How to Manage Your Research Project

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The following workshop is aimed at Honours students, however, students undertaking short research projects (e.g., Final Year Projects, Masters by Coursework Dissertations) may also find it useful. The workshop aims to:

- offer strategies to assist you during your Honours year
- discuss the expectations in your discipline
- explain the research process in relation to your individual project
- outline the elements of a good thesis or dissertation
- consider ways to maintain effective relationships with supervisors
- get you thinking about your research question

Introduction: why do Honours?

Honours study is comparable to an ‘in-between space’, a transition between the coursework orientation of undergraduate study and the traditional research focus of postgraduate study. Honours is a transition year for most students. It is the year when they are asked to:

- shift from being recipients to being generators of knowledge
- begin to establish their claim to join the academic community
- decide whether or not they will proceed to postgraduate study
- perform at a standard which determines whether they will be eligible for a PhD scholarship

In practical terms, this transition means radical changes to undergraduate patterns of study. While people often liken a PhD to a marathon, the Honours year is more like a sprinter’s race: a brief sudden burst with a little time for pit stops, and relying on good solid training and preparation for a good finish. Like the sprinter, Honours students need effective strategies to stay ‘on track’.

What do you think some of these strategies may include?
Understanding the process: a checklist for the early stages

It is important that students who are new to research prepare themselves by thinking about the nature of research as carefully as they think about the subject of the research. Too often, students concentrate on the content of what they are doing at the expense of the process, and realise too late that they do not really understand what is expected of them.

1. Do you have a clear understanding of what will be required of you as a research student?
   - No
   - Yes

2. Are you aware of the assessment criteria for your dissertation?
   - No
   - Yes

3. Have you checked out other dissertations in your field?
   - No
   - Yes

4. Are you becoming familiar with the literature?
   - No
   - Yes

5. Are you developing a research question?
   - No
   - Yes

6. Are you aware of the requirements for a proposal in your faculty?
   - No
   - Yes

7. Do you have a plan for analysing your data?
   - No
   - Yes

8. Do you have a system for keeping track of literature, references and data?
   - No
   - Yes
Managing the process: an example of milestones

Most Honours programmes across campus have two components: thesis and coursework. Both are vital parts of doing Honours and serve different and complementary purposes. The individual disciplines decide on the particular relationship – the what, how, when and how much – of these two parts. The coursework may often be the most familiar aspect of the Honours programme with set workshops and assessments. However, the research process itself may involve a step into the unknown. What is needed is a plan for managing time and for visualising the process.

Below is an example of the proposed timing or benchmarks for progress of a hypothetical Honours student:

- commence review of literature and develop a preliminary list of references in February/March
- proposal completed by 1st April (document that outlines the plan for your research: clear question, research design outlined, outline of research methodology including approach for analysis, a statement of completion criteria and a realistic timeline)
- research design specified in detail, theoretical framework understood, a good draft of the Introduction and of the Literature Review completed by the end of May
- Literature Review (or other chapter) completed for assessment in early June
- Data collected by July and a substantial portion of the dissertation written in draft form in July
- Good draft of the whole dissertation completed by end of August
- Good draft of the whole dissertation to supervisor/s by Monday 5th September
- Comments returned by Monday 19th September (subject to negotiation with supervisor/s)
- Final draft of whole dissertation completed by Monday 26th September (subject to negotiation with supervisor/s)
- Commence review of final draft on Monday October 10th (subject to negotiation with supervisor/s)
- Complete review of final draft by Monday 17th October and organise photocopying and binding (subject to negotiation with supervisor/s)
- 2 bound copies of thesis to be submitted by Monday 31st October
The research process as a progressive reduction of uncertainty
(adapted from Phillips & Pugh 2005, p. 83)

maximum uncertainty

Field of interest Possible topics Thesis proposal Data collection Data analysis Final write up

minimum uncertainty

TIME
Insert your own markers
Dissertation considerations

Students undertaking an Honours degree, a final year project or Masters by coursework usually have to submit a dissertation. A research dissertation is much more than a long essay or research report because it “normally represents the culmination of a substantial piece of original work over a period of at least a year” (Anderson & Poole 1998, p. 4). Although the format and style of a dissertation may vary between disciplines, some important elements to consider include:

- **Scope** – make sure you do not, to any significant degree, exceed the word limit
- **Look and feel** – standard layout and chapters
- **The student should show a familiarity with, and understanding of, the relevant literature**
- **The dissertation should provide a sufficiently comprehensive study of the research question**
- **The results should be suitably set out and accompanied by adequate exposition**
- **The quality of English and general presentation should be of a professional standard**

🌟 Can you, even at this early stage, construct a proposed plan for your dissertation? Make sure it reflects the conventions of your discipline. Compare yours with those around you.
Choosing a supervisor

The thesis stands on two major pillars: a supervisor and a topic. Both are vital and mutually dependent. If you are undertaking an experimental lab or fieldwork-based topic, it is likely that you will be slotted into an existing research project within the department, joining a team of research staff and students. If your research is based on library research or surveys, you will typically have wider choices of topic and supervisor. In most cases, students first select their preferred supervisor, who nearly always must be a member of the department, although it is possible to have a co-supervisor from elsewhere within or even outside the University. Then, in consultation, you work out a suitable topic for research.

