



Universiteit
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Thesis writing for students with AD(H)D

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Leiden University

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1. The thesis: a phased approach

Writing a thesis is a lot of work. The more structured you are, the better. Unfortunately, if you have AD(H)D that can be quite a challenge. However, by taking a phased approach to the thesis process, you can avoid a lot of difficulties.

1.1 Phases in the thesis process

You can split the thesis process into the following phases:

1 Orientation phase

What is expected of your thesis? What form should it take and which topic should you choose?

2 Information phase

Look for literature that will help you gain a clearer picture of what you want to research. What has already been researched and what can you add to it?

3 Question phase

Next, delineate your topic so you can come up with a good research question.

4 Research phase

Now, answer your research question by means of literature research and/or empirical research.

5 Writing phase

Next, write up your findings in a well-structured manner. By way of rewriting and revising, you will end up with a good text.

6 Finalisation phase

Last of all, make sure your text flows well and that you have a good layout, list of contents, notes, bibliography and so on. At this stage, you usually also write your introductory text and conclusion.

These phases are explained in more detail in the following pages.

1.1.1 Extra tips for students with ADHD

Use the following tips to help make each phase in the process more manageable.

Do's	Don't's
First, make sure you have a good structure.	Don't just start writing without a clear plan.
Channel your enthusiasm into logical sub-steps.	Don't let your enthusiasm get the better of you and allow your approach to become chaotic.
Stick to your topic.	Don't keep switching topics.
Make a list of the phases and all the steps within them, then cross them off as you go along.	Don't get over enthusiastic and try to include too many interesting elements in your thesis.

1.2 Orientation phase

In this phase you should find out what is expected of your thesis. For example:

- Look up your study programme's thesis manual and read it carefully. If there isn't a thesis manual, read the information about the thesis in your study programme's prospectus.
- Look at other theses in the library or those written by friends and fellow students.
- Next, look for a thesis supervisor. Some study programmes will allocate you a supervisor, but in most cases you will have to find your own. You could contact a lecturer with whom you have a good rapport. It is generally wise to approach a lecturer who is specialised in the topic you think you want to write about.
- Then, choose your topic. How can you go about this?
 - Remember that the perfect topic does not exist.
 - Ask a lecturer to suggest a topic.
 - Choose something from your area of interest. This is especially handy if you have AD(H)D as it can help you to focus, or even to hyper-focus.
 - Follow on from the recommendations made in another thesis.
 - First make sure there are sufficient materials available on a topic.

1.2.1 Extra tips for students with AD(H)D

Don't skip the orientation phase before you get to work.

Do's	Don'ts
Make a list of the criteria that your thesis must meet.	Don't start before you have a clear picture of what is expected.
Make use of other people: read their theses and ask their advice.	Remember you don't have to re-discover the wheel.
Find the right stimulus by choosing a topic that really interests you.	Don't choose a topic that is too broad or challenging.

1.3 Information phase

In this phase you should find out what research has already been done on your chosen topic. You can gain a first impression by talking to your thesis supervisor who should have an overview of your research area and can put you on the right track to formulating a good research question.

Getting to know your topic:

- **Begin by brainstorming;** write down all your spontaneous thoughts on your topic and follow them up with searches in the library or online.
- **Consult experts** and other people involved in your topic to help you to see it from different angles.
- **Search for literature.** Most students find the majority of their information by searching digitally. You can also use encyclopaedias, overviews, manuals or anything else you can get your hands on. The more you define your topic, the more specific the information you need.
- **SCAN!** You don't need to read all the information on your topic from A to Z. That takes much too long. Instead, scan by looking at chapter titles and headings and by reading summaries. In this way, you can sort out which information will and won't be of use later.

1.3.1 Extra tips for students with AD(H)D

Use these tips to make the process more manageable.

Do's	Don'ts
Use your instinctive creativity when brainstorming and write down all your ideas.	Don't get stuck thinking about ideas without writing them down or researching them further.
Divide your literature search into manageable chunks: take breaks.	Don't try to do too much at once, or you'll risk becoming overwhelmed and starting to procrastinate.
Scan! Only read the main points (titles and summaries) and only store the information that is useful for your topic.	Don't try to read and store everything from A to Z.

1.4 Question phase

In the question phase you should come up with a good research question. This forms the central point of your thesis and acts as the common thread throughout. The more concrete your research question, the more focused and efficiently you'll be able to work. It's a good idea to formulate your research question as an actual question, or several coherent questions. Next, draw up a research plan, also known as a thesis outline, around your research question.

