

Chapter 1

Ready to Research?



Overview

Know what you are aiming for: track down previous students' dissertations and have a good look at them

Getting organised:

- Filing
- A place to work
- Making a project plan
- Managing by objectives: smarter planning
- Bibliography: start early

Working practices discussion:

Study skills: 'Learning from'

Procrastination

Skill sets and skill set boosters:

- Academic writing skills
- Methods and methodology
- ICTs and typing
- Numeracy and statistics

The dissertation team and working as part of a group

Ready to Research?

This chapter takes you through a process of reflection upon your preparedness to research, helping you to think through your attitudes to study at this stage in your degree programme, and getting organised. The main purpose of the chapter is to provide you with lots of ideas and

checklists which you can use or ignore at your discretion. The aim is to raise your awareness of what is involved in doing a dissertation, and to provide some concrete suggestions for things to do and think about which will support your efforts as you go along.

In practical terms, the chapter emphasises:

- getting organised;
- brushing up the study skills you will need for the dissertation;
- your dissertation team: getting your people behind you.

You are asked to identify what actions you need to take in order to make sure that you are ready to research.

The first and most important thing to do is to look at previous students' dissertations and develop a clear idea of what you are aiming at as detailed in Task 1.1

Task 1.1

Look at Previous Students' Dissertations

Ask to look through some undergraduate dissertations. If you are lucky, you will find some out on open shelves in the library that you can browse at your leisure. However, you may find that previous dissertations are kept by your department or tutor. In any case, ask your tutor for suggestions about good ones to study.

Look at the physical layout and presentation of the dissertation. Feel the quality of the binding; observe the layout including the title page and the abstract, and check out the table of contents. Understanding the overall size or weight of the dissertation; look at the tightness of the referencing in the text and the length of the bibliography at the end; and check for examples of how data has been presented, example, tables and interview extracts. Do take time to read a few sections to develop a sense of the density of the text.

What makes a good dissertation good? List its best features.

Remember three things:

- 1) This is the final product – this is what you are aiming to produce.
- 2) This is what a good dissertation looks like.
- 3) Your dissertation will one day sit alongside the others.

Getting organised is an essential first step – staying organised is the second! Being well organised will substantially impact the quality of the research that you are able to do.

The benefits of being well organised throughout your project are:

- The time saved (for example, from searching for lost items) and the quality time which can be carved out from your busy life as a result (for example, having the time to sit down with the data and work with it in a calm and collected manner);
- Having time to think about and bring the project together, for example to synthesise data, or juxtapose different aspects of your work in ways which had not originally occurred to you;
- Keeping good records, including bibliographies, from early on will allow you to complete the otherwise endless and time-consuming tasks of checking quickly and easily and will reduce your risk of losing easy marks through errors and omissions;
- It will enable you to execute your data collection in a systematic and effective way. It will prevent developing bad working practices, such as having to repeat the steps of carrying out the research;
- Last but not least, being well organised allows you to relax into your project and get the most from the experience. Students sometimes say that they find the academic work challenging but enjoyable. But this enjoyment is spoiled by arriving somewhere late and flustered, finding that you have left your things at home, and with only a few vague questions lined up to ask your smiling participant, realise that you have missed a great opportunity.

Figure 1.1 Get Organised!

Managing Your Dissertation

Dissertations flow from personal choices and individuals' original work and ideas. However, in order to successfully carry it off, you will need to get organised. Start as you mean to go on, and develop good working practices which will allow you to complete your dissertation to the best of your ability.

Task 1.2

Getting Organised – Essentials Checklist

Make sure that you have at least some if not most of these in place (you might need to keep some of these things in hard copy form as well as on your PC):

- A project file – keep all of the materials you need to manage the project in this. Don't use this file for the content of your project. It should contain a list of the tasks which you have completed and what you have left to do. It should also contain other information such as contact details, including a specific section for your respondents
- The unit or module guide prepared by your tutors
- The regulations and requirements of the dissertation, including word length, presentational style etc.
- The marking scheme
- Your research project proposal, i.e. the document setting out your research question, rationale, methods, first initial reading, bibliography
- Your research project plan, i.e. a paper version of the timetable and the major landmarks of the project. Note: if you have used spreadsheets for this, prepare an easy to read 1–2 sides of A4 which give a snapshot of the project in its entirety with key dates highlighted
- A spare copy of the consent form
- Leaflets and print-outs from websites of interest, such as library, museum or archive details including opening hours; on-line reservation details
- A listing of books and papers reserved or ordered, tick them off once obtained
- A file or two for handwritten notes from papers and books
- A separate file for each kind of data collected from subjects, e.g. one file for survey data, another for interview data
- Keep a bibliography as you go along – do not wait until the end of writing up to construct one. You might want to do it the old-fashioned way using a card index and box or software such as EndNote

Box 1.1 Tips: Time and Space

- Identify a key place in which you are going to work on your dissertation. If possible, find a table on which you can leave papers and

books undisturbed between work sessions so that you can pick up tasks without having to get everything out each time. Clear a shelf and cupboard space specifically for storing things to do with your dissertation.

- Find a quiet corner in the library which you can commandeer at key times. You may also find that locating an anonymous café away from other students will give you some space to read or think while eating.
- Try not to work in a mess; clean up after a work session, and make your environment one which is pleasant to return to. A friendly muddle is different from a mess.
- Make sure that you have adequate light, both natural light from a window and room lighting including a table lamp.
- Consider in advance whether you would benefit from staying elsewhere for a few days during your dissertation write-up, for example, with friends or family. Beware that you may need to access library and other sources including a tutor, however, and that staying with other people can be demanding! So you will need to carefully plan your sojourn, but this might be a possibility to think about.

Understanding the Dissertation Task: Making a Project Plan

Dissertations typically go through a series of stages. It is strongly advised that you develop your own project plan. Clearly identify each task involved and allocate some time to it. Doing this will allow you to develop an overview of the dissertation in terms of:

- the scale of the task;
- the steps which you will go through;
- a rough chronological order.

Here is a list of the typical tasks which you might encounter:

- Analyse project; decide on primary purpose and audience; choose topic
- Whittle away at the topic so that it becomes a more narrowly focused research question rather than a broad issue or topic area
- Set aside library time; develop searches on your theme

- Send for materials needed from Interlibrary Loan
- Do background research, narrow topic further or rework question in the light of your searches
- Decide on research questions and a tentative hypothesis
- Start working on bibliography; begin tracking down sources in a purposeful manner, following leads found in the bibliographies of the texts which you are reading
- Begin to develop a research proposal: make a template document for each of its constituent parts
- Begin reading some methods texts: decide on an approach to your project and begin to develop a critical view of your project
- Consider the need for statistical data: gather or develop graphics and any other visuals needed
- Develop working thesis and rough outline of a research design
- Work up your research proposal, checking carefully for its internal consistency: will it give you the data which you need? Is it a manageable project given the constraints of time that you have?
- Data collection: as necessary, conduct interviews, make observations, or distribute and collect questionnaires
- Data coding, analysis and interpretation
- Read and evaluate further sources
- Draft explicit thesis and outline
- Prepare first draft of the dissertation, including visuals
- Obtain and evaluate critical responses to your draft
- Revise draft
- Prepare and check your bibliography
- Edit and revise draft; craft the text; use spellchecker
- Prepare final draft, including all of its components such as title page, abstract and so on
- Do final proofreading

Your final project plan would normally be structured chronologically in the phases and thus tasks of the project. You can choose how detailed a project plan you want – some people prefer to make very detailed ones indeed, as shown for example in Table 1.1, Example of An excerpt from a Detailed Project Plan: this is more like a series of ‘To Do’ lists.