Generally speaking, the primary responsibility of the supervisor is the oversight of your work, that is:

- to provide on-going, clear, adequate advice on the planning and execution of your project
- to offer help in the solution of difficulties
- to provide you with timely and constructive feedback on all aspects of your work

The particular way these aspects take shape varies within the different departments. The supervisory relationship is such a critical one that establishing the ground rules for a sound and effective relationship should be among your earlier priorities.

 крыш Who has already selected a supervisor? What can you do to facilitate the best possible working relationship with your supervisor?

Selecting a topic for research

Anderson and Poole (1998, p. 19) contend that the “selection of a suitable topic for a thesis or dissertation is in many ways the most difficult task”.

 крыш Why do you think this may be?
When selecting a topic for research you may want to consider the following points:

1) **Identify the broad area of study** - This is the time to read in these areas to get a feel for what has been done and where gaps exist. Consult with your supervisor and draw on their expert knowledge or look at recently completed theses in the field to get an idea of cutting edge ideas. This is part of the ‘narrowing process’.

2) **Identify or list potential topics** - Look for an issue that you think is intriguing, that you are enthusiastic about, one that sparks your curiosity. Your reading can then become more focused: journal articles will become increasing important at this stage. At some point you will become convinced that you want to pursue a topic and make it the focus of your research. Warning – don’t jump in just yet!

3) **Seriously consider the feasibility of the topic** - Consult with your supervisor and consider the following checklist of topic feasibility and appropriateness:

### Checklist of topic feasibility and appropriateness

- Is there current interest in this topic in your field?
- Is there a gap in knowledge that this topic would help to fill?
- Is it possible to focus on a small enough segment of the topic to make a manageable project?
- Is the data collection approach acceptable in your school?
- Is there a body of literature available relevant to the topic?
- Are there any large problems to be surmounted in working on this topic? If so, do you feel confident in handling them?
- Does the topic relate reasonably well to others that have or are being done in your school?
- Will financial assistance be required? Is it available?
- Is the needed data readily accessible?
- Finally (this should not occur before all the above have been considered) do you have a clear statement of the purpose, scope, objectives, procedures and limitations of the study?
Developing your research question

In the early stages of research, many students find they are tempted to take too broad a view of the topic, to read too widely and to design overly ambitious experiments and surveys. Scoping your project should be an early task. Answer the following questions about your research project, and then discuss your answers with the person next to you. Seek feedback on the clarity of your ideas.

- What are you trying to find out?

- How are you going to do it?

- Why is this worth doing?

Part of the training experience of the Honours year is learning to identify a research question that can be handled within the time, word and energy constraints of an Honours thesis. This scoping of your project you will do, usually in consultation with your supervisor, in the early months as you gradually increase your understanding of the field you have chosen and of the specific question you decided to explore. A useful strategy for keeping your attention focused is to complete the following sentence:

“The aim of my thesis is to...”
Final tips for planning your project

Organising your time takes some effort but will certainly pay off as the months go by. The most important consideration in planning your project is creating deadlines for each stage of your work. In so doing, you can construct a schedule so that you can work steadily towards the completion of your project. Remember the workload is extensive and must be structured. To do this, you must be aware of important dates (such as the submission date).

- Make sure you understand the **sequence of tasks** that is required by your school. Some of these have time requirements or are ‘dead-line driven tasks’, for instance, the research proposal will have a final date for submission relatively early in the year. This is the same for ethics clearance if it is required. Chart these.

- Identify **critical points at which progress can be reviewed** and your plan reassessed. Estimate times at which these critical points will be reached so that your progress can be accurately evaluated (this should be at least every 3 months).

- Refer to your structure and **identify those components that can be tackled in the initial stages** of the project – the literature review and methodology chapters are good examples. You can begin writing these early and refine them later. By doing this, you will gain a sense of accomplishment early in the project.

- **Monitor your progress and set new goals.** If you don't meet a goal within the time you have set don't be discouraged; this is part of your learning-perhaps the time allotted was unrealistic, or the goal was not specific enough. Simple projects can be managed by using a timetable and “to do” lists. Management tools such as GANTT charts, Critical Path Analysis and software such as Microsoft Project can be used to plan more complex projects.

- There will be times when you will feel tired or unable to concentrate. Be prepared to use those times for practical tasks, such as filing, record keeping, bibliographic referencing, etc. **Never waste time** that you've allocated for your project!

- Schedule in **regular meetings** with your supervisor and be well prepared for these. Let them know the deadlines you are creating for yourself.

- Never underestimate the time it will take to **format** your final draft and be well aware of layout conventions and binding requirements.
Don’t forget to check out the online Honours Hub at:

http://www.studentservices.uwa.edu.au/ss/learning/online_services/honours_hub

where you will find:

- information on upcoming Honours skills workshops
- podcasts and handouts from previous workshops
- a message board where you can post questions/comments
- links to a variety of Honours-related resources
- a personal account of Honours from a past student

Individual appointments are also available for you to:

- receive feedback on your written work
- discuss time management issues
- get additional support with your Honours studies

For more info on appointments contact Dr Lucy Reilly at:

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Reference List


Kearns, H & Gardiner, M 2006, Time for research: time management for PhD students, Staff development and Training Unit Flinders University, Adelaide.