**How to “Wr**[**iting to get unstuck – #phdknowhow**](http://patthomson.net/2015/07/08/writing-to-get-unstuck-phdknowhow/)**”**

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Sometimes, in the middle of the PhD, you feel stuck. You feel as if you’re losing focus. Perhaps your research question is slipping away. Perhaps your research question no longer feels as if it quite fits. You may be analyzing data and suddenly feel as if you don’t know where it’s going. These times can feel like a crisis.

At these points it can be very helpful to take stock through some focused, timed writing.

Take 25 minutes or so to write as fast you can, without too much pause, about any one – or more – of the following:

• Why my topic is important  
• What I now know that I didn’t know when I started  
• What I’ve done so far  
• How my understanding of my topic has changed as I’ve gone along  
• What I could write a paper about now  
• What my existing research question offers and what it doesn’t

You might even choose to do more than one timed session about these topics if they seem appropriate.

Have a rest for ten minutes, get a cup of tea/coffee, go outside, pet the dog/cat and then sit back down. Now do one or more timed sessions writing about one or more of the following:

• Two things I’m still puzzled about  
• The thing that has most interested me so far  
• Where I might go next  
• A big idea that is emerging from my work so far  
• The thing I most want to find out about now

It may be that at the end of this you’ve unstuck yourself. Simply writing on these issues has given you some insight into what is troubling you at the moment and how you might approach the work differently. Sometimes simply changing focus is enough to get you re-energised and re-focused.

But maybe not. If not, leave these pieces of writing and go and do something else for the rest of the day – analysis, reading… When you come back to this writing the next day, treat it as a piece of data that has been written by someone else. As you read through the writing, ask yourself:

• What is the project the writer is doing?  
• Where are they up to?  
• What might they do next?  
• Do they need to make a decision about anything in order to move on – if so what are the choices that they have?

Write down the insights you have gained from this reading. Write this text in the third person. *The writer is…the writer now needs to*

There’s no guarantee of course that working through these three writing stages will get you unstuck, but there’s a VERY good chance that switching gears to focus on your overall process will help.

These kinds of writing exercises can get you out of the mire of the immediate, and put you in the position of identifying your strengths and diagnosing problems. You can then develop strategies to address the stuck point(s).

Writing helps you move from the micro to the meta. You shift from the position of feeling out of control to being the doctoral researcher who can analyse their own processes and get themselves going again.