

# Your Undergraduate Dissertation

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# Your Undergraduate Dissertation

The Essential Guide for Success

Nicholas Walliman

2nd Edition

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# 7

## What About Working and Planning My Time?

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### 7.1 Motivation and discipline

This chapter is in danger of sounding patronizing in places, partly because it sometimes states the obvious, and partly because the idea of discipline evokes the picture of someone talking from on high and wagging a finger at you. But I know only too well (from writing this book) that motivation and discipline are two factors that play an important part in helping to actually get the work done. It is after all *self*-motivation and *self*-discipline that are the issue, not something imposed by a higher authority. So, to become aware of a few techniques which help to make life easier is no bad thing.

Ideally, if you have enough motivation, you are unlikely to need to impose much onerous discipline on yourself. In order to be motivated, it is pretty



important that the project you have chosen really interests you. When you think of it, this is probably the first opportunity you have had since beginning your education to choose yourself what you will study for the next few months, so you should seize the opportunity to select something that will make this exercise enjoyable and rewarding. This point has already been made more fully in Chapter 3.

Even so, not every task can be interesting, and there are so many other enjoyable things to do and other deadlines to meet. There will also be several new skills to learn and others to develop, both of which require energy and dedication. You are only human, so it is worth considering how your efforts can be optimized by being in tune with your personality and mental and physical characteristics. Below are some ideas of how you can achieve this.

## 7.2 Moods

No one can be upbeat and raring to go all of the time. We are all subject to moods that have an important influence on our ability to concentrate and be creative. Philippa Davies (2002: 15) mentions two sets of opposite conditions – energetic/tired and calm/tense – which can be understood to contain a range of moods from mild to extreme. One cannot simply equate one or other state with being conducive to hard work or concentrated effort. It depends on your personality how you react to these moods. What is useful though is to be aware of how you are feeling, and also what sort of activities you can do best in which mood. For instance, some people need the tension of working to a deadline to get going, while others are only productive when they can mull over their work in a peaceful setting.

It is well known that people's mood varies during the course of the day. But they are not all the same: some are 'morning people', others 'evening people', while some fall between the two, or are even 'night people'. Take note of how you feel during the day. Do you find working easiest during the morning, or do you only get going in the evening hours? This is not just a psychological phenomenon, but also a physiological one (something to do with body temperature at different times of the day). If you can detect a pattern, then plan your activities to suit. Not all that you need to do requires intense concentration, so you can reserve the less demanding tasks for your 'weaker' periods. For women, the monthly cycle might also be taken into account.

Moods are also a form of information or feedback about your biomedical condition. Healthy living in the form of plenty of exercise, a balanced diet, and regular and sufficient rest, promote an upbeat mood. Conversely, a lack of sleep, poor diet, too much drink and smoking, and lack of exercise will tend to depress your mood. I know that these often feature largely in student life,



FIGURE 7.1 It depends on your personality how you react to these moods

but it is just as well to be aware of it, and know that a good meal and a night's sleep will actually make working easier. You can also do things to influence your mood. To avoid getting stuck in a boring and depressing routine, why not organize a shift of scene? Work somewhere different, visit different libraries, choose case studies or do other field research in different locations. Although you might not be in a position to make a study of exotic butterflies in the Amazon jungle, visits to new places can be a stimulating experience.

Ruminating about a subject for a long time can be a 'downer'. There is only so much that one can resolve in one's head. Thinking too long around a problem, without getting it down on paper or discussing it with someone, tends to lead to circular thinking and the feeling of being stuck. Only when the problem gets clearly laid out can you find ways to grapple with it, or even to let your subconscious work on it.

Make the best of when you are feeling great. At these times you will feel inspired, ideas will tumble into your head, you will see connections and have insights and have a strong urge to get it all down onto paper. Avoid getting interrupted, as it is difficult to pick up from where you left off. Put off other commitments and savour the moment: this is when you will be at your most productive. There are other times when you feel that you are running at half speed. Make use of these times for more menial tasks, such as tidying up, sorting out notes, drawing or scanning illustrations, making graphs and figures. You can also catch up on your reading.

Sometimes, having worked for some time you can get stuck, fed up or just tired. Peter Woods (2006: 16–18) has collected a few ploys that he and other well-known writers have used to reinvigorate themselves: Spend some time gazing out of the window (at a panoramic vista if there is one), drink numerous cups of coffee, pace the room, listen to the birds singing or to a piece of music, examine what is going on in the neighbourhood with a pair of binoculars, give an imaginary speech or hold a conversation with yourself, take a walk or go for a run, play the violin or a computer game or a game of snooker, go out and do some sport.

