**Two knees and a PhD: On writing a PhD in adverse circumstances**

Karen McAulay

A year ago, I started writing my thesis.  I already had a handful of conference papers which I hoped to use as the basis for some of my chapters.  All that was required (I thought) was gracefully to embroider them together in some kind of order, and hey presto!  One thesis.

Oh, that it was so easy.  I'm a full-time working mother with an older, mobility-impaired husband.  I registered to do my PhD part time five years ago.  Apart from four weeks' study-leave for writing up, I did my research entirely in my spare time.

I'm not about to tell you how to write graceful English and elegant arguments, nor how to structure paragraphs so as to present your arguments in all their pristine, innovative glories.  Let me give you some mundane advice instead.

How did I do it?  Scheduling and log-keeping.   I applied the same principle to my thesis-writing as I do to my youngest son's school projects.  How many words are required?  How many chapters?  How much time is available?  Parcel it up and write it down.  Do you need your supervisor to read each chapter as you go?  Only you will know how quickly that's likely to happen.  Timetable this in as well.

During your writing session, keep a second document to note down inspirations about other things you need to check out or get from the library. This means you won't forget them and can follow them through later, without interrupting what you're doing right now.

Finish each writing session by doing a word-count, and keep records of words per chapter, and total words.  It's a powerful incentive.

Start your bibliography at the start of your research project.  Find out what information is required and how to format it, and keep it that way. Use EndNote if you find it helpful - I only used it for record-keeping.  As I cited a work in my writing, I added it to my EndNote bibliography, so that I'd have a record of what I'd referred to.  It helped when it came to compiling the final bibliography at the end.

If your institution offers a course on formatting your thesis in Word, take it!  It is worth every minute!

As you approach the end of your project, make another timetable.  Allow time for proof-reading, checking references, checking any formatting of footnotes or bibliography etc.  I never use spell-check, but I used it on any words which I might have spelled wrong - in my case Scottish surnames and Gaelic place-names.

Check the rules about submission, and plan when you intend to print your thesis, how many copies you need, where you're going to get them bound, and how.  Invest in more ink and paper than you're likely to need - having to go to PC World halfway through is a complete pain in the \*\*\*!

You'll be wondering about the title of this piece.  My husband had two knee replacements this summer - one, a month before I submitted my thesis, and the other a week after my viva, and I discovered in between times that I'm now legally considered his carer.  It's been a stressful summer.

My revisions have been accepted, the final volume bound, and graduation is in December.  I've learned a lot about my subject - and I'm quite proud of the results - but I've learned every bit as much about organisation and determination.  As my school headmistress once said, "Success is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration."  You know what?  She was right!

**Karen McAulay**, whose research was on C18th and C19th Scottish song-collectors, is a librarian at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama.