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Getting strategic

Why do a dissertation?

The end-of-course dissertation enables you to show that you can do the sort of research you have been learning about throughout your course of study. It will also demonstrate your personal and project management skills: your ability to

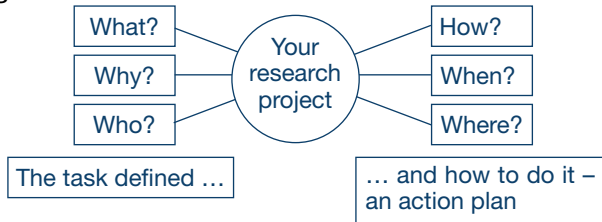
- ▶ work independently
- ▶ develop a mature and effective working relationship with your supervisor
- ▶ manage the project from start to finish – making practical arrangements and meeting deadlines
- ▶ make an in-depth study of a topic relevant to your future career plans.

Ask strategic questions

The six strategic questions¹ are really helpful in project planning and the answers will help to bring your dissertation into sharp focus.

¹ Used in other books in this series: *Getting critical* pp1–6, *Time management* pp39–44, *Reflective writing* pp16–20.

Read your course materials carefully, and check and recheck regularly online to make sure you have all the information available.



What exactly do you have to DO? The task defined

Try asking yourself the first three strategic questions, using the prompts below.

What exactly are you being asked to produce?	
How is it described? <i>Research project? Dissertation? Practical dissertation? Thesis? Research paper? Other?</i>	
How long/number of words? Are references and the 'preliminary pages' (title page, acknowledgements, abstract, contents etc.) included in the word count or not?	
What is the guidance about structure, chapters? How many? What goes in them? Approx. length of each?	
Are you given guidance about presentation? Eg font/size, margins, headings, cover sheets?	

Why are you doing a dissertation?	
<i>External reasons:</i> required for an Honours degree, attractive to an employer ...	
<i>Internal reasons:</i> a question you want to answer, a need you have identified, personal satisfaction, to excel in your studies ...	

Who are you writing for?	
Your primary reader will be a colleague of your supervisor: you have time to get to know what they are looking for.	
Other(s)? Eg work placement mentor. They could be the second reader/examiner in a work-related project. What do they want to see in it?	
Who will help you? What is the role of your supervisor? Who else can help? Librarian, lab technician, contacts?	

As you note down your answers to the first three strategic questions, your project will begin to take shape and become more manageable.

Getting it done – an action plan

Take a few more moments to work through the last three strategic questions – checking through the information you have. The ones below will help you clarify the practicalities.

When are your deadlines?	
When is the deadline for the final hand-in of the bound copy? The deadline for electronic submission?	
What are the interim deadlines for each phase/chapter? For registration and other forms to submit? Is there a set schedule or do you have to create your own?	
When are the key meetings and contacts with your supervisor/course team?	

Where will you do your research?	
Your research and reading? Your uni library? Any other?	
If you plan to do primary research, where will that be? What planning do you need to do for access, permissions, ethical approval? Other practicalities – cost, fares, time, room booking etc.?	

How will you do it?

This is what this book is about! And your supervisor will guide you.

You may be given a clear outline of the stages of your project in lectures, schedules and helpful notes. Equally, you may find you have surprisingly little detailed guidance. If, after you've worked through your course materials and had a go at answering the six strategic questions, you are still not clear, take control and ask.

Meanwhile, start thinking like a researcher ...

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