### 7.3 Being creative

One of the main points of getting you to do a dissertation is to force you to work independently, and this requires some creativity. Although you will get a certain level of support, it is really up to you to work things out and find solutions, and even to discover problems that need solving. Understanding complex situations also needs an open-minded approach. Creative thinking helps you to break out from habitual thought patterns and explore a wider range of possibilities. There are several easy-to-use techniques that can help you to think creatively. Here are a few exercises you might find useful.

*Brainstorming* You need a group of people for this (though you can do it on your own; it is then called brainwriting). First clearly define a particular problem you want to solve. List as many ideas as come into your heads of how to solve the problem. In a group, you can also feed off other people's suggestions, combine ideas and extrapolate or modify them. The main rule is not to criticize, however bizarre or ridiculous the suggestions may be. The evaluation of the ideas comes later. A typical brainstorming may produce about 50 different ideas (probably rather less for brainwriting) for solutions to a particular problem. These can then be classified and evaluated.

*Checklists* A bit like a shopping list. Make a list of things you need to consider, difficulties you might encounter, tasks you need to do, information you need to collect, etc. Again, you need to focus on one aspect of your project for useful results. You can also use checklists to look at alternative ways of doing things by using trigger words, e.g. combine solutions, reverse the problem (see it from a different perspective). Other trigger words are adapt, rearrange, substitute, magnify, minify, modify, put to other uses.

*Analogies* You can often draw parallels between two different problems or situations, where knowledge about one can help to explain or solve the other. This is quite a natural process, a way of learning from experience. Put to more deliberate use, it can help to obtain new insights and perspectives. For example, the techniques your favourite chat show hosts use to prise information out of their guests could be used in your own interviews; or analysis of dynamics among a group of people could be compared with that of an extended family or a small business.

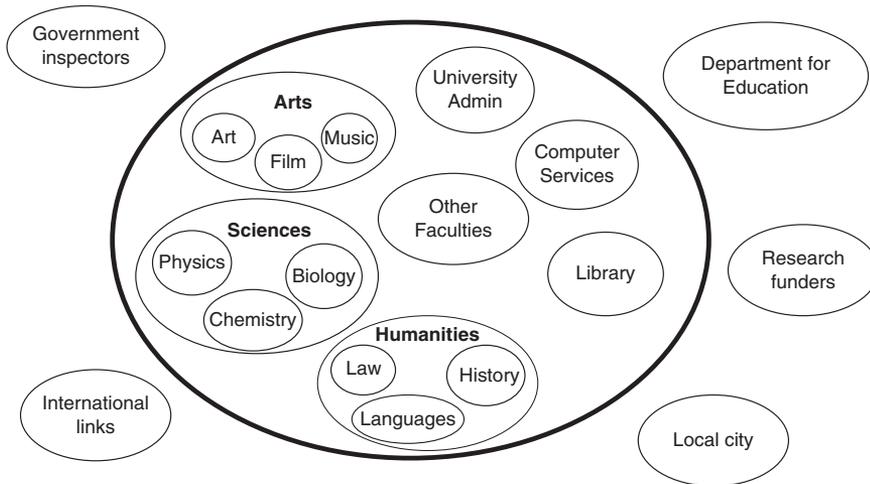


FIGURE 7.2 Systems map of the university (very simplified)

*Immersion in the problem* This takes time, and is a good reason for defining a problem at an early stage. Once you are aware of the problem, be it of a practical or a theoretical nature, think about it for a bit, and then just ‘forget’ it for a few days and allow your subconscious to work on it. You might just jump out of the bath shouting ‘eureka’ as a solution presents itself out of the blue.

*Discussion* A problem shared is a problem halved, so they say. It is best if you talk with people who share similar problems, and especially those who have found good solutions!

*Systems thinking* There is a range of ways of looking at systems, i.e. a complex of interrelated things or events such as machines, organizations, social groups or natural phenomena. You can draw a diagram to explore the sequences of cause and effect, or of the influence that factors have on one another. Other types of diagram are organization diagrams, cognitive maps, flowcharts and decision trees. A simple example of a systems map is illustrated in Figure 7.2. See Chapter 16 for examples of other diagrams.

You will probably find it necessary to spend plenty of time by yourself in order to get yourself going. Having the TV on in the background is a real concentration killer. I find even having music on is a distraction – I keep wanting to listen.

## 7.4 All the things you need to do

A dissertation is probably the biggest academic project that you have ever undertaken. The worst aspect of this is not that the task seems impossibly

complex and lengthy, but that there are so many unknowns, making it very difficult to plan for a successful and timely completion.

