

2

GETTING STARTED

CHAPTER PREVIEW

- On your mark, get set, go!
- Navigating the process
- Staying on course

ON YOUR MARK, GET SET, GO!

“The secret of getting ahead is getting started.”
Mark Twain

You know what would make Mark Twain's advice even more valuable? If we knew the best way to make a start. Most students getting ready to tackle a research project have little idea of how to make a start or what they need to get them on their way.

Well one thing is for sure, research does not just happen. Researching is a process that demands planning, forethought, commitment, and persistence. In fact, research is more of a journey than a task; and, like any journey, it needs to be managed, navigated, and negotiated from early conception to final destination. Now it is not unusual for students to question their ability to successfully navigate this journey. After all, researching is a skill that is only just beginning to develop, so the thought of embarking can be quite daunting. Some jump in without a strategic plan, while others wallow too long in the planning stages. Some will make a good start, but get lost or lose motivation along the way. As you begin to contemplate the task ahead, it's worth keeping in mind that completing a research project in good time is much more than a test of your intellectual ability; it is also a test of your persistence and tenacity.

As you travel on your journey, you are likely to find that **yOUR** quest to produce new knowledge will be learning experience far richer than you might have ever expected. Conducting a research project allows you to:

- *Engage in 'problem-based learning'* – the thinking behind problem-based learning is that the best starting point for learning is working through a problem that needs to be solved in a hands-on fashion. The learning here is 'double loop'. Not only do you learn about a problem you are exploring, but you also learn how to tackle that problem, hopefully in a manner that will allow you to transfer problem-solving skills to a variety of new challenges. The nature of conducting research (and stumbling a bit along the way) embeds problem-based learning into the research process.
- *Engage in 'action learning'* – Kolb (1984) stressed the importance of the creation of knowledge through 'transformation of experience'. He suggested that experiential or action learning is dependent on cycles that include: (1) engagement in real experiences (concrete experimentation) that need to be followed by (2) thoughtful review and consideration (reflexive observation); as well as (3) broader theorizing (abstract conceptualization); and (4) attempts to improve action (active experimentation). Such processes are embedded in various aspects of conducting research. To 'do' research is to engage in cycles of action learning.
- *Enhance communication skills* – Gathering credible data is not a task for the shy or faint-hearted. It is a process that is highly dependent on your ability to communicate with others. Whether it is the challenge of gaining access, conducting interviews, or engaging in participant observation – boosting your communication skills is often a side benefit of doing research.
- *Develop research skills* – I know I write research methods texts, but I'll still tell you there is only so much you can learn from 'reading' about the conduct of research – the real learning comes from the 'doing'. Without a doubt, it is reflectively conducting research that will teach you how to do it.
- *Produce new knowledge* – You will find out something. You will hopefully get an answer to your research question. You will have produced new knowledge that will add to a body of knowledge.
- *Engage in, or facilitate, evidenced-based decision making* – It is a really good feeling to know that commonsense, practical decisions are being influenced by data you generate. If well managed from conception through to dissemination, your research project might just have the ability to influence change.
- *Offer a pathway for gaining academic qualifications or getting a raise* – Perhaps these goals are not as noble as the learning objectives above, but let's face it, this kind of stuff is often important to us.

NAVIGATING THE PROCESS

Research is a process that simultaneously demands imagination, creativity, discipline, and structure, and needs to be navigated strategically from start to finish. So right from the start it is worth considering a number of practicalities related to the process. In order to hit the ground running it is a good idea to (1) familiarize yourself with your institution/programme's resources and requirements; (2) get appropriately set up; (3) negotiate the advisory process; and (4) manage your workload in ways that will see you complete on time and still manage to maintain a life!

16 THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO DOING YOUR RESEARCH PROJECT

Understanding your programme

In order to move strategically through the research process, you need to become familiar with the requirements and resources of your university. If you do not, you might just end up wasting a lot of time undertaking and producing research that falls outside set guidelines and/or not taking full advantage of the resources available to you.

