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## Staying on Top of Graduate Research Projects

Completing a research project can be one of the most daunting challenges a graduate student will face. Nonetheless, it can be turned into a rewarding growth experience. This fact sheet provides helpful tips for staying on top of a research project, with emphasis on the planning and writing process. For students beginning (or having difficulty finishing) a research project, this information provides a few important details to assist in making the task a little less overwhelming - and a little more enjoyable

### All Work and No Pay

Completing a research project can become equivalent to a full-time job, with no obvious immediate benefits, and can take several years to complete. A research project should command as much consideration and attention as an exam or assignment, and putting your research on the back burner can hinder your advancement in the field. Maintaining steady progress will help you avoid the unfortunate circumstance of having an incomplete research project after you have finished your coursework and internship.

Planning ahead helps minimize the financial burden and can assist you in staying on track to complete your research project. Getting your finances in order eases the strain of working with no pay. Frugal budgeting is often difficult, but can be achieved. In addition, students should consider securing research grants or fellowships to offset the financial burden. Securing funding demonstrates not only the importance and value of the research, but also the qualifications of the individual as a researcher.

### Plan of Action

A plan of action *can* help keep you on track. The most important thing about developing a plan of action is to remember to be *realistic*. Here are a few tips:

- Set realistic short-term and long-term goals. Setting goals and establishing deadlines can make the process less challenging and help ensure progress towards goal completion.
- Keep timelines visible and up to date. Daily planners and calendars work well for managing tasks and keeping track of progress.
- Before beginning the writing process, obtain a few recent theses/dissertations/research reviews related to your research area. Keep these on hand to help you with organizing and formatting your document.

- Work consistently, completing small chunks. Remember, smaller pieces are easier to accomplish. Writing five pages is less challenging than writing thirty pages.
- Write as you go. Do not wait until you have read everything to begin writing.
- Create annotated bibliographies to help summarize large quantities of reading material and guard against wasted time re-reading articles. Steady progress is the best strategy for a work-in progress.
- Take advantage of software programs that can help to organize references and facilitate searches of research literature.
- Maintain your progress by working with what you have rather than waiting for information that is not readily available. Waiting halts the writing process and is counterproductive.

## **Time Table**

In order to put your plan of action to work, you'll need to develop a time table. A time table helps you adhere to your goals and guides your daily progress. Remember, a research project is qualitatively different from other graduate school assignments. You may write an entire section of your literature review and then find that you should have taken a different perspective. You may begin collecting data and then find out that you did not consider an important variable. Remember to be flexible and patient, because research is a work in progress, no matter the stage of your career or experience. The following stage-based model can assist you in developing your own time line. Keep in mind that you may need to return to an earlier stage as your work develops.

### *Stage 1: Identify an area of research*

*Task time frame: Depends on the program, plan for at least one semester*

- Discuss your interests with your advisor(s).
- Conduct a literature review to familiarize yourself with the topic. Initially, abstracts provide information on previous research variables and populations.
- Begin brainstorming your own research questions, and search for specific resources (e.g., population specific journals and organizations) that provide you with specific information. Document your searches (by keyword, database searched) and begin a reference list.
- Although program requirements may vary, a strong reference list typically includes at least 50 sources that cover your topic in the most comprehensive manner possible. You are likely to find *the landmark* study among these articles that will guide the direction you take in your own study.

### *Stage 2: Develop research questions, hypotheses, and identify variables*

*Task time frame: Two to Four weeks*

- Identify specific research questions that you'd like to answer in your project, and validate these hypotheses with your advisor(s).
- Begin conceptualizing the variables in terms of independent/ dependent, fixed/ variable, and individual/ population.
- Begin documenting your own hypotheses, theoretical models, and methods.
- Begin conceptualizing ways to minimize the effects of confounding variables. Consult the research design literature to minimize threats to the validity of your study (e.g., Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002).

- Locate journal articles that are pertinent to your study and begin writing annotated bibliographies.
- Brainstorm various ways to outline your text.
- Ensure that your questions and methodology are based on the theoretical and research literature, and that your study will help to fill a gap or contribute to enhancing this area of research, with implications for practice.