- Research question: relevant and specific.
- What criteria should a good research question meet?

	Vague	Specific
Irrelevant	X	X
Relevant	X	Good!

Make it specific:

- Look for connections
- Use verbs
- Demarcate well (in terms of time, measurability, definition)

Make it relevant:

- What use is this knowledge?
- Is this not already known?
- Who would be interested in the results of this research?

This paragraph has been borrowed from “Snel afstuderen! Stap voor stap naar een geslaagde scriptie” (Graduate quickly! Step by step to a successful thesis), by Erik Feijen and Pepijn Trietsch. A good book, if you would like to read more on this subject (in Dutch).

1.4.1 Extra tips for students with AD(H)D

A good research question is half the work.

Do's	Don'ts
Take the time to come up with a good research question.	Don't move on to the next phase until your research questions has been approved.
Make sure you have a good demarcation: less is more!	Don't let your research question get too complicated or too vague.

1.5 Research phase

1.5.1 Draw up hypotheses

Research can take the form of literature research or empirical research. In both cases, you must first formulate a hypothesis, then test it. You can do this by assigning provisional answers to all your sub-questions on the basis of your common sense and existing knowledge. A hypothesis can help you to think in a more focused way and thus work more efficiently.

A good hypothesis should meet the following criteria:

- Simple, objective and precisely worded
- Containing quantified information (i.e. not *smoking a lot*, but rather *smoking twenty cigarettes a day*)
- Dare to make guesses based on your common sense

1.5.2 Gathering literature

Once you have a good hypothesis, you will know what sort of information you need to look for in the literature in order to test it.

Which literature?

- Find a few influential classics in your subject area
- Supplement these with new developments
- Search separately for review articles
- Search separately for unpublished articles
- Don't waste time on mediocre sources (be critical, particularly with sources from newspapers and popular websites).

Where to look?

- Your supervisor can probably suggest some good initial sources
- Use different search machines and databases
- Use reference lists from text books, theses and articles

How to search?

- Create a separate folder on your computer for each hypothesis/sub-question or chapter
- Determine how long your attention span is and set a timer for that amount of time
- Use key words from the literature you have already found
- Scan the bibliographies in articles that you have already found
- Select literature by reading summaries
- Stop in time: i.e. once you have found three to five articles for each sub-question

Rate your literature on the basis of relevance to your research question and sub-questions, and on the basis of quality i.e. whether it is well respected in your field of study. Discuss the literature you intend to use with your thesis supervisor.

Want to read more (in Dutch)? This paragraph has been borrowed from "Snel afstuderen! Stap voor stap naar een geslaagde scriptie" (Graduate quickly! Step by step to a successful thesis), by Erik Feijen and Pepijn Trietsch.

1.5.3 Empirical research

After establishing your hypothesis, start gathering information. You can do this, for example, by way of databases, conducting interviews or surveys, or through

observations.

Next, summarise the data you have collected and test it against your hypothesis. You can often do this by way of statistical techniques that you have learned during your study programme. The results will help you to come to a conclusion.

1.5.4 Extra tips for students with AD(H)D

The research phase is a crucial stage in which you will find all the data you need to start writing.

Do's	Don'ts
Make a plan in advance: what are you going to research, when and how?	Don't collect data randomly. This will make it virtually impossible to order your data later on.
Limit yourself when searching for literature: 3 to 5 sources per sub-question is sufficient.	Don't keep searching until you have so much data you can't see the wood for the trees anymore.
Discuss your choices with your supervisor.	Don't be afraid to discuss things with your supervisor.
Record all your data in the same way, so you can find everything quickly and easily during the writing phase.	Don't deviate from your plan.

1.6 Writing phase

Before you can start writing, you need a good structure. A text that lacks a solid structure will quickly fall apart.

What makes for a good text?

1. A good text has sufficient focused arguments. In other words, strong **content**.
2. The structure must be logical and evident. Make sure you have correct numbering, clear headings and that you use appropriate key phrases.
3. The style should be easy to read and objective. Make sure your sentences and descriptions are concise and that you don't use colloquialisms or personal expressions.
4. Of course, your spelling and grammar must be correct. Take plenty of time for revision. You will save your supervisor a whole lot of irritation if you do.
5. Make sure the layout meets any requirements set by your study programme. Many study programmes specify, for example, one and a half line spacing. Also make sure your layout is consistent i.e. that you use the same letter type and spacing throughout.

