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‘Where do I start?’ This tends to be first question students ask.

Know what you want to research?

If you do, then it can be tempting to launch straight in to collecting the evidence. However, before doing so, it is worth pausing to consider:
- a range of topic options, just to be sure you have made the right choice
- the distinct skills and demands of larger-scale projects and how to manage these.

Not yet decided on a topic?

If you do not yet know what you want to research, then don’t be too concerned; it is not unusual. Start by gaining a sense of the process. Chapter 9 provides steps to help you select a topic.

The 3 basics

Research is sometimes summarised as three basic components:
1. A question
2. Methods of arriving at an answer
3. The answer.

Although this summary of the basics conceals the complexities of research, it can be helpful to return to these building blocks to help clarify the task and refocus your thinking if you start to lose direction.

Plus 2 more …

In addition to the 3 basics above, it is useful to add two more.

4. Bringing out significance. Why does it matter? What is the relevance? So what?
5. Writing it up. Communicating your research to others and opening it up to scrutiny.

The answer depends, to some extent, on whether you have decided yet what you want to research.
Laying good foundations

It is generally better to lay solid foundations upon which to build your research project, rather than jumping in without thinking it through. Below, are some key aspects to consider.

**Gain a sense of the ‘end product’**

Before starting, develop a feel for what is expected as the ‘end product’. You are then more likely to produce it. (See Chapters 2 and 7.)

**Gain a sense of the overall process**

This has many advantages.

- You’ll know what to expect.
- It helps you to take charge of the process and make it more coherent for yourself.
- It will help you to see where specific tasks fit into the whole.
- It helps you schedule tasks in the best order.

(See pages 35–6.)

**Build your understanding in stages**

The overall process can seem complicated, as there are many aspects to consider. Build your sense of the process in stages, working from the basic building blocks to a deeper understanding of a multi-layered process.

- Start with the 3 + 2 basics (page 9).
- Gain an overview of the tasks (page 11).
- Develop a more detailed overview.
- Start to consider the complexities associated with the basic processes (page 13).
- Achieve a more detailed sense of what each of these tasks entails (page 12).
- Gain a grasp of the project planning process (Chapter 3).

**Sort out the steps**

Tasks do not necessarily fall into sequence. As you can see from the overview of the task on page 11, you will be starting some new tasks before you finish others.

This means it is important to:

- clarify what the steps are
- work out the best order for your project
- use checklists and charts to keep yourself organised.

**Plan your time – as soon as possible**

- Start work on the assignment now: don’t wait till near the deadline as this always comes around much faster than people expect.
- Schedule the whole process in detail. (See Chapter 3.)

**Consider the self-management aspects**

You will be studying largely on your own, so knowing how to get yourself through the process is an essential consideration – and one that is often underestimated. Give thought to how you will manage such aspects as solitude, motivation, maintaining momentum, gaining inspiration and keeping in touch with others. (See pages 43–50.)
Chapter 3 looks at managing your assignment as a research project. It details the process as a set of steps to manage. At this point, it is useful to gain a sense of the four main parts of the task and when you would undertake each in relation to the others.

On the left, below, are the four main parts of the project task, from planning to writing up. The numbers in brackets indicate how these relate to the ‘3 + 2 basics’ described on page 9.

On the right is a broad outline of how each of the four overarching parts relates to the others in terms of scale and timing. Each is also mapped against a start-to-finish line to indicate when, across the timeline of your research project or dissertation, you would be working on that part.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part</th>
<th>Start</th>
<th>Finish</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Preparation</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Get yourself organised to do a good job and to manage the practical realities.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Preparation and planning</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop the proposal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work out the question and how to answer it (1, 2, 4, 5).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conducting the research</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follow your proposal to arrive at an answer (2 and 3).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Writing it up</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Report to others the answer to your question, how you found out, and its significance (1–5).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Overview of the task

Below is an overview of what is involved in a typical research-based assignment. Tasks are organised broadly according to the four ‘parts’ into which this book is divided. It is likely that, as you work, you will move back and forwards between the various tasks, rather than following them in a simple sequence.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prepare and plan</th>
<th>Develop the proposal</th>
<th>Conduct research</th>
<th>Write up/Present</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Don’t dive straight in: orientate yourself to the task from start to finish</td>
<td>Conduct your literature search; focus your reading and thinking towards potential topics</td>
<td>Fine-tune your thinking, research question and methods; raise major changes with your supervisor</td>
<td>Write your introduction – what questions did your research set out to answer and why?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Get a feel for the end product and process: read examples from your field</td>
<td>Consider the practicalities of each potential topic</td>
<td>Set up the conditions needed for gathering your data</td>
<td>Finalise your literature review, indicating how your research builds on what has gone before</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Get to grips with the project management aspect of the assignment</td>
<td>Narrow your focus to select a specific topic; formulate research questions or hypotheses</td>
<td>Collect your raw materials, such as documents, texts, data</td>
<td>Write up your methods – what exactly did you do to arrive at your results?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Know your assignment brief inside out</td>
<td>Design your research: how will you answer the question or test your hypotheses?</td>
<td>Keep accurate records of what you do</td>
<td>Set out your results: summarise findings in words and in tables or diagrams if appropriate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Survey the field; find an area that interests you; generate options so that you have choices</td>
<td>Review the literature, writing this up. Read broadly, keeping details for citations and references</td>
<td>Keep accurate records of what happens/what you find out; compare these with previous research or theory</td>
<td>Discuss what you found, analysing it critically; draw out its significance and any emerging issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Build your relationship with your supervisor</td>
<td>Refine your question and decide on your approach and methods; ensure the project is feasible, ethical and meets the brief</td>
<td>Organise your material or data so that you can see what you have found out</td>
<td>Draw conclusions, synthesising your findings with your understanding of previous research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-management: give serious consideration to how you will keep yourself on track</td>
<td>Prepare materials and record forms; pilot your methods and materials, if relevant</td>
<td>Refer back to previous research to make sense of your findings</td>
<td>Write the wrap-around sections such as the abstract, references, and appendices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organise support: for ideas, social contact, and motivation</td>
<td>Discuss a draft of your proposal with your supervisor</td>
<td>Select the most salient findings and examples</td>
<td>Fine tune your drafts until your assignment flows well</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Start to schedule everything</td>
<td>Finalise your proposal; submit for formal approval if required</td>
<td>Set out your findings so that the salient points stand out clearly</td>
<td>Prepare for a viva or presentation, if required</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In practice, the experience of completing a large-scale assignment is more complex than suggested by the ‘3 + 2 basics’ outlined on page 9. Below are some of the practical realities associated with each of the ‘basics’, as experienced by students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The basics 3 + 2</th>
<th>The complexities – the practical realities as experienced by students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1  A question: what do you want to find out? | ‘There seem to be a lot of other things that you have to sort out before you get to the point of deciding on a “question”.’  
‘I don’t have anything in particular that I want to find out.’  
‘I have lots of questions: how do I decide between them?’  
‘I have a brilliant question, but my supervisor says it isn’t feasible.’  
‘How can I choose a topic if I don’t know what is known already?’  
‘How do you start to find a “question” if you haven’t got one?’  
‘How big a question does it need to be for me to have to spend so long researching it?’ |
| 2  A way of finding out the answer: the methods | ‘The lectures did cover methods, but I was only paying attention to what people found out rather than how …’  
‘They gave us an outline to follow for previous projects/experiments, but for this assignment, I have to plan it all out myself …’  
‘I don’t understand why I can’t just ask friends, family and people what they think about the subject – they’d be happy to help. I don’t like to ask strangers to be participants.’  
‘I have great ideas of my own: why have I got to include other people’s theories?’  
‘How much reading is enough anyway?’  
‘Methodology? Methods? What is the difference?’ |
| 3  An answer | ‘“The answer” sounded so short, but seems to need a lot of analysis and discussion …’  
‘What kind of answer takes 1000s of words to write?’  
‘What if I don’t get the right answer?’  
‘I am investigating an issue – so what would a “question” and “answer” be like?’ |
| 4  The significance: ‘So what?’ | ‘I have shown what happened, but what does it mean?’  
‘I have found out why this occurs, but that opens up even more questions.’  
‘Does this have any relevance to other researchers in my field?’  
‘I made this amazing discovery, but is there any practical application?’  
‘How does this change anything? It is so little compared to what is published already …’ |
| 5  Writing | ‘I have a mass of information, but how do I organise it into something coherent?’  
‘I know the answer, but getting it down in words seems harder than the research.’  
‘I am only half way through and am already nearly at the word limit …’ |
Do I have the right skills?

How prepared am I already?
In considering some of the ‘complexities’ raised on page 13, you may wonder whether you have the necessary skills. It is likely that you do have a great deal of relevant experience and skill to draw upon: courses are usually carefully designed to ensure that previous assignments and current coursework provide a good foundation for this level of challenge.