*Stage 3: Develop an outline with references*

*Task time frame: Two weeks*

- Organize your ideas (e.g., research variables, populations of interest, hypotheses) in an outline format.
- Support your plan of action with references that you have gathered from data base searches [e.g., Relationship between empathy and well-being (Smith, 2005)].
- List references in your outline. This strategy will remind you of the sources you intend on referencing as you write. You can obtain additional information from your annotated bibliographies.

*Stage 4: Writing the text (occurs before, during, and after data collection)*

*Task time frame: Depends on the individual – be realistic.*

- Begin to build upon what you have documented in the initial stages of your research project.
- Identify your program's requirements for formatting, length, and function of your research project document. Masters theses and doctoral dissertations typically have different requirements than other research projects.
- Review the style guidelines from the Graduate School and, if possible, review other manuscripts from your program.
- Utilize your outline and annotated bibliographies to guide the organization of your text. The APA Style manual provides an outline for sections in dissertations and theses (e.g., *Introduction, Methods* sections). Follow APA organization and style from the onset, instead of having to worry about formatting the final draft.
- One effective strategy is to write five to ten pages of a section at a time.

*Stage 5: Continuous revising and reviewing*

*Task time frame: Depends on the individual and their advisor*

- Schedule regular meetings with your advisor(s). Meetings can serve as deadlines for your writing goals and provide opportunities to receive helpful feedback.
- Remember that your research project, as well as your outline, is a work in progress. The important thing is to stay on track.
- Consult with your advisor(s) through all stages of your project. Enlist input regarding timelines and expected date of completion.
- Try to view obstacles along the way as part of the process. This requires problem solving or seeking alternative solutions, rather than becoming frustrated or feeling stuck. A positive attitude helps you to continue to move forward.

## **Time Management**

We all struggle with time management. Below are a few tips for increasing on-task behavior and decreasing wasted time.

- Be aware of your style in time management. Let your advisor(s) know if you work better with structure and following a set schedule and fixed deadlines.
- Schedule time blocks for working on specific tasks related to your project. Identify those times when you are most productive and get to work.
- Take breaks. Most students are more productive when they work in structured time frames with small breaks in between. Time-out allows you to incubate your thoughts and become more creative in the process.
- Make sure that you get an adequate amount of sleep, and take breaks for meals. Remember that you need to take care of yourself in order to keep a clear head and maintain focus when working. Exercise and relaxation techniques are also helpful in enhancing your alertness and energy level.
- Most importantly, stick to your plan of action, with flexibility as needed. Schedules may change, but do not use modifications as an excuse to get off track.

## **Additional Resources**

Utilize the best resources around: people.

- Advisors are a great source of knowledge. They have experience with students struggling to complete their theses, dissertations, and research projects. Ask for assistance or advice on how to begin or stay on track – and do this sooner rather than later. The earlier that your advisor is aware of any potential problems, the faster you can get back on track.
- Start a buddy system. Friends will help keep you on schedule. They can provide motivation, support, and feedback. Friends can also review drafts.
- Talk to other students in your program. Chances are that most students are also having difficulty with at least one aspect of completing a research project. Sharing tips on staying motivated will provide new perspectives for tackling challenging components of your work.

## **It's All About Me**

When working on your research project, it may seem like the work is never ending. It is important to take care of yourself and reward yourself for productive progress along the way. Specifically, scheduling “you time” provides an outlet for frustration and helps keep you healthy and happy. Having something to look forward to serves as a great motivator and encourages you to meet your pre-set goals. It is just as important to keep your time commitments to *yourself* as it is to maintain progress on your writing goals. Visualize a successful ending and the light at the end of the tunnel.

## **The Payoff**

Remember that you are not alone and that many students have been through the same struggles and challenges. The reality is that while most students finish their theses and dissertations, some do not. These students are left with no degree and limited career opportunities. By persevering and making the most of your resources, you will complete your research project. In the end, you will look back and think it was all worth it.

## **Suggested References**

American Psychological Association (2001). *Publication manual of the American Psychological Association*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. Washington, DC: Author.

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