In order to remove some of the mystique, here is a list of the tasks that you will (or in some cases, might) need to undertake, in a typical order. This list, tailored to the requirements of your type of study, will help you to work out a sequence of activities, make an estimate of how long each activity might take, and thus give you the information to set up a programme of work. You can then use this both to assure yourself that you can complete on time, and to check that you are not falling behind too much in your rate of work. It will also ensure that you do not spend too long on any aspect of the work, thus avoiding last minute panics. You can get some idea of what is involved in each task by scanning through the chapters mentioned.

- Decide on a subject and type of investigation and, if possible, get it provisionally approved by your supervisor (see Chapters 2 and 3).
- Investigate the subject so that you have enough information to write the proposal (see Chapter 4).
- Write a proposal explaining the subject of your research and giving some indication of how you will do it (see Chapter 6). It is a good idea to discuss your proposal with your supervisor, as it represents the foundation of your efforts over the next months.
- Organize your note taking and your archiving system (see Chapter 9).
- Carry out background research through study of the literature to determine what has been done already in the subject (see Chapter 8) in order to see where your study fits into current and past work.
- Investigate methods of data collection and analysis which have been used to do similar studies to your own, and the practical aspects of doing them, e.g. experiments, observations, surveys, reviews, etc. (see Chapters 2, 12, 13 and 14). This will help you to decide just how you do your investigation and enable you to make estimates of what will be involved in time, expense, organization and perhaps getting permissions and access to sources of information.
- Work out a structure for the dissertation (i.e. chapter headings and short lists of contents for each) and write a draft of your preliminary chapter(s) (see Chapters 9 and 16).
- Start writing. It is a good idea to start writing the introductory chapter(s) quite early on while you are immersed in the literature review. Do not try to perfect it – even blocks of notes will be a useful start.
- Plan your project work, i.e. the part of the research that will generate new information (e.g. fieldwork, experiments, trials, archive searches, textual analyses, etc.). This might entail getting permissions for access to institutions, selecting case studies, obtaining documents for analysis, setting up questionnaires, etc. (see Chapters 10 and 11).
- Carry out the project work as planned above. Take into account time required for travel, waiting for responses to questionnaires, getting appointments with people, etc. (see Chapters 11 and 12).
- Sort and analyse the collected information. In some cases, you may need to take some time to learn computer programs to help with the analysis (see Chapters 13 and 14).

- Write up the results of your analysis, devising graphs, diagrams and illustrations to help explain the data.
- Write up how you did the research (it is easier to do this after you have completed it, though it should appear earlier in the dissertation), and write conclusions based on what you have found out (see Chapter 16).
- Prepare a final draft. This is the time to pull all the written work together in a structured form. Check that the length complies with the requirements, ensure that chapters or sections follow a logical sequence, and assess the need for illustrations, graphs and diagrams, etc. You can experiment with layout designs at this stage (see Chapters 17 and 18).
- Write up the final version based on the final draft. This will also involve inserting illustrations, graphs and diagrams, lists of references, contents and finally setting out the layout and page numberings.

## 7.5 Setting up a programme

At the beginning of a project, when there seems to be loads of time to complete it, it is easy to sit back and believe that planning can be done later, when time starts to run out. After all, there is no need to be all organized when time is not an issue, is there? The trouble is, until you actually assess how much work is involved in writing your dissertation, it is quite difficult to judge whether there actually is loads of time. For this reason, it is a good idea to devise a simple programme early on so that you can reassure yourself that you will not get into a desperate panic later.

In order to be of any real use, a programme should be realistic in its aims. It is easy to plan out a timetable of work that *should* be done, ignoring all the obstacles that might get in the way. For this reason it is important to include in your timing any other commitments you may have, e.g. holidays, sport, other assignments and exam dates. If the objectives are realistic, then you may actually keep referring to the programme that you have spent time devising in order to check on your progress and to plan your next moves.

It helps to break up your project into stages. Give yourself deadlines to complete aspects of the work. This is a common requirement of professional research projects, where intermediate reports are required to check up on the



FIGURE 7.3 Ignoring all the obstacles that might get in the way

progress of the work. You are unlikely to have to submit your work in stages like this, but the satisfaction and comfort of consciously getting parts of the project out of the way are worth the effort. The other advantage of splitting the work into sections is that you set limited goals, ones that you can see that you can achieve without being daunted. In addition, having some intermediate deadlines will stop you getting carried away or dithering on any one aspect of the work and spending far too much time on it.