Table 1.1 Example of An Entry in a Detailed Project Plan

Phase	Tasks	Sub-tasks	Time
Identify research problem	Generate ideas	Brainstorm with peers	2 hours
		Use internet	2 x 2.5 hours
		Go through old files and notes from courses done so far	3 hours
	Research initial topics	Using internet database, identify some recent articles	1 hour
		Read and take notes from articles	4 hours
		Start bibliography	15 minutes
	Turn topics into research problems	Mind maps	2 hours
		Discuss in class	Class session
		Draft some rough questions	1 hour
		Discuss with supervisor	30 minutes
		Present to class	Class session

There is nothing wrong with the approach shown in Table 1.1, although it isn't for everyone. The advantages of this are that it splits tasks down into manageable bite sizes. However, many people will make the size of the unit larger; for example, they might have 'Brainstorm ideas' as one task, and 'Turn idea into a research question' as a different task. This is fine too. However, be careful of making the tasks too big. For example, defining a task as 'Doing the literature review' is too big a task; it needs to be broken down a little more.

In effect you are using your project plan to set goals. In terms of effective goal-setting, it is often suggested that good goals are much easier to reach if they are split down and made manageable. Based on Drucker's (1954) ideas of Management By Objectives (MBO), the mnemonic SMART (which more recently has been amended to SMARTER) is a useful way to check that the goals, or dissertation tasks, which you have set yourself are achievable in a reasonable time limit. You might learn that you consistently overestimate how difficult something will be but underestimate how long it will take you which will give you a clue in working out how long something will take you in the future.

<p>S Specific, fixed M Measurable A Achievable, do-able, manageable R Relevant or realistic T A set time – with a clear beginning and end E Evaluated, exciting R Recorded and reviewed</p>
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Figure 1.2 Mnemonics: Management By Objectives based on Drucker, 1954

Task 1.3

Draft a Project Plan

List the tasks which you need to do over the next few weeks. Break them down into manageable sizes, bearing in mind the amount of work involved and how easy or difficult it will be for you to do it. Check your tasks, treating them as objectives: are they SMARTER?

The Bibliography: Start It As Soon As You Can

A common but unfortunate pitfall is to leave their bibliography until the end. However, you need to start your bibliography as soon as you can, and maintain it throughout the project. Students doing their dissertation often underestimate the importance of doing this. One of the reasons is making the assumption that you can wait until you are writing up before compiling the bibliography – rather as you would when writing up an essay or case study.

But bibliographies for dissertations are much longer and more complex, and you will do the project over a much longer period of time than you spend on an essay. waiting until late in the day will turn preparing the bibliography into quite a task, possibly quite a difficult one. You will find that you don't want to take on that task the night before the submission deadline. It will be difficult to compile your bibliography in one attempt; you will find that you will need to check some things, however careful you have been in keeping your bibliographic details.

Bibliographies are usually maintained in two ways:

- in hard copy form, using a card index system;
- using software which will capture your referencing.