Requirements

One of the greatest frustrations for students and lecturers alike is when good work does not meet set requirements. The best way to ensure that university protocols are met is to find out what they are early on, and to keep them in mind throughout the research project. Common research requirements include:

- *Meeting deadlines* – Perhaps one of the biggest hurdles you will face, but extremely important to manage. Late submissions might not be accepted, or may be subject to penalties. It is well worth knowing your deadlines and familiarizing yourself with policies for late submission and extensions before you even start the journey.
- *Staying within word limits* – Word limits vary with level of study, discipline, and university. But whatever the limit is, it is generally expected that it will take close to this to produce a quality research paper/thesis. As a lecturer, seeing a very ‘thin’ paper is almost (but not quite) as disappointing as seeing one you will have to get home with a trolley. Try not to go too far under or over the prescribed word count. Some lecturers/institutions can be quite strict with works that fall outside set limits.
- *Gaining ethics approval* – This is essential for most research that involves human (or animal) participants and is discussed fully in the next chapter. Each university will have its own requirements, committees, and deadlines for gaining such approval.
- *Progress reports/seminars* – For longer projects, universities often require reports to be submitted by students, supervisors, or both, on an annual or biannual basis. Students might also be expected to present in regularly scheduled seminars.
- *An examination process* – This too varies by level of study and university. Some research write-ups will be given a grade or level, while others are simply deemed satisfactory/unsatisfactory. For higher degrees, the examination process often involves external examiners that the student may or may not have a say in determining. It may also involve an oral defence of the work. It is highly advisable to discuss the issue of examination/examiners with your supervisor quite early in the process. There can be great benefit in knowing what to expect.
- *Originality and avoidance of plagiarism* – Virtually all universities have clear policies on originality and plagiarism. Familiarizing yourself with what constitutes plagiarism can help you avoid some deadly grey areas.

Resources

When it comes to resources, many students do not bother to ask, therefore they do not receive. Finding out what your university/programme offers research students

should be high on the list of initial priorities. As highlighted in Box 2.1, nothing is more frustrating than finding out about an excellent service or facility just a bit too late.

BOX 2.1 DAMN! I WISH I KNEW THAT SIX MONTHS AGO

SCENARIO 1

'\$1,300! You got \$1,300 for your field trip? How in the world did you get that?'
 'All research students are entitled to \$2,500 a year to help cover costs; you just have to put in a form.'
 'You're kidding me. How come I wasn't told?'

SCENARIO 2

'Hey, how did you get an access number for the photocopier?'
 'Debbie in main office. The school provides them for all research students.'
 'Aw, that's just great; do you know how much I have spent on photocopying over the past six months?!'

SCENARIO 3

'So where are you headed?'
 'Can you believe I have to go halfway across town to Nelson Library to pick up a book? They don't have it on this campus.'
 'Oh ... Why didn't you do an inter-campus loan on the Internet? They send it right to you.'
 'You are joking ... since when?'

Some of the resources you may want to check on are:

- *Accommodation* – Is dedicated or shared office space available?
- *Equipment* – Will you have access to telephone, computer, printer, and/or photocopier?
- *Software* – What software is supported by the university? Is it willing to acquire any software you might need?
- *Funds* – Is there any money available to help with costs such as university fees, books, photocopying, postage, consumables (paper, ink cartridges, cassette tapes), travel costs (site visits, conference attendance), and equipment (tape recorder, transcription machine, Pc, laptop, software, etc.)?
- *Library facilities* – What databases are available? Is there a system of inter-library loans? Will you have Internet access?
- *Workshops* – Does the university offer any methods workshops or writing circles?

18 THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO DOING YOUR RESEARCH PROJECT

- *Methods assistance* – Is there any assistance available for questionnaire design, transcription, data entry? Is statistics advice available?
- *Writing assistance* – Is there anyone who can help you put together a proposal, or structure a final draft? Is there anyone to help with editing?

