind and your project as two gears. To turn, they need to engage, to mesh. Questions are the cogs of the gears, the means by which your mind engages with your project. You prepare to write (or read) by remembering the questions your piece is addressing (or discovering the questions an author is addressing) and by generating questions of your own. Meshing the cogs on one gear (the questions of the piece you are writing or reading) with the cogs on another gear (the questions on your mind) engages the gears and sets them in motion. Whenever your mind disengages (i.e., you lose your concentration) use these sets of questions to help you reengage.

**Relating** (to your project). Relationships, whether with your studies or with people, share common phases and themes: Someone or some topic catching your interest from afar. Flirting. Getting acquainted. Courtship. Falling in and out of love. Disillusionment. Getting real. Voicing your concerns, needs, preferences, and limits. Working through conflict and disappointment. Fighting fairly. Creating deeper intimacy through conflict. Reaching out with a peace offering. Taking a break. Getting reacquainted. Remembering what about the other initially attracted you, appealed to you. Remaining curious about and kind to the other. Finding common ground. Negotiating new terms.

One senior thesis writer referred to his thesis as “Taylor” and would say, “Taylor and I are spending the weekend together,” “Taylor and I haven't been doing so well, so we decided we needed a date night.” “Even when we're having a hard time, I try to remember what drew me to Taylor in the first place.”

**Practicing Zen Mindfulness** (an approach to everything in life, including one's writing, reading and studying). A Zen approach to life involves mindfulness (*vs.* mindlessness); being present (*vs.* being absent); and cultivating an abiding awareness of your relation to all you do and encounter in your life.

When your attention wanders, as it inevitably will, just notice that it has, and bring it back to your task. Don't judge yourself or your behavior – berating yourself by saying, for instance, "There I go again being such a poor writer (or reader). I never keep my focus. I have such a short attention span. I bet I have the poorest concentration of anyone. I can't believe I am so distractible. I must be doing something wrong. Everyone else in this class (or this library, or the world) knows how to keep their focus. I'm just not a good reader. . . ." Such judgments waste your precious time and energy. When you lose your concentration, just notice what you are doing, and then bring your attention back to your focus.

**19. Negotiate with yourself.** When you seem to be sabotaging your own efforts to do what you intend, listen for internal voices that express your **competing needs, desires, and fears**. Part of you might be saying, "Me, I really do want to do well on this project. I want to get down to work." But another part might be saying, "Me, I'm going to make sure I get some time to hang out with friends no matter what." And yet another part might be saying, "Me, I'm afraid I'm really not competent to do this project. I'm afraid that if I work on it now, I'll just discover that I really don't know what I'm doing or that I can't do as good a job as I want to."

At times like this, it is as if our behavior is being guided by an internal committee whose members each have a vested interest in their own particular preferred activity. The committee as a whole has trouble either accomplishing a task or enjoying itself wholeheartedly because its members keep quibbling over which activity should have priority. Worktime tends to be compromised by the desire to rest or play, and playtime tends to be contaminated by guilt and anxiety over not working.

To work and play with less internal conflict, you need to form alliances among various parts of yourself – for example, among the part of you that aspires to do your best; the part that values other things in life besides achievement; and the part that is afraid of failure, compulsive working, loneliness, or other potential risks of engaging with your work. To form such an alliance requires that all of the separate, uncooperative, **"me/I" voices** join to create a generative **"we/let's" voice** (e.g., "Okay, we have several different things that matter to us. Let's figure out how can we get going on this project and also help manage our fear about not being good enough and also guarantee that we can have time to play"). In creating a "we/let's" voice, you bring together all of your energies in the effort to live **a life that feels whole and true to the complexity of who you are**.

**20. Let yourself be surprised** in the process of writing your thesis. True learning involves a transformation of sorts, and we all know how disorienting transformations can be.

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