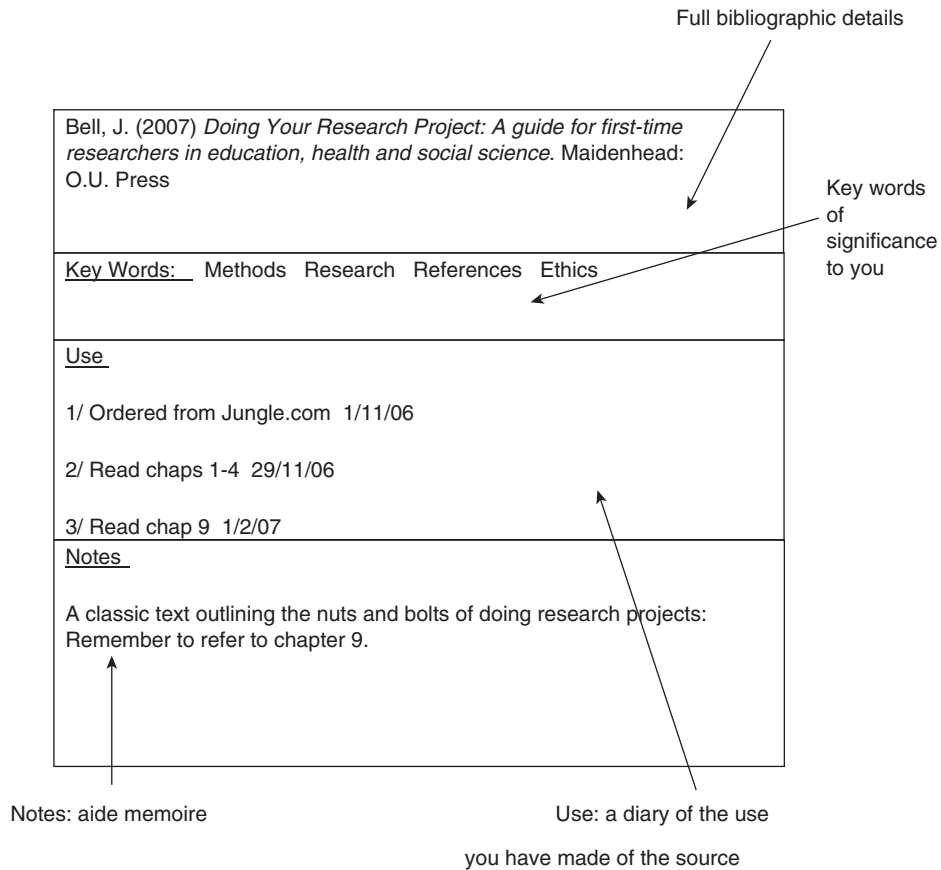


Figure 1.3 Example of a Card Index for Bibliographies

In both cases keep a list which can be printed out from time to time for checking and don't be surprised if you find things falling off the list, however carefully you work with software or cards. Figure 1.3 sets out the details which you need to keep. Do check which referencing system you will be working with (e.g. Harvard) and make sure that you know how to use it!

Task 1.4

Begin your Bibliography

- Decide whether you are going to use card indexes or software
- Decide on the information which you are going to record and how and when (for example, the frequency with which you will do this)

- Make a couple of entries, so that you can say that you have truly started
- Don't forget to maintain the bibliography as you go along. Don't wait until the end of the dissertation before trying to construct one

Review Your Working Practices

Starting out on your dissertation, gives you an opportunity to reflect upon the working practices you have developed as a student Useful or painful? Only you know!

At this stage, it is worth taking a moment to reflect upon your approach to tasks, especially relatively large or complex ones. You will already have a sense of how you work, for example, whether you tend to hurry or prevaricate, but it is often interesting to ask other people (whose judgement you trust) what their perceptions are. Stella Cottrell's C.R.E.A.M. strategy offers five planks to cling to in the sea of imponderables which surround this kind of reflection. You can use these planks as jumping off points to focus your attention. See Figure 1.4 for a brief description of each element. Consider whether this applies to you as you read through them.

Study Skills As Working Practices

Many students get along quite well until their final years. However, the final year can bring an additional loading which presents a challenge, especially if by this point you are striving for a good degree or are concerned about your underachievement. Strategies which until then have worked well become less effective. A classic method is the 'all-nighter', a tactic of many a student in assessment systems which require a combination of sustained effort and last minute cribbing. This is an effective way of working quicky and can help you avoid distractions. On the other hand, many students arrive at the final year having never done all-nighters, preferring to stick to a 9-5 model. This is an effective way of sustaining your effort over time. In the final year, you might find that you need to change your behaviour and do a bit of the opposite approach. Night owls might find that they have to travel to libraries in the daytime, while the Fordist day workers might benefit from going the extra mile of an evening. You may need to be prepared to experiment with whichever approach you don't normally do.

Fry the 'True or False' questions in Table 1.2 to reflect upon how your skill set is coming along. Use the final column to work out how important this is to you to deal with. What top few issues would it be helpful for you to address?. The reasons for your selection will be personal and specific to your previous experiences and current circumstances.

C Creative

By this, Cottrell means be creative in how you approach your work, don't worry about doing things your way – and developing your way of doing things.

R Reflective

By this, Cottrell means being able to learn from your experience by carefully considering what happened and why, and evaluating what you learned and how you might be able to apply it in the future.

E Effective

By this Cottrell means getting ready to work both mentally and physically, so that you can sit down and get on with it. Rather like cooking a meal, you need to make sure that you have all the ingredients to hand before you start and have set aside enough time to do the task.

A Active

By this, Cottrell means getting and staying engaged. Be interested in what you do and go the extra mile to feed your interest.

M Motivated

By this, Cottrell is asking you to work out how you are going to keep going. Be clear within your own mind about what you are trying to achieve, and your own reasons for doing it. Irrespective of whether you are racing along or have hit heavy water, remember to look up and hold on to your objectives and dreams.

Figure 1.4 The C.R.E.A.M. Strategy

Source: Based on Cottrell (1999: 49)

Skill Set Booster: Academic Writing and Critical Thinking skills

It is never too late to boost your academic reading and writing skills. They should be pretty good by the time you have reached dissertation level, and you might find some basic texts and exercises *too* basic. Even so, it is likely that there will be:

- Areas for improvement: speed, facility, finesse
- Gaps of knowledge: you know most things about most things but not everything about everything

There are some suggestions about academic reasoning and writing books under Further Reading at the end of this chapter which you might like to peruse.

Table 1.2 Your Skill Set: True or False?

Question	True	False	Priority
I can type reasonably quickly			
I am confident when using I.C.T.s			
I can connect material I learned on one course to material			
I learned on other courses I know how to introduce and discuss academic ideas and other people's writing			
I regularly read the broadsheet press and a few key magazines and am reasonably well informed about current affairs, the arts, and sciences			
I am purposeful in my reading and writing			
I am familiar with academic conventions and manage academic reading and writing fairly quickly and easily			
I have a clear idea of why I am doing a dissertation and what I will get out of it			
I work well with people as part of a group			
I have reliable study habits: I know what works for me and can manage blocks of work effectively			
I can evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of various sources			
I can source and sift information appropriate to my line of inquiry			
I am comfortable with statistics. For example, I can manipulate and present data using a range of techniques			
I have strong spelling and grammar, and an excellent vocabulary			
I work out the order of work according to the priority of each task			
I check what is required of assessments of every kind, including the dissertation			
I am reasonably competent with my university's systems, for example the inter-library loan system			

Box 1.2 Academic Writing Skills and Finding a Good Book

The key to good writing for most people is reading. Read as much as you can, and as broadly as you can. However, see Chapter 6, *Finding Sources and Doing the Literature Review* and Chapter 12, *Writing Up* for tips on specifically improving your writing skills, and remember that writing for academic purposes is a particular kind of writing.

Meanwhile, here are some ideas for finding a good book, which might be related to your studies or read just for interest:

The American Indian Resource Directory includes short oral stories which have been written down

<http://www.indians.org/Resource/natlit/natlit.html>

The Bartleby site contains all manner of on-line books

www.bartleby.com

The Commonwealth Writers' Prize: the annual prize for short-listed books from Africa, Europe and South Asia, the Caribbean, Canada, South East Asia and the South Pacific. Look under Culture and Diversity for listings, links, and reviews

<http://www.commonwealthfoundation.com/>

The Internet Public Library

www.ipl.org

The Man Booker Prize website contains listings and reviews of books

<http://www.themanbookerprize.com/>

The Nobel Prize for Literature which is awarded for work of an 'idealistic' nature, The website contains all past winners with links to their books

http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/

The Orange Prize for Fiction web site contains listings and reviews

<http://www.orangeprize.co.uk/home>

The TIME Magazine best 100 English language Novels since 1923 website provides listings and reviews

http://www.time.com/time/2005/100books/the_complete_list.html

The 'whichbook' website will draw on its database of 20m books to recommend a book based on your requirements.

<http://www.whichbook.net/>

Doing a dissertation is an excellent opportunity to develop your skills in critical thinking, reasoning, and argument as well as take more interest

in philosophical problems such as morals and ethics. These are life-enriching competencies and sensibilities, and many students find that it is through doing a dissertation that they move up a rung in their thinking.

There are some suggestions about critical thinking under Further Reading at the end of this chapter which you might like to pursue.

Skill Set Booster: Methods and Methodology

There are a number of excellent texts to guide you on methods, ranging from overviews of social research to more in-depth texts which examine particular techniques. We will refer to many of these throughout the remainder of the book. For now, some good suggestions are Bell (2007); Denscombe (2003); and Bryman (2008).

It is also possible to take short courses in all aspects of methods, including for example, survey techniques. This can be very useful to do if you lack confidence or experience in doing surveys and have the time and money, but hopefully most undergraduates will not need such opportunities.