Getting set up

Researching is an activity that requires more independence and autonomy than most types of learning you are likely to have attempted, and requires that you spend a fair amount of time reading or working at a computer. Getting set up therefore requires access to a quiet place to work, a good reliable computer, and proficiency in the use of that computer and its software:

- *The study/office* – Having a comfortable place to lock yourself away is essential. Researching can be an alienating activity and creating or finding a space where you can work comfortably is well worth the effort.
- *The computer* – Most students find it impossible to do research without an up-to-date word processing program and reliable Internet access. You may also need to run statistical and/or qualitative data management programs that can be demanding on the system. It is well worth investing in a computer that can not only meet your current needs, but also needs that might arise with use as the research process gets underway.
- *Proficiency* – With the computer/Internet age well upon us, most of you will have pretty good skills when it comes to basic word processing and Internet searching. Nonetheless, a bit of upskilling won't go astray. Whether it be managing large documents, working with graphics, advanced searching, and just working on your touch typing, there is a lot to be gained from feeling competent in these areas.

Getting the right advice

Doing a research project usually involves working with the guidance and support of a mentor or supervisor. For many this is a new and somewhat daunting experience. Now I would like to be able to say that this experience will be highly rewarding – and more often than not it is. But at times, it can be tumultuous, frustrating, aggravating, and just plain unsatisfactory. Supervisors can be busy, dismissive, muddled, and sometimes even arrogant. So it is extremely important to negotiate expectations right from the onset and work towards open, clear, and comfortable communication.

If you are new to supervisory relationships, you may not be aware of just how varied they can be. Some relationships are based on student autonomy and independence, while others are much more collaborative and dependent. The only way to know where you stand is to negotiate both student and supervisor expectations. Keep in mind that

if you do not do this early, you may be setting yourself up for a tremendous amount of frustration and angst. Box 2.2 highlights some of the expectations you may want to openly negotiate with your supervisor.

BOX 2.2 NEGOTIATING EXPECTATIONS

Expectations that need to be clarified in student/supervisor relationships include:

Autonomy

- Who is responsible for orienting the student to university resources/requirements?
- Who sets the timelines?
- How much advice/direction can/will the supervisor provide on the selection of topic, question, methodological and theoretical frameworks?
- Will the student be expected to submit all drafts for review/comment?
- Do all new directions need to be cleared with the supervisor?
- Will writing/editing assistance be provided by the supervisor?
- Who makes the final decision on acceptability?

The Programme

- How regularly will you meet?
- What is the expected turnaround time for getting and responding to feedback?
- Are seminar presentations required?

The Nature of the Relationship

- Will the relationship be purely professional or professional/personal?
- Will emotional support be provided?
- Is open and frank discussion on progress expected/welcomed?

Your supervisor–student relationship is likely to be closer than any other relationship previously experienced with an academic. One reason this can be a bit nerve racking is that it is a relationship of very unequal power. On one side you have the professor and expert, while on the other you have the student and novice. Yes, the goal should be mentoring, growth, and mutual respect but, as highlighted in Box 2.3, it is a relationship that can easily leave students feeling patronized or even a bit intimidated.

20 THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO DOING YOUR RESEARCH PROJECT

BOX 2.3 THE POWER OF THE RED PEN – KATE'S STORY

When I switched universities, I was assigned to a supervisor who had just received her PhD and had research interests similar to my own. We met a few times, and I can't say it went very well. While her PhD was in an area similar to mine, our approaches seemed worlds apart, and I got the distinct feeling that she thought my approach was not just different, but wrong. No one wants to be 'judged', so it was with much trepidation that I handed her an early chapter of my thesis. I hated the thought of her passing judgement as she read and dreaded receiving her feedback.

I got the chapter back a few weeks later and it was even worse than I thought. The paper was literally covered in red ink. Angry, vile, 'I have power over you', 'you are wrong', red ink. Well I went from feeling apprehensive to angry. There was no need to exercise that type of power trip on me. I did not need hypercritical judgement, what I needed was support, guidance, advice, and perspective. In the end, what I actually needed was a new supervisor.

This does not mean that you and your supervisor need to be on the same 'wave-length'. A lot can be learned from a supervisor whose style pushes your boundaries and helps you grow in ways you might not have even considered. The thesis acknowledgement below sums this up quite well:

My thanks to Dr Sherman who was a great supervisor for the way my mind works. And my thanks to Dr Hakim who was an equally great supervisor for the way it doesn't.