Don't be too perfectionistic at the start. First, draw up a chapter division on the basis of your research question and plan. Then, write an initial rough draft. You can polish it up and do the finishing touches later. Many students get stuck at this stage trying to formulate things correctly and write perfect sentences. This really isn't necessary in the early phase of writing.

Writing is a creative process that should be seen separately to revising. If you try to write and revise at the same time, you will end up holding yourself back and getting nowhere. First write, then revise.

1.6.1 Extra tips for students with AD(H)D

Do's	Don'ts
Draw up a plan and structure, then fill in the details.	Don't start writing without a clear plan.
Make sure you have a good layout and that you write easy to read text.	Don't think that a good layout and consistent style are too time consuming. Paying attention to these aspects will certainly benefit your cooperation with your thesis supervisor.
Ask someone you know to read your text and give feedback on the language and structure.	Don't keep ploughing on alone. Asking for help in a constructive way is also an academic skill.

1.7 Finalisation phase

Writing takes place over several rounds during which you will hand in sections and process feedback until you end up with a good, clearly formulated thesis. Once the content is ready, it's time for the finalisation phase.

In this phase you should write both a good introduction and a conclusion. Next, you can make sure your text is easy to read by doing the finishing touches.

1.7.1 Conclusion

You should generally write your conclusion last, however you can make notes for your conclusion throughout the writing process. It is better to have one conclusion at the end of your thesis rather than several shorter conclusions throughout. But wherever you place your conclusion, you must always make clear what you are basing your conclusion on, i.e. actual research results, the views of others, or your own analysis. In your conclusion, you can also include suggestions for further reading or research.

1.7.2 Introduction

Once the your thesis is broadly finished, you can write your introduction. You can also

try to jot down ideas for your introduction during the writing process, for example in the margins.

You should generally cover the following in your introduction :

- the aim of your thesis
- an explanation of the topic
- a concrete description of the research question
- the criteria you used when selecting the literature
- the structure of your thesis, with in some cases a short explanation or summary of each chapter

1.7.3 Final formulation

It is a good idea to check through the entire text one more time to correct any language mistakes. If you are unsure about any language usage, ask someone to take a look at it for you. If you are unsure of the correct spelling, consult an up-to-date dictionary.

1.7.4 Layout

In terms of layout, check all the following:

- Pages should be printed on single side.
- Text should be one and half or double-spaced and there should be broad margins of 3 to 4 cm on both the right and left of the page. Also, leave a broad space at the top and bottom of the page.
- Organise your thesis well so that both the appearance and layout are consistent.
- By using headings in Word, you can maintain consistent headings throughout and create a table of contents in no time.
- When choosing titles for chapters, paragraphs and sub-paragraphs, try to avoid content-poor, vague and abstract sentences. Keep titles short and make sure they match the content.
- Always start a new chapter on a new page.
- Don't go overboard with the number of sub-paragraphs. An overly detailed layout can result in loss of clarity.

Cover page

The cover page of a thesis should generally include:

- the title and if necessary, the subtitle;
- the author's name;
- the year and month in which it was written;
- the name of the thesis supervisor;
- in some cases, the name of the institution at which the thesis was written.

Citations

In terms of citations, take the following into account:

- When quoting someone, place the relevant text between inverted commas.

- If you want to omit something from the original quote, indicate this by placing three points between brackets.
- Quotations can enliven a text or clarify a particular author's point of view, but it is unwise to cram a thesis full of quotations. Not only does it make the thesis difficult to read due to constant interruptions, it might also give the impression that you have difficulty expressing points in your own words.

Literature references

- Literature references in the body of a thesis generally only state the surname of the author and the year, e.g. Smith, 2003. Initials are only used if there is any risk of confusion.
- If reference is made to a work written by two authors, both are mentioned, e.g. Smith & Peterson, 2007.
- If a work is attributed to more than two authors, all surnames are mentioned in the first reference, e.g. Smith, Peterson and Jones, 2008. Later, the surname of the first author followed by 'e.a.' is sufficient, e.g. Smith et al., 2008.
- If several works written by the same author in the same year are quoted, they should be distinguished by placing the letters a, b, etc. after the year, e.g. Smith, 2005a.
- The reader must be able to find the literature referred to in your text in the bibliography. Here, you must always list works in alphabetical order according to the surname of the author. Or in the case of multiple authors, according to the surname of the first author.
- Books, articles from books, articles from professional journals, dissertations and lectures can be listed in a numerous ways. Consult the bibliographies of other theses in your field of study for guidance.