However, if you do have the time and money or are considering continuing with your educational career to postgraduate level, or perhaps are looking for jobs which involve a lot of research and report writing, then you can do much worse than to consider an investment in a short course to boost your skills.

Some suggestions for reliable places to check out for short courses, workshops, and events (which range from 1–2 days to a few weeks; and may be in person and via e-learning), include:

- The National Centre for Social Research
- The Essex University Summer School in Social Science Data Analysis and Collection
- The Social Research Association
- The Market Research Society
- Your own and other local universities

Skill Set Booster: ICTs, Typing and Managing Long Documents

It is one thing to be able to create and manage a simple document using text and a few headings which you manually create (all that is needed for an average essay), but the dissertation is a good opportunity to do a bit more.

Doing a dissertation in the social sciences typically involves long hours hammering away at a keyboards with additional time spent working on

internet sources and searching. Apparently ‘un-academic’ and dare we say ‘boring’ skills like learning to type can seem a bit more useful than it first seems when it is midnight and you are still trying to get your document sorted out.

A possible approach to take is that you would be aiming to upgrade your hitherto ‘gets-me-along’ level of skill to there ‘I-can-do-anything-I-want-quickly-and-easily’ level of skill. The skills you could develop include:

- Using *all* of the various functions on offer in standard word processing software and using them *well*, including headers, footers, automatic table of contents generation and heading levels, ... track changes, file importing, drawing tools etc.
- Creating and manipulating data in spreadsheets
- Working effectively with digital images
- Developing skills with PowerPoint and other presentational software
- Being able to produce labelled and titled graphs, charts, tables and diagrams, and being able to change them and move them around, quickly and easily
- Using book marking, tagging and other networking tools to develop your own rich bank of resources and engage with on-line communities

A Word on Typing

Many people learn to type in a two-or three-fingered ‘search and attack’ style. This is not necessarily a problem in the short- to mid-term and many people become very fast typing in this way. However, using ICTs will be part of many readers’ working and social lives for the foreseeable future.

This need not take very long: dedicated with some time on their hands could manage to touch type in under a month, although most people will take a couple of months to get speedy. Most people can get the basic hang of it in around 20–30 hours.

You could also consider improving your general facility or comfort with technology. For those readers who already have a high level of ICT skill, you too might consider whether there are further activities which you could usefully do at this stage which would boost your skill set and your CV.

There are a range of ways in which you can brush up your skills. These include:

- Taking a short course at a local college or private sector provider
- Exploring independent learning tutorials and software which may be provided by your university

- Buying a study book, for example – one of the numerous ‘How To’ guides on the market, and/or CD Roms, DVDs etc

Here are some specific suggestions:

- Mavis Beacon Touch Typing: a well known provider of typing tutorials which is very successful in the USA and sells internationally. The claim is that you can learn to type well in a fortnight.
- Pitman-training.com: the Pitman Institute offers a range of certification which can be added to your CV including for typing, ICT skills, presentation and web design, book-keeping and accounts, spreadsheets, and software use; they also provide opportunities for taking business seminars and diplomas. Many local centres are available in the UK.
- The European or International Computer Driving Licence (ECDL/ICDL): You can undertake testing at a test centre local to you and will be able to include this on your CV.

Skill Set Booster: Numeracy and Statistics

Of all the areas in which many students lack confidence or in truth, have never really developed familiarity, statistics remains one of the major ones.

Specific issues arise when students choose methods and refer to sources with which they feel comfortable, rather than methods and sources appropriate to the line of inquiry. This is a tactic to avoid quantitative methods. This ‘anti-numerical’ approach will mean that your project suffers: it may well produce fuzziness in your understanding and could lead you to make blunders.