If you can check off most of the items on the list below and the skills on page 15, then you are in a strong position for this kind of assignment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Previous academic experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Typically, by now, you would have:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ completed many smaller-scale assignments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ developed a range of study skills (see page 15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ developed skills in independent study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ built your knowledge base in the subject</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ become familiar with broad theoretical frameworks in your subject</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ been introduced to specialist journals or texts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ seen how evidence is collected and put under scrutiny within your subject discipline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ been introduced to specialist research methods within your subject.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Building on existing study skills
At every new level of study, there is a greater level of difficulty and/or complexity. This means that you are expected to build on pre-existing study skills, fine-tuning and adapting them to suit new contexts.

At earlier stages of study, many of the skills you need are common to most types of study. As you move to higher levels of study, the skills relevant to your academic work tend to become less generic and increasingly specialist.

Nonetheless, there are strategies and approaches common to most large-scale assignments. These are not usually covered in detail as part of a course of study at this level as it is assumed that the skills would have evolved through previous study. However, many people find that they have gaps in these skills, or anxieties about what is required, or want a road map to help navigate the demands of the assignment.

Specialist research skills
Every academic discipline focuses on a specific branch of knowledge and investigates particular kinds of issues. Each draws on different types of original source material or raw data as its evidence base and uses distinct methodologies and techniques to find, analyse and make use of the evidence.

Training in these discipline-specific ways of thinking and working will form part of your course. You are likely to receive guidance on:

- ethical issues relevant to your subject
- recognising good quality sources, materials or data
- gathering your own data in ways that are recognised as sound within the subject
- interpreting source materials and data
- relevant statistical methods
- using statistical software packages
- using specialist equipment
- reporting your findings or writing about your material in ways that fit the culture of the subject discipline.

These may be introduced to you at the same time that your dissertation or project is set. If not, you may need a specialist text that looks in detail at methods used within your subject.
Typically, by the time you are set larger-scale assignments, you would have developed a good base of skills and self-knowledge through earlier, shorter assignments. If you can check off most of the following list with well-grounded confidence, then you are starting with good foundations.

1 Self-management skills
- Knowing how and when you learn best, and organising your study accordingly
- Personalising your learning in order to play to your learning strengths and preferences
- Keeping yourself motivated
- Setting priorities
- Keeping yourself organised
- Resilience and good coping strategies
- Asking for support and help when needed.

2 Academic skills
- Understanding academic conventions that apply within your subject
- Conducting online searches
- Reading at a reasonable speed with good reading strategies and comprehension
- Analysing reading material and data using critical thinking skills
- Interpreting and presenting numerical data
- Recognising quality evidence for your subject
- Making relevant notes as you read
- Synthesising information from many sources
- Developing a good line of reasoning within your own work, supported by evidence
- Structuring your thinking, organising concepts
- Organising your ideas when writing
- Writing clearly and precisely in academic style
- Citing and referencing sources correctly.

3 People skills
- Offering support to others without sharing your work in ways that are not permitted for the course
- Contributing to group seminars and classes
- Presenting information to a given audience, typically your tutor or other students
- Answering questions about your work.

4 Task management
- Understanding the role of the assignment title
- Being able to identify the question implicit within the title, as well as the key issues it raises
- Producing pieces of work that are closely focused on the assignment title or question
- Identifying component parts of assignments
- Managing your time to meet deadlines
- Presenting numbers and charts as required
- Structuring your writing to designated formats
- Writing up work in the required style and format
- Fine-tuning drafts and editing your work, checking for errors and correcting them.

What if I need to develop these skills?
You will develop and fine-tune these skills over time as you work on your research project. However, it is preferable to have a good foundation in these skills before you start such a large assignment.

If these study skills are new to you, or if you have a gap in your recent studies and feel that these skills might be rusty, see Cottrell (2013), *The Study Skills Handbook*, to help you get started.
What kinds of skills will I need to develop?

What kind of skills will I need?

Long assignments are demanding in terms of word length, scale of operation, breadth of reading, depth of thought and quality of research. That requires you not only to fine-tune existing skills, such as those outlined on page 15, but also to learn new skills, from academic skills through to project management.

As with any increase in challenge, you will probably find that research projects test your personal skills and qualities to the limit. This means that preparing well for the task ahead, and keeping yourself going, over the longer term, are just as essential as academic ability.