The easiest way to devise a programme is to set up a table, with a list of tasks on the left-hand side, and the time in weeks along the top (see Figure 7.4). It is best to use the table facility in your word processor or a spreadsheet program for ease of adjustment and neat presentation. If you like, you can include your other activities to make sure that there are no clashes in timing. Try to be realistic, or the programme will become obsolete within a few weeks. If you cannot fit the necessary work into the time available, then reduce the scope of the work.

Your programme will help to motivate you, as you will easily be able to see that whatever you are doing in your list of tasks, the job is useful and a necessary part of the sequence. And the task will also have a defined and meaningful end. You will also be able to check that you are not drifting by spending too much time on particular aspects of the work, and that you allow enough time for the latter stages. Seeing that you will manage to complete on time is a great comfort. If the work does slip in relation to the programme, you will be able to adjust it so that you still find time (even if it is somewhat reduced) for all the essential tasks.

## 7.6 Starting to write

Even professional writers state what a pain it is to write, and how they need to be a bit insane in order to do it. However, you can take comfort in the fact that you are not writing a novel or some poetry – totally dependent on your own resources. The content of your writing will be based on other people's publications and your own collection of information and observations. You will have plenty of raw materials, so the page will not need to be blank for long!

Perhaps the most difficult step is to start writing. You might feel that you have nothing to write about until you have done all the reading and research. In fact, through just thinking about what you want to do for your dissertation you already know quite a lot. At the start of any project, there has to be some writing done to explain to other people what you intend to do. So this is a good time to start.

At this early stage, you can afford to be uncertain about matters; raise them anyway as points for further investigation. For example, you can start with describing what area of study you want to pursue (e.g. primary education, building management, magazine publishing), and exploring some of the situations

Tasks	Weeks																
	01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
Initial background reading and deciding on subject	█	█															
Write proposal			█	█													
Organize note-taking system		█															
Continue background reading and note taking			█	█	█	█											
Draft structure of dissertation Chapter 1 draft			█	█	█												
Decide on research methods – data collection and analysis				█	█												
Arrangements for fieldwork – questionnaires, appointments					█	█	█										
Chapter 2 draft							█	█									
Carry out fieldwork								█	█								
Collate data for analysis and do analysis									█	█	█						
Chapter 3 draft									█	█							
Final chapter draft										█	█						
Drawings and formatting Introduction, contents, list of references, etc.											█	█	█				
Final presentation and submission																█	█

FIGURE 7.4 Programme of work

where you could concentrate your investigation (e.g. in relation to the above, first days at school, deep excavations, trends in layout style). What you write is not chiselled into stone, so just let your thoughts get onto paper (or the computer screen) without being too critical. Once ideas are written, then you can play around with them, and add, cut and adjust them. You cannot do this all in your head, so the process of writing it down will actually help you to think about it, and to make decisions about what you really want to do.

As you get more into your subject, a good way to get something onto paper without even having to form sentences is to make a list. This can be of things to do, topics to investigate, or headings of subjects you want to write about. Once you have a basic list, you can add some subheadings to the items that expand on these. Before long, perhaps after doing some reading, you will be able to add a few sentences under the subheadings. You can first concentrate on the bits that are easy. Later, when you already have a body of text, you will be more confident to tackle the harder aspects that require more thought and knowledge.

Later on in the project, when the real bulk of writing needs to be done, the pressure and difficulty will be at their greatest. This is where the creative and original work is produced. Peter Woods (2006: 14–16) describes how he needs to ‘crank himself up’ before he starts writing up his research. Analysis and presentation of the information you have collected is a multifaceted task that is quite painful and demanding work. A few tentative starts are to be expected as you ‘psych yourself



FIGURE 7.5 Things you want to write about

up'. People often remark on how they become unsociable when they are involved in creative work: you need to be concentrated on yourself and your own thinking in quite a selfish way. However, do switch off in between your working sessions. If you are quite strict with your timing and set yourself realistic goals (e.g. so many words per day), then you can feel you have really earned your time off. Most professional writers work regular office hours – whether they are inspired or not.

This is a good place to remind you that you must save and back up your work regularly. Computers are notoriously fickle and can ruin your day if your work gets lost or deleted by accident or failure. Keep all your writing recorded in at least two, better three, different formats – data stick, hard drive on your laptop or desktop, your home directory on the university intranet. Make a habit of saving your work manually every 10–15 minutes, and set the program to make auto-recover files every few minutes. I have heard some tragic true stories of work getting 'lost' – perhaps one of the most infuriating and disappointing things that can happen to one's hard-won writing efforts.