Yet developing your numeric skills will allow you to:

- Create good literature reviews which can refer to patterns such as expenditure, social trends, and the relative importance of this versus that, with confidence
- Make good selection decisions for samples, and be able to handle the data which you collect
- Improve your general grasp of mathematical concepts and reasoning, and improve your general knowledge
- Boost your reasoning and logic skills with data, theories, and ‘facts’ of all kinds

- Understand your data; both qualitative and quantitative data require you to draw reasoned conclusions about their meanings, including the inter-relationships between variables, and connections between meanings
- Make the most of your data by good presentation: it is always easier when you know what you are talking about and can choose how to present it
- Talk about research with confidence

Some sources of help include:

- Statsoft on-line contains a useful glossary and hints on techniques across a full range of statistical techniques which you are likely to encounter as an undergraduate on a social sciences/humanities programme (see www.statsoft.com/textbook/stathome.html).
- *Statistics Every Writer Should Know: A Simple Guide to Understanding Statistics, for Journalists and Other Writers Who Might Not Know Math* is the accessible guide by Robert Niles to what to look for in discussions and texts which rely on numbers to prove a point, i.e. to make truth claims (see www.robertniles.com/stats/).
- See under Further Reading in Chapter 8.

Task 1.5

Working Practices: An Action List

What actions will you commit to? Identify one or two things to do in a few of the following areas, according to your priorities:

- Getting organised
- Learning from Leila
- Tackling procrastination or improving your time management
- Pick 1–2 items inspired by Table 1.3, your Skill set: True or False?
- Skill Set Boosters

The Dissertation Team

Your dissertation is, and has to be, all your own work. However, students at the writing up stage, or later at graduation ceremonies, often feel the need to acknowledge the help they received from others. Likewise, students also note some of the difficulties which arose with their network over the course of doing the dissertation. Finding help and anticipating difficulties will assist you in the long run.

Why do people procrastinate?

Fear of failure and perfectionism – rather than try and fail it is better to put it off, or make a start but never complete it. Write it down first, and worry about it later.

Don't know what to do – unclear about expectations and don't know if doing the right thing. Solution: find out what to do. Ask someone who knows what they are talking about. If you don't understand their explanation, don't give up and go away until you have understood the explanation.

Competency issue – really cannot do it, lack the skills and/or experience to successfully attempt the task. Solution: recognise that it isn't so much cannot do it, as don't know how to do it. The answer is to find out how to do it first, and then attempt it, then think about how you would do it next time.

Stressed – too much going on. Being under some pressure is widely regarded as healthy but too much pressure can trigger anxiety. The behaviour which results might feel personal and special to you, but it is rather more common than that. Examples include flitting between tasks, making excuses to put them off, becoming overwhelmed and staring into space, finding other things to do.

Solution: choose one task, and forget about the rest. Choose something small and simple. Do it, and then choose the next one.

What to do about procrastination:

Avoid aimlessness: set up specific study periods and allocate particular tasks or goals to them. When you have finished them, get up and walk away.

Stay healthy and relax. All the boring things can really help: eat and sleep well, take regular exercise, see people and get out, go easy on drink and drugs.

Read 'Learning from Leila'

Consider the True and False questions below: can you boost your skills so that you zip through work?

Inspiration: Make a list of things which have gone well for you and put it up; collect memorable quotations and read inspirational stories; make plans for the future.

Motivation: Identify some treats to have lined up along the way

Figure 1.5 Procrastination

Task 1.6

Your Dissertation Team

This task asks you to identify the key people in your network, those people who will be important in terms of your dissertation experience, and are in effect part of your study team.

In particular, you could consider forewarning your employer and workmates if you have them, that you are doing your dissertation. If you are going to need time off or wish to work flexible hours, you should consider how best to approach the subject, and give them plenty of time to make alternative arrangements if they are agreeable.

A special word on children and other dependents. Many students today have families, both young and old, and others whom they care for. Most of the degree programme to date will have presented challenges in terms of time and your focus, but the dissertation and achieving those vital marks in your other courses at the end of the year presents a special challenge. Enlist the support of those who can give it, and be prepared to share your plans well in advance. Ask for suggestions, you might be surprised by their good ideas. Talk things over with the important people in your life, including any children you may have. As far as you can, handle the situation: don't let it handle you.

Who are the key people in your dissertation team? What, if anything, do you need to talk to them about?

