3. Getting Started

How to do your Social Research Project or Dissertation
Tom Clark, Liam Foster, and Alan Bryman

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW?

- Planning your project
  - First steps of planning
  - Structure
  - Managing your time
  - Managing yourself
- Working with your supervisor
- Expecting the unexpected
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Introduction

We understand that you want to get on with doing your research, but carefully planning your dissertation or project is crucial to its success. As such, this is potentially the most important chapter in the whole book! It will examine how to negotiate the workload of the research process, how to cope with unexpected problems, and how you can best use your supervisor to support you through this process. If you can start your dissertation with a clear plan, and an agreement about your working relationship with your supervisor, it will limit the problems you might encounter further down the line and give you the best chance to fulfil your potential.

Planning Your Project

A dissertation is a significant piece of investigative work. It requires the use of many basic skills. These include analytical and critical thinking, but also the ability to organize and plan your time. In many ways, you will prepare for your dissertation using skills you have developed when planning to write other assignments. However, there are key differences between dissertation research and other assignments, not least the amount of time you will spend on it. Dissertations require tenacity, hard work, and careful planning. While you may be good at writing short essays the night before they are due, this is not going to happen with the dissertation. Writing a dissertation is a complex process, which begins with the initial idea and continues with the research design, ethics approval process, data collection, analysis and write-up. All of these components require careful planning and execution. You will also need to make sure you are suitably prepared to deal with any obstacles that might come your way during the process. While we wouldn’t go as far as to say ‘fail to prepare, prepare to fail’, failure to plan properly is likely to result in problems further on in the research. (p. 27)

FINDING YOUR WAY 3.1

Having a well-thought-out plan is integral to undertaking a successful research project. Without one, it is easy to lose focus, come up against unexpected changes, and struggle with time management.
First steps of planning

When you do a dissertation, the process begins long before you actually start collecting data—and the preliminary stages of planning are certainly just as important in enabling your project to run smoothly. There are a number of things you should do when planning your dissertation:

1. Identify your topic area and a potential title
2. Make sure your aims are achievable
3. Think about what kind of theoretical approach and methods to employ
4. Make sure your aims are ethically suitable
5. Familiarize yourself with dissertation guidelines and requirements, including the format that your dissertation should take

Firstly, you will need to identify your research interests. We’re going to discuss how to develop a research idea more fully in Chapter 4, but it’s worth highlighting here that it is often a good idea to make sure the topic you choose is something you find interesting, as you are going to spend a considerable amount of time researching it. You’ll also need to narrow down this interest so that it is manageable. This can be a challenging process. We have seen many students come to us with initial ideas that are so broad they were more like three or four dissertations! Let us suppose, for example, that you were initially interested in the expansion of the use of social media across the western world, which groups were not using social media as frequently (for example, older people) and why, as well as types of training to encourage social media use. This kind of focus would need narrowing substantially because it is far too broad in scope. You would be much better off looking at a local initiative that was designed to teach older people how to use social media. You could then use semi-structured interviews to explore some of the barriers older people face in using social media and how they might be overcome. Familiarizing yourself with the literature in relation to the topic area (see Chapter 6) is crucial in both helping you to see what has already been written about an area, and in defining your scope. It will help you to develop your research ideas and position your research. This knowledge provides you with a platform to identify a research gap, and to introduce the aims and objectives of your project.

I WISH I’D KNOWN ... THE IMPORTANCE OF CHOOSING A TOPIC OF INTEREST 3.1

The dissertation can be a much more enjoyable and rewarding process if it is based on a topic of interest that you can explore in detail.
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“Choose a topic that you are passionate about and that you want to understand more about. I still follow this advice in my own research. If I wasn’t interested in my topic I wouldn’t be able to sustain a critical interest in it.”

— Dr Anna Tarrant, Reader in Sociology, University of Lincoln

WORKING WITH YOUR SUPERVISOR 3.1

Your supervisor should be a valuable resource when developing and focusing your dissertation idea. They will be able to advise you whether your dissertation topic is likely to be too broad or too narrow in focus. They can assist in relation to whether it is likely to be achievable.

“Mistakes most commonly arise at the topic selection stage. Students choose a theme that turns out to be too broad, or a research question that proves impossible to answer. They are reluctant to narrow down their ideas, and become increasingly frustrated. The nature of the research process means that it can be difficult to pull students back from early mistakes. That makes the topic development stage at the outset absolutely critical to effective student performance.”

— Dr Patrick Diamond, Senior Lecturer in British Politics and Public Policy, Queen Mary, University of London

To formulate the specific research aims and objectives, firstly