## 7.7 Chapter summary

Self-motivation and self-discipline are needed to write a dissertation, which is perhaps the first substantial piece of work that you have had to devise and carry out completely on your own. Choosing a subject that really interests you is the best motivation to complete the work. Be aware that you are not like a machine, so look after yourself and make the best of your dynamic phases and find ways to provide relief when you get stressed.

There are several techniques that help you to be creative and find solutions to the problems that you are bound to face. Brainstorming, making checklists, devising analogies, immersing yourself in the problem, and a spot of systems thinking might get you out of your habitual ways of thinking and offer some new perspectives on your subject.

Good planning will help to keep you on track and avoid a final panic as the deadline draws near. You will need to decide on a subject and type of investigation and investigate it so that you can write a proposal. Organizing your note taking will ensure that you do not lose any of that carefully researched information. This will set you up for doing the background research and deciding on what methods of data collection and analysis will be appropriate to answer your research questions. Planning your programme of work based on what you need to do and the time available will provide a reality check on your project. To help you do this it is good to draw up a structure for your dissertation with chapter headings and subheadings.

The actual research activities should follow your programme as closely as possible. Of course, there will be some unexpected events along the way that need to be accommodated, but you can adjust your programme to take these into account.

## 7.8 What should I do now?

Whatever stage you are at in your project, if you have not done so yet, set up a programme of work. You can use the example in Figure 7.4 as a model and adjust it to your own particular needs. I produced this one using Microsoft Word 6 table function, though the Excel spreadsheet program could also be



FIGURE 7.6 You may be faced with a combination of problems

used. Use the line drawing function on the drawing toolbar for the horizontal time bars. Try to be realistic and take into account your preferred method of working and also your other commitments. It is usually difficult to judge just how long each task will take (usually longer than you think). However, as time will always be a limiting factor you will often have to cut the work to fit the time – a reasonable justification for limiting the scope of your work. The main thing is to get the proportions between the various stages of the work to be reasonable.

Start writing something. If you are still at the beginning, outline the area of your study, bringing in any information or quotations from things you have read. Try to define a focus for your project in the form of questions or aims. If you are further on, you could make a start on

your background chapter, using the notes you have made from your reading in order to set the scene for your individual work. You could also write out a structure for your dissertation in the form of a list of headings and subheadings.

If you are unclear of what you want to do, or of how to progress, define the problem as you see it, and try out one or more of the ideas-generating techniques above. You may be faced with a combination of problems that make you feel helpless and lost. Try to break them down into different aspects and tackle each one in turn. Once you have found solutions, start by putting them down in writing and listing what actions you want to take. Even if you don't start working on them straight away, at least you have a record to fall back on.

## 7.9 References to more information

Davies, P. (2002) *Get Up and Grow: How to Motivate Yourself and Everybody Else Too*. London: Hodder Mobius. This book is good on motivation, and referred to in this chapter. Read this to get the full story.

There are many books on creative thinking. De Bono became a creative thinking guru in the 1970s and 1980s with a string of books and public appearances. Here are some of his most popular – and easy to read – books.

De Bono, E. (1997) *Lateral Thinking: A Textbook of Creativity*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

De Bono, E. (1996) *Teach Yourself to Think*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

De Bono, E. (1993) *Serious Creativity: Using the Power of Lateral Thinking to Create New Ideas*. London: Harper Collins.

I found a few more books on thinking creatively and problem solving – worth delving into:

Bransford, J.D. (1993) *The Ideal Problem Solver: A Guide for Improving Thinking, Learning, and Creativity*, 2nd edition. New York: Freeman.

Smith, F. (1992) *To Think: In Language, Learning and Education*. London: Routledge.

Gilhooly, K.J. (1996) *Thinking: Directed, Undirected and Creative*, 3rd edition. London: Academic.

The following books offer lots of advice on writing. I have put them in order of accessibility and the level of academic stage that they are aimed at.

Smith, P. (2011) *How to Write an Assignment: Improving Your Research and Presentation Skills*, 8th edition. Plymouth: How To Books.

Pirie, D.B. (1985) *How to Write Critical Essays: A Guide for Students of Literature*. London: Routledge.

Hall, G.M. (ed.) (2013) *How to Write a Paper*, 5th edition. London: Wiley-Blackwell.

Bowden, J. (1991) *Writing a Report: How to Prepare, Write & Present Really Effective Reports*, 9th edition. Plymouth: How To Books.

Murray, R. (2011) *How to Write a Thesis*, 3rd edition. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Berry, R. (2000) *The Research Project: How to Write It*, 4th edition. London: Routledge.

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