Table 1.3 Your Dissertation Team

Team member	What, if anything, do you need to discuss with them?
Partner, spouse, boy or girlfriend, ex-partner	
Workplace: boss	
Workplace: colleagues and peers	
Parents	
Children	
Other students	
Flatmates	
Tutor	
Medic	
Librarian	

(Continued)

Table 1.3 (Continued)

Team member	What, if anything, do you need to discuss with them?
Bank manager	
Counsellor	
Community or faith organisation; sports or arts organisation; volunteering body	
Others	

Working as Part of a Group

Much dissertation work necessarily involves working on your own. Even the most disciplined and motivated person may nonetheless feel that it would be nice to share mutual congratulations and commiserations from time to time. A way to systematise informal meetings is to set up a study group. Working as part of a study group can be a very successful approach. While you may find that tutors will assign you to groups through the dissertation classes, you might find that you will benefit from a group of your own choosing.

Membership

- Consider a mixture of peers including one or two who are not from the same course as you. Remember: all final year students attempt an independent project of some kind. You may find a lot more in common with other students than you initially think
- Invite slightly more people than you initially need, in order to cope with drop-outs, and the (almost inevitable) emergence of preferred pairings or trios
- Draw up a list of contact details for members of the group

Ground Rules

- As with all new groups, set the ground rules at the first meeting. These should cover how often, how long, and where you will meet, as well as deciding who will lead the group (check that members are happy for you to do it if you wish to and suggest rotation)
- A second set of ground rules relate to conduct, for example, you might wish to propose that what is said in the group is confidential. You might also think about how you will give and receive constructive criticism, help or advice

Keeping the group going

- Each group member should be active. This means turning up on time and staying until the end of the meeting; responding to emails and phone calls; and making sure that everyone gets the chance to contribute in each session
- Be flexible with how each member wants to work with the group: some may bring a draft of their work and ask for specific advice, while others will want to talk and might not welcome any advice at all
- Try to set a balance between negatives and positives. A supportive group will look for opportunities to celebrate achievements however small, as well as sharing problems. Both of those activities are different from a more general moan and groan session about tutors, money, being a student etc.
- End each group with some actions agreed. In other words, each member of the group leaves with one thing that they promise to do before you meet next time

The end of the group

- Inevitably, the group will come to its end. You might find that you need to force the issue, or alternatively it will fizzle out naturally. Don't despair either way. Just remember that even the Beatles split up!

Figure 1.6 Setting Up Your Own Study Group**Summary**

- Get a sense of the dissertation as a final product
Begin by tracking down previous students' dissertations and have a good look at them. Look at their structure as well as content, and become aware of the amount and quality of work involved.
- Get organised
Do this early on, it will save a lot of time and aggravation later. In particular, make sure that you have got a good filing system going and that you can anticipate where the bottlenecks might be. Taking basic steps such as making sure that you have got a place and some time to work undisturbed could be quite important.
- Don't leave things to chance
Draft a project plan, and break down each major task into smaller, bite-sized pieces which you can work through.
- Manage by objectives
Tasks are manageable when they are:
 - Specific, fixed
 - Measurable

- Achievable
- Relevant or realistic
- Time-bound
- Evaluated, exciting
- Recorded so you know how far you have come and what is left
- Bibliography
Start early! Even if you use software (over the now old-fashioned, although still functional, card index), you still need to record all of the information – and maintain your bibliography as you go along. You must check it before submitting your dissertation.
- Reflect on your working practices
Are you?
 - Creative
 - Reflective
 - Effective
 - Active
 - Motivated
- Study skills
It is never too late to 'Learn from Leila'!
- Procrastination: a student's best friend?
Tackle it. Get down to work and don't be put off by there being other things to do. They are not other things to do – they are distractions.
- Skill sets
Consider whether or not it would help you to brush up your basic skills including 'boring' ones such as typing. Certainly consider other skills: academic writing, argument and reasoning are all key to doing a dissertation, and are life-enriching; getting to grips with methods if you haven't yet done so is now essential. Don't rule out reading a good book for pleasure.
- The dissertation team
Get your people behind you early on. Tell them what you are going to do and enlist their help.
- Group working
Remember the possibility of working as part of a self-selected group is possible strategy for study which many students find useful although it is not for everyone.

Further Reading

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