In sum, I would recommend three strategies for facilitating a positive supervisor–student relationship: (1) know what your supervisor expects of you and what you can expect from your supervisor right from the start of your relationship; (2) be open – do not bottle up concerns and frustration. Share them with your supervisor in as non-threatening a way as possible as soon as issues arise; (3) if you cannot see a way to make the relationship work, talk to someone about it, i.e. a course coordinator, the research office, an academic you trust. Not every relationship is destined for success, and your progress needs to be your priority. It is important to remember that if you can develop a healthy rapport with your supervisor, you will make your journey that much easier.

Managing the workload

One word that I stress in all student research projects, regardless of level or discipline, is 'doability'. Is it doable? Well, assessing doability involves more than just looking at the quality of the research design. It also involves looking at the full gamut of pressures

TABLE 2.1 GANTT CHART

	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	June	July	Aug.	Sept.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.
Groundwork	xx	xx										
Literature review		xx	xx	xx	xx	xx						
Defining methods			xx	xx								
Data collection					xx	xx	xx					
Progress seminar						12th						
Data analysis							xx	xx	xx			
Write first draft		xx	xx	xx	xx	xx	xx	xx				
Write second draft								xx	xx	xx		
Final seminar											27th	
Write final draft										xx	xx	xx
Thesis due												15th

and responsibilities that you as an individual need to manage. Realistically assessing and managing your workload is essential. If you don't, time will simply slip away.

There are no set rules for time management. You might be a night owl, an early bird, someone who can multi-task, someone who can only tackle one task at a time, someone who feels anxious without a defined schedule, or someone who is more spontaneous. Recognizing your own approach and working its strengths and addressing its shortcomings will be important to timely completion. If you can work your own style into a plan, it can help you manage what is likely to end up a very complex and, at times, seemingly unending task.

One useful tool is a Gantt chart. As shown in Table 2.1, a Gantt chart can be used to map out a project from start to finish. Now keep in mind that researching is often a fluid and flexible exercise likely to incorporate the unexpected, and your chart will invariably need to shift in order to reflect the dynamic nature of your project. However, having a document that can be negotiated and modified is more likely to keep you true to deadlines than not having one at all.

For some, the discipline it takes to stick to a Gantt chart comes naturally. These amazing individuals are able to get up at a pre-defined time, work diligently to a plan, and take only minimal food and toilet breaks. *And* they manage to do this five days a week. For us ordinary humans, however, the procrastination skills we have developed over many years of formal schooling are much too sophisticated to see us succumb to that level of discipline. Instead, we wait for inspiration. Which is fine if inspiration strikes with enough frequency and regularity – but what if it doesn't? Well then, you

22 THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO DOING YOUR RESEARCH PROJECT

may have to 'trick' yourself into some sort of pseudo-inspirational state. Some things you might want to try are:

- *Working on/reading over your research journal* – An invaluable tool for any researcher is a good journal that can capture creative inspiration and help you manage the process. Your journal might include observations, notes on method and theory, lists of relevant contacts, notes/reminders to yourself, and any other ideas, doodles, concept maps, etc, that come to mind. Adding to your journal, or simply reading it over, may get the creative juices flowing.
- *Forcing yourself to get on the computer* – Engaging in some menial task can be a catalyst for doing richer work. Try starting with relatively mindless editorial work, data cleaning, or referencing, and then try to move to whatever you are procrastinating over. If you don't approach the computer at all, then nothing gets done. But if you sit down to a task, not only is the task accomplished, but the real work might get going as well.
- *Writing a letter to a real or fictional friend* – If you are feeling stuck, try writing an informal letter that tells 'whoever' what you are trying to do. Freeing yourself from academic writing can often help liberate ideas.
- *Go for a walk* – Sometimes a good head-clearing walk can be a trigger for a flood of fresh ideas. Having a small tape recorder handy (which if kept by the bed can also capture early morning inspiration) can capture those thoughts you are bound to forget.

