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Managing the Research Project

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In this chapter ...

For many people, their dissertation represents the largest piece of written work they will have had to produce to date. Managing your dissertation as a project is a sensible, and some would say necessary, part of the process. Good project management can be as important as your own writing or the inputs of your supervisors. The problem is that projects and people differ, so there is no single recipe for success. The research topic, methods, supervisors and your own way of working are all key aspects of developing a workable plan for your research and whilst every project is different there are some helpful practices which help.

Managing a research project is similar to managing any other type of project: following some basic rules minimises the chances of things going wrong as well as making the whole process more enjoyable and productive.

The purpose of this chapter is to offer some guidelines for managing the research project. It will start with the general project management items of tasks and milestones, before detailing the resources at your disposal during the project and how to manage these. We will also look at the need for a contingency plan to deal with the things which commonly go astray in research projects. Finally we will explore the relationship between you and your supervisor(s) to help you make the most of the support, advice and feedback that is available.

Project planning: Phases, tasks and milestones

One of your first activities should be to map out the key phases, tasks and milestones that will make up your research project. Combined, these three items form the basis of the project plan.

Phases tend to be interpreted by many researchers as groups of activities. Listed below is one view of the key phases in your research project.

- 1 Establishing your topic
- 2 Building an understanding of the literature
- 3 Choosing your method(s)
- 4 Gathering data
- 5 Doing the analysis
- 6 Writing and re-writing
- 7 Formatting and submission

Others offer similar summaries and there may be small variations based on the type of qualification that your dissertation sits within. For example, research-based degrees such as a PhD or MPhil typically incorporate an oral defence of the thesis whereas this only occurs in very rare circumstances in a taught programme. Similarly, in some degree programmes, topics are assigned rather than chosen. Nevertheless, this list of key phases, or a close variant of it, offers the first building block with which you can prepare a project plan. A simple first step is to check the submission date and work backwards from there, allowing time as you see fit for each of the phases that are as relevant to your project.

Tasks are those activities that go to make up an individual phase. Tasks are therefore shorter, more precise, and should be described in a level of detail that would make it clear to anyone reviewing your project plan what is going on and when. Task descriptions should not be long sentences or even paragraphs, but key points that identify necessary activities. For example, phase 2 listed above suggests that you will need to develop a solid grasp of the key literatures pertaining to your chosen topic. This phase will be made up of a number of specific tasks, often stated in the form of a list, using some form of numbering or similar as identifier. For example:

Phase 2: Building an understanding of the literature (see Chapter 3)

Tasks

- 2.1 Identify key concepts
- 2.2 Identify seminal authors and contributions
- 2.3 Identify key journals
- 2.4 Agree search terms and the boundaries of a structured review of the literature
- 2.5 Summarise key debates and points of agreement/disagreement
- 2.6 Establish a research question

Depending upon your own preferences, tasks may contain subtasks and can be broken down into a sensible number of sub-levels. Whilst this level of detail is partly dependent upon your choices it also relates to the nature of the research project. The example given above is typical in that tasks are ordered in sequence that they will likely occur over time, e.g. the first task that is to be executed appears at the top of the list, and the last one at the bottom. Bear in mind that tasks or subtasks may overlap and that some iteration will probably occur between tasks.

Finally, milestones are events that usually attached to a particular deadline such as a submission date, or the point by which ethical approval must be secured. In many cases, milestones are linked with finishing a phase. To some degree, they can be regarded as objectives, and one of their key purposes is to allow you to monitor whether the project as a whole is on time or not. Milestones often indicate that a new task or phase can or should be started. Identifying milestones is just as subjective as the process of identifying tasks and subtasks. Our strong advice would be to discuss phases, tasks and milestones with your supervisor(s) to strike an agreement over the way in which your project will be delivered.

Even the simple process of identifying phases, tasks and milestones in list format is a big step in the right direction. It creates a rudimentary project plan and it is worth noting that experience suggests that students following a rudimentary project plan tend to be better organised and achieve better outcomes than those who approach their project informally. From here, we will refer to this basic project plan as 'Plan A'. A student following Plan A has a clear view of what they should be doing, by when, in order to complete

their research project in time and to a high standard. This can be regarded as approaching your project in an organised manner. That said, no project plan is static, and most projects of this scale and duration experience setbacks and unexpected delays. Tasks which at first appeared sequential in nature may in fact need to be done in parallel and vice versa. A common experience for students is that the start of one task is put on hold until other tasks in the project plan progress or even finish. But sometimes data collection takes longer than expected, analysis is more challenging or ethical approval slows things down.

We have given an example of a dissertation project plan below. We would stress that this example is not definitive; rather it is one of many possible project plans. It does however demonstrate the general point that research projects can be divided into phases, tasks and sub-tasks.

Plan A: Tasks

- 1. Project organisation/planning**
 - 1.1.** Identify your research area
 - 1.2.** Identify your research question
 - 1.3.** Identify tasks and milestones
 - 1.4.** Identify resources, e.g. time, financial, etc.
- 2. Literature**
 - 2.1.** Search the literature
 - 2.2.** Review the literature
 - 2.3.** Search and review more literature
- 3. Data**
 - 3.1. Research approach**
 - 3.1.1.** Review research philosophies
 - 3.1.2.** Identify philosophical stance
 - 3.1.3.** Identify research method and methodology to be used
 - 3.1.4.** Get ethical approval for planned data collection
 - 3.2. Data collection**
 - 3.2.1.** Identify potential samples, i.e. people or organisations
 - 3.2.2.** Identify ways of accessing samples, e.g. interviews face-to-face, interviews via Skype, field work etc.