Appendices

- Appendices are generally not read in full. Your reader might refer to them to find information needed to check a statement or conclusion you have made in your thesis, or just to satisfy their curiosity. It is up to you to decide what you include in your main text and what you put in your appendices.
- As a rule, it's wise to put anything that might make reading very difficult in your appendices. For example, large tables, diagrams, questionnaires, extensive numerical data, instructions, etc.
- Appendices should be numbered and titled. The page numbering should continue through the body of your thesis and your appendices.
- In the body of the text you should refer to any appendices.

2. Planning

2.1 Introduction

Now you know all the phases in the thesis process, you can get to work. Planning and motivation are essential for achieving a good end result, but this can be a challenge in itself. Symptoms of AD(H)D can sometime stand in the way of good planning and motivation. It is therefore important that you learn to manage your symptoms. The GGZ (Dutch Association of Mental Health and Addiction Care) offers help and support. Every year, it organises a support group for students with AD(H)D, in collaboration with Leiden University's student counsellors. If you have already attended this support group, you will recognise a lot of the advice given here below.

2.2 *General planning and organisation tips*¹

- **Get an agenda and notebook**
 - Don't use loose bit of paper and post-its. They will only get lost.
 - Write down everything you want to remember in your notebook. For example, things you have to do and telephone numbers.
 - If your notebook is full, buy another one right away. But keep the old one so you can always look back in it.
 - Put all your appointments in your notebook, not on separate pieces of paper.
 - Make a to-do list in your notebook.
 - Go through your to-do list every day.
 - If your to-do list becomes illegible, write it out again neatly.
- **The perfect system does not exist**
 - Constantly searching for the perfect system will only demotivate you.
 - An agenda and notebook are always a good start.
 - Give every system a fair chance. It can take up to three month to get used to a new system. Don't be discouraged by negative thoughts. It always takes time to learn new habits.
- **Many students with AD(H)D like to have their agenda, to-do list and alarm on their phone. If this works for you, do it.**

¹ Based on 'Bahandelgids ADHD bij Volwassenen. Cliëntenwerkboek' by Safren, Sprich, Perlman and Otto.

2.2 *Planning your thesis*

Planning is a skill you can learn. Although as a student with AD(H)D, this can be more of a challenge. A good plan is SMART:

- **Specific**
 - What are you going to do?
- **Measurable**
 - How are you going to do it?
- **Achievable**
 - Can you accomplish it?
- **Realistic**
 - Is it possible?
 - Is it realistic?
 - Ask others for feedback as to whether your plan is too optimistic.
- **Timely**
 - When are you going to do it?
 - Have you set deadlines for yourself?

2.3 *Make an overview*

A good plan goes from general to specific. First make a general overview. Fill in the details later.

1. Set a start and end date for your thesis
2. Set the amount of time for research
3. Set the amount of time for writing
4. Set the amount of time for finalising

2.3.1 **Start and end date**

- How long should a thesis take according to your study programme? You can work this out by multiplying the number of ECs (credits) awarded for the thesis by 28, i.e. 1 EC equals 28 hours.
- How much have you done so far (percentage)?
- How much time are you able to spend per week?

Now you can work out how long it will take you. If you have already done 10% of the work, calculate how long the remaining 90% should officially take. Then divide this by how many hours you plan to spend per week.

An example:

Say your programme awards 20 EC for the thesis.

That's $20 \times 28 = 560$ hours

But you've already done 10% of the work (e.g. you've already come up with your research question or have gathered some literature).

So that is $(100-10) \times 560$ hours = 504 hours

Say you plan to work 18 hours per week on your thesis: $504 \div 18 = 28$

That means it will take you 28 weeks.

2.3.2 Set the amount of time for research

Let's assume you have already come up with your research question and sub-questions, and have drawn up an outline. You now have to do your research. You can divide this into literature research and empirical research. You can then divide your literature research into the sub-questions you want to answer. If you find it difficult to estimate how much time you'll need, ask your supervisor for help.