STAYING ON COURSE

“Patience and tenacity are worth more than twice their weight of cleverness.”
Thomas Henry Huxley

I don't think I have been involved in the supervision of one student who has not agonized over the research journey. For most, their research project is likely to be the biggest academic project ever undertaken. Knowing a field, being responsible for the production of 'new knowledge', designing methods, collecting and analysing data, and writing it all up can be an intimidating challenge – particularly for those whose roles and responsibilities in the real world extend beyond those of student. But rest assured, feelings of frustration, confusion, and even incompetence are both commonplace and surmountable. Being able to find a balance and deal with a crisis are part and parcel of researching.

Finding a balance

Student, employee, parent, child, partner – no student is a student alone. We all have a variety of roles to play. Yet sometimes those around us, ourselves included, forget that we need to manage and balance all of these simultaneously, even if they are sometimes incompatible. Balance is essential. No one can reach or work to their potential if they are neglecting important areas of their life.

So how do you find balance when you know you need to focus on your studies, yet you are feeling pressure at work, and you realize that you must reprioritize family? Well, as highlighted in Box 2.4, whether at work, home, or university, being honest and open about your needs is a good start. That, combined with the ability to say 'no', can go a long way in staying on top of it:

- *At work* – Try taking the time to discuss the demands of study with your managers. Hopefully they will be supportive. If not, at least you know where you stand. If your research is work related, it may be possible to negotiate time and resources for your project, particularly if you explain the significance and potential benefits of your research to the workplace.
- *At home* – Having the support of family is essential, not only for the practical support that can come from assistance with domestic duties, child care, etc., but also for the emotional support that can be quite crucial during the process. Unfortunately, some partners can be threatened by, or envious of, your achievements. Working through this dilemma, or again at least knowing where you stand, can put you in a stronger position of power.
- *At university* – I think the best advice is to be professional, but put your concerns on the table for legitimization. Being open and honest with your supervisor is crucial to your ability to set realistic and, most importantly, achievable goals.

BOX 2.4 NO TIME FOR GUILT! DAKOTA'S STORY

I spent much of my time doing my Masters degree thinking about what I wasn't doing. When I was studying, I often wasted hours daydreaming about being with friends, family, going out. I was quite good at making myself miserable and unproductive. When I was with friends and family, things weren't necessarily better. I spent a fair portion of that time feeling guilty about the work I knew was waiting for me.

I decided to start my PhD when my youngest daughter turned 1, so I knew I had to get my act together. I now had two small children at home, and I could not afford to waste time agonizing over what I thought I should be doing. So I made a conscious decision to 'give up guilt'. I put the kids in high-quality part-time day care, and simply let it go. And you know what? It worked. When the kids were in care I simply focused on my work and did not allow myself the luxury of worrying about them. When I was with the family, however, I was really with the family. I was fully there and simply enjoyed. In the end, I finished my thesis on time. I have come to realize that there is simply no productivity in angst and guilt.

Dealing with 'crisis'

It may sound a bit dramatic, but it would be unusual to undertake a major research project without it intersecting with some sort of 'crisis'. Unfortunately, our lives are

24 THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO DOING YOUR RESEARCH PROJECT

full of them. If you are finding it all too much, starting to doubt yourself, or doubt what you are doing, it is important to know that you're not alone. Knowing what to expect, knowing how others cope, and developing and using a support system can help you get through inevitable rough patches:

- *Crisis of motivation* – It can be awfully hard to stay motivated for an extended period of time. What starts as an exciting and interesting project can quickly end up being one you just want to finish. In fact a colleague of mine told me he regularly advises his students only to research the things they are *not* interested in, because if they are really interested in it, they will be sick to death of it before they finish! Now I am not sure if I agree with that advice, but it does highlight how universal the problem is. Developing a supportive research culture can go a long way in keeping up motivation. Whether it be an attentive/sympathetic ear at home, interested work colleagues, a peer support network, or a relevant Internet chat group, engaging with others can help keep your interest up. It might also be worth reminding yourself to 'enjoy the process' and that 'the end will come'.
- *Crisis of confidence* – There are a lot of people who start their 'research' careers at the end of very successful 'learning' careers. These are people who are used to competence and success. Well, research students generally set their own agenda, work independently, and attempt to work to their potential; and herein lies the problem. Working to your potential pushes at your own personal limits, often in ways prior learning has not. Feeling like an impostor, thinking that it is beyond your intellectual capabilities, and believing that your work is not good enough are, believe it or not, fears widely shared. Getting a more objective sense of how you are going can help put things in perspective. If you talk to your supervisor and your peers, you will often find that others have more faith in you than you have in yourself. I often tell students who are facing a crisis of confidence to remember that 'your first project is generally the worst'. You are in the midst of a learning process; your skills and confidence will grow with time.
- *Lack of direction* – Research often starts with broad-ranging exploration that can take you down many tangents. The up side is that this exploration will undeniably increase your learning and often lead to new insights. The down side, however, is that you risk feeling lost. It is pretty easy to get yourself off course and feel like you have no idea where you are going. Finding direction can come from reflecting on what it is that you really want to know, having open and candid discussions with your supervisor, and in the end remembering that the answers may not simply appear. You may need to make some hard decisions about the direction you will take.
- *Feeling disorganized* – It is too easy to say 'you need to be organized'. You probably knew that before you got yourself in a mess. The need for self-discipline may be obvious, but the ability to exercise it is much harder. If physical disorganization is your downfall, take a week or two off from 'doing' research and just clean up your work space and organize yourself. If, however, disorganization is more in your mind and you feel as though you cannot think straight, you can (1) try the above – an organized desk and office can pave the way for an organized mind – or (2) get away from it all. Sometimes a good weekend away is all you need to refresh the mental batteries.

- *Personal crisis* – I think it was John Lennon who said ‘life is what happens while you are making other plans’. It would be nice if the world stopped while you got on with your research, but that is simply not going to happen. Whether it is difficulties with finances, partners, parents, children, in fact any variety of drama, the research process necessarily coincides with life’s inevitable ups and downs. Reach out to your support network and speak openly with your supervisor. My experience is that people are generally supportive. Perhaps most important of all, don’t put too much pressure on yourself. Get support and then make a guilt-free decision to press on, take it slower, or have a hiatus until the crisis subsides.

FURTHER READING

There are quite a few project survival guides out there. The following might be worth a look.

- Cryer, P. (2006) *The Research Student's Guide to Success*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Hall, G. and Longman, J. (2008) *The Postgraduate's Companion*. London: Sage.
- Moore, N. (2006) *How to Do Research: A Practical Guide to Designing And Managing Research Projects*. London: Facet.
- Phelps, R., Fisher, K., and Ellis, A. H. (2007) *Organizing and Managing Your Research: A Practical Guide for Postgraduates*. London: Sage.
- Rudestam, K. E. and Newton, R. R. (2007) *Surviving Your Dissertation: A Comprehensive Guide to Content and Process*. London: Sage.
- Tarling, R. (2005) *Managing Social Research: A Practical Guide*. London: Routledge.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- Research is a process that needs to be actively managed. Being strategic in your preliminary planning, being organized and prepared, and creating the mental space necessary for research are important parts of the process.
- Conducting a research project offers tremendous opportunity for professional development in areas including, but not limited to, problem-based learning, action learning, communication, evidenced-based decision making, and academic qualifications.
- In order to produce research that falls within university guidelines, you will need to familiarize yourself with your institution’s requirements. Similarly, taking advantage of all possible resources involves knowing what they are.
- Navigating a path through the research process should begin by making sure you have access to an adequate work space and computer system/ programs.

26 THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO DOING YOUR RESEARCH PROJECT

- Supervisory relationships can be difficult to negotiate. Working towards good communication with clear expectations, as well as striving for a sense of comfort in power relations, can help ensure a positive and productive relationship.
- Researching can present real challenges in terms of workloads and timelines. Using Gantt charts and working with both discipline and inspiration can help you manage the process.
- Most students carry the burden of having a variety of roles. Finding a balance is essential to personal well-being and hence success in all endeavours, including research.
- The research process is rarely an easy and straightforward journey. It often involves crises of confidence and motivation, and coincides with life's ups and downs. Knowing that you are not alone and that there is support can help get you through.