1 Self-management skills

Managing yourself well is usually the key to completing a larger assignment well. This skill tends to be the one that is least understood or valued and, consequently, it is most easily overlooked. It is where the greatest risks often lie. ‘Self-management’ involves a range of skills, all addressed in Part 1, and related to:

(a) Developing the right mindset
(b) Maintaining high levels of motivation
(c) Nurturing your intellectual curiosity
(d) Managing time effectively.

2 Academic skills

For research assignments, the generic skills typical of these assignments include:

(a) being able to read widely and wisely, to help develop an expert knowledge base
(b) knowing when you have found the right topic
(c) working intelligently with existing theory, research methods and knowledge in the subject domain
(d) being able to synthesise ideas effectively
(e) being systematic in your approach
(f) thinking critically about your own work
(g) transforming ‘information’ into ‘knowledge’
(h) communicating your work in writing, using appropriate conventions
(i) discussing your work and answering questions, such as through a viva exam.

3 People skills

Although your assignment will involve a great deal of independent working, it also calls for good ‘people’ skills. In the first instance, this means developing a working relationship with your supervisor or tutor. Maintaining contact with peers can be harder but can be invaluable. Your project may also mean working directly with a range of participants or clients.

4 Task management skills

In the case of dissertations and extended research assignments, this means skills related to project management. That includes such skills as:

(a) understanding the brief and elaborating the task requirements
(b) project managing the assignment, forward planning so as to manage time, deadlines, resources and risks
(c) understanding the project both as a whole and in terms of its component parts.
What skills do you bring already?

- Conduct an audit of your skills for research-based assignments, using the checklist below.
- Rate your current skills on a scale of 0–5, where 0 = ‘none yet’ and 5 is ‘excellent’.
- Identify ✓ whether you need to develop further. If so, follow up the relevant chapter or pages.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self-management skills</th>
<th>Current skill level 0 – 5</th>
<th>Develop further?</th>
<th>Pages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Developing the right mindset</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>45; 49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Nurturing my own intellectual curiosity</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>46; 49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Envisaging myself as a researcher</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>47; 130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Maintaining high levels of motivation</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>45; 46; 48; 50; 55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Managing time effectively</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>51–6; 180–2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic skills</th>
<th>Current skill level 0 – 5</th>
<th>Develop further?</th>
<th>Pages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6 Understanding what is meant by ‘research’</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>19–30; 88–96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Awareness of different approaches to research</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>97–106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Reading background literature to develop my knowledge</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>77–86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Writing up a literature review</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>86–88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Selecting an appropriate topic as the subject of research</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>46; 67–76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 Formulating a suitable question title and/or hypothesis</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>75–6; 115–16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Drawing upon relevant theoretical frameworks</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>82–3; 86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 Selecting a research methodology</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>97–106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 Choosing research methods</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>119–68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 Gathering, selecting and organising material/data</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>119–68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 Thinking critically about material and findings</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>169–70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 Synthesising material and ideas</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>86; 169–74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 Structuring my material appropriately in writing</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>185–96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 Communicating my work well in writing</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>200–1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 Discussing my work verbally such as in a viva exam</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>203–8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People skills</td>
<td>Current skill level 0 – 5</td>
<td>Develop further? ✓</td>
<td>Pages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 Working effectively with my supervisor or tutor</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>57–60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22 Giving and receiving support from peers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>49–50; 55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23 Working with participants</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>129–36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24 Working with children/vulnerable groups as participants</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 Gathering data from surveys</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>151–6</td>
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<tr>
<td>26 Conducting interviews</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>157–62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27 Understanding the ethical issues</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>107–12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task management skills</th>
<th>Current skill level 0 – 5</th>
<th>Develop further? ✓</th>
<th>Pages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>28 Being able to pause and reflect constructively</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>46; 71–2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29 Clarifying the assignment brief</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>63–6</td>
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<tr>
<td>30 Project management skills</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>31–42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31 Understanding the overall process of such assignments</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>10–13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32 Maintaining a sense of the project as a whole</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>10–13; 21–3; 31–3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33 Understanding the component parts of the process</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34 Managing resources</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>37–8</td>
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<tr>
<td>35 Managing risks</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>39–42; 111</td>
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<tr>
<td>36 Forward planning and scheduling tasks to meet deadlines</td>
<td></td>
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<td>33–6</td>
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<td>37 Preparing a proposal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>113–18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38 Organising myself for writing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>179–84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39 Preparing for a viva exam</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>203–6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Other skills relevant to my project</th>
<th>Current skill level 0 – 5</th>
<th>Develop further? ✓</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
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