2.3.3 Set the amount of time for writing

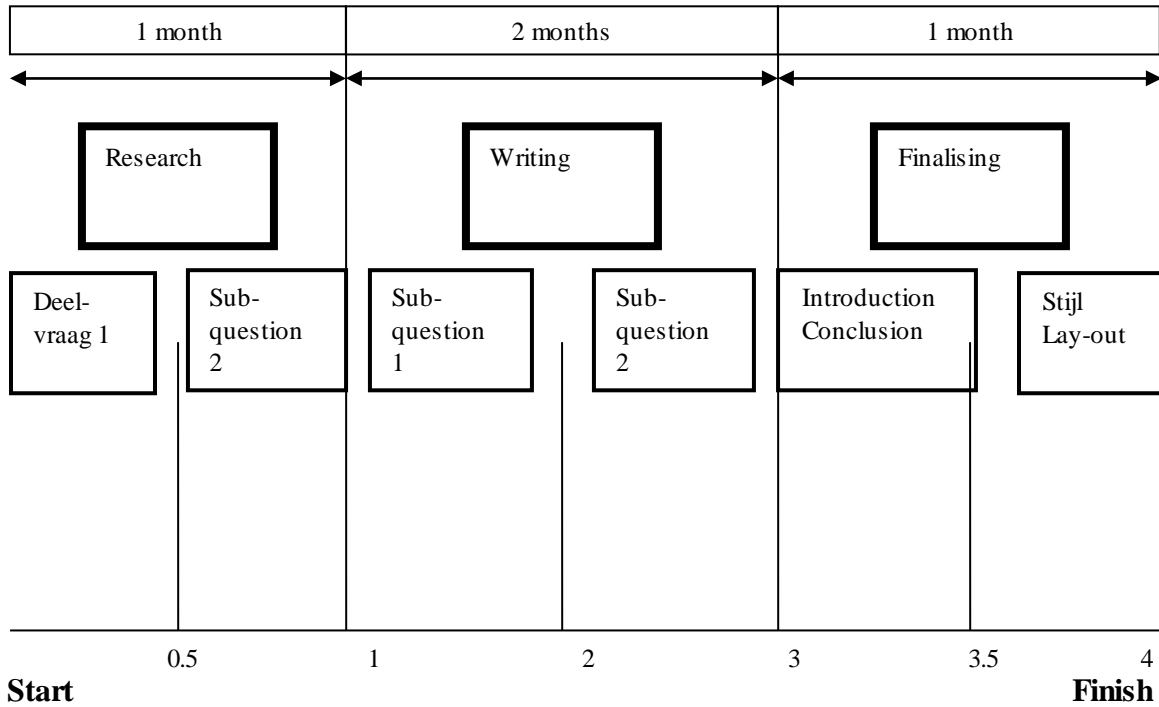
Once you've completed your research you can start writing. You should describe empirical research in the form of 'method', 'data' and 'results'. Literature research should be divided into the sub-questions you want to answer. This will ensure a good structure. Make a time estimation for each element you want to write. Here too, ask your supervisor for help if you find it difficult.

2.3.4 Set the amount of time for finalising

Don't forget to plan time for finalising. A good introduction and conclusion, and making sure your text is neat and ordered are essential for a good thesis. Take into account your own writing and editing speed. If you have difficulty with the layout or grammar, ask the people around you for help. By asking others to read your thesis, you'll end up with a better result.

2.3.5 Put your overview in your notebook and on your computer

Make sure to put your overview down on paper. Write it in your notebook and save it on your computer. You can also print it out and hang it by your desk.



2.4 Make an overview of each element of your plan

Now you have an overview, you can work out each element of the plan. For example, what do you need to do to research sub-question one? You can make a to-do list for each element. Here’s an example:

Research sub-question 1	Research sub-question 2	Writing sub-question 1	Writing sub-question 2	Introduction and conclusion	Style and layout
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Gather x number of sources. - Look through sources and put useful information on cards. -Order cards. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Gather x number of sources. - Look through sources and put useful information on cards. -Order cards. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Divide chapters for sub-question 1 into smaller paragraphs. - Find cards relevant to each paragraph. -Write up information on cards. - Put texts together. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Divide chapters for sub-question 2 into smaller paragraphs - Find cards relevant to each paragraph -Write up information on cards - Put texts together 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Assemble conclusions from each chapter to form a whole. -Write introduction describing your research question, method and structure. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Check spelling. -Check consistent layout, headings, letter type. -Bibliography complete? -Let friends or family read it. -Printing and binding.

2.5 Make a daily to-do list

Now you have an overview and have divided your elements into tasks, you can make a daily to-do list. This will give you structure and focus. You can make a to-do list by determining the priorities from your overview. Then decide what you need to do for each.

An example:

To-do list Gather sources sub-question 1		
<i>Element</i>	<i>When</i>	<i>To do</i>
Sub-question 1	Morning	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To library: search for source A 2. Go through source A and write useful info on cards
	Afternoon	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. To library: search for source B 4. Go through source B and write useful info on cards
	Evening	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. Go home: immediately put things in order. File the cards or put on computer 6. Cook 7. Relax

Keep a logbook. Also, make sure to put your to-lists in your notebook. If they don't fit, get a ring binder instead. Put your to-do lists in it every day and cross them off.

Make sure that your to-do list and plans are always identical in your agenda and notebook.

3. Thesis supervisor

3.1 Introduction

You will write your thesis under the guidance of a thesis supervisor. Your relationship with your thesis supervisor is very important. It is therefore wise to choose a supervisor with whom you are well matched. You should also tell your supervisor about the difficulties that your AD(H)D can cause you, so they can take this into consideration. If you then miss a deadline or forget something, your supervisor will be more understanding.

Your thesis is as good as your thesis supervisor thinks it is. It is therefore important to build up a good working relationship and to make full use of your supervisor's feedback.

3.2 Whether or not to mention your AD(H)D

Some students with AD(H)D don't like to tell lecturers or staff that they have AD(H)D. But it is generally a good idea to do so, certainly when it comes to thesis writing, as you will have to spend a great deal of time with your supervisor. Some lecturers might know very little about AD(H)D, so a degree of openness can help them to understand you better. If you tell them a little about your diagnosis and what that can mean, your supervisor will be better able to understand your actions of behaviour. This can help prevent your supervisor thinking that you are, for example, lazy or reluctant, and allow them to realise that sometimes you don't intend things to go the way they do.

3.3 Managing expectations

Most supervisors have an image of the ideal thesis student². Namely a student who scores highly in:

- Content
 - Original research
 - Thorough analysis
 - Good text
- Process
 - Open communication
 - A deal is a deal
 - Comes up quickly with a clear plan
- Attitude
 - Independent worker
 - Enthusiastic and polite
 - Processes feedback correctly

Luckily, no one is perfect. However, you can manage the expectations of your supervisor by telling them in advance about your difficulties. For students with AD(H)D, it is usually 'process' that proves to be most challenging. They tend to forget appointments from time to time. And making a clear plan can be tricky. Being open about these matters can help.

² Borrowed from Snel afstuderen! By Feijen and Trietsch

It is important that you make clear agreements with your supervisor.

Try doing the following to help improve your score for the above-mentioned points:

- Content
 - Use citations from your supervisor's work
 - Use your supervisor's techniques
 - Also use their layout and language
 - Make sure you have a good introduction and conclusion
- Process
 - Explain in a business-like way the effects that AD(H)D can have in this area
 - Ask your supervisor to set deadlines before deadlines (i.e. a deadline and a REAL deadline)
 - Always respond politely to emails
- Attitude
 - Try to stay positive, even when this is difficult
 - Suggest solutions rather than just asking questions (show initiative).

3.4 Problem solving

Sometime students may become dissatisfied during the thesis process. Supervisors have certain tasks that they should fulfil when supervising your thesis, and if they fail to do so problems can arise that need to be resolved.

Feijen and Trietsch (2007) specify the following tasks for thesis supervisors:

- The supervisor should think along with the student in terms of content.
- They should adhere to the thesis regulations.
- They should give periodic clear and consistent feedback on the work.
- They should grade the thesis in an honest manner.
- They should treat the student with respect.

If conflict arises, Feijen and Trietsch (2007) state that the following can help:

- Remaining polite.
- Assuming that the supervisor has good intentions.
- Clearly explaining what you think and feel.
- Trying to understand the viewpoint of the supervisor.
- Asking for advice, for example from family, friends, your study adviser or a student counsellor.
- If there are certain things you really object to doing, respect your own boundaries.
- Giving objective arguments, if needed, backed up by the opinions of study advisers, student counsellors or other lecturers.
- Remaining constructive and looking for solutions.

Tips from students with AD(H)D

You're not the first student with AD(H)D and you won't be the last. We have collected a few tips from other students with AD(H)D here below. Tips from your peers can be extremely useful as they have already been tried and tested.

- Don't get side tracked: stay on the path and don't take any diversions or side trips.
- Golden tip: work on your thesis every day. Do the hours!
- Give yourself the space to switch between tasks.
- Always write down your ideas.
- Have someone else to bounce your ideas off as well as your supervisor, for example a fellow student.
- When you're writing your thesis, your studies don't have any fixed structure. It's therefore a good idea to attend a lecture from time to time, just to help you maintain some kind of rhythm.
- Make sure your study area is free of distractions and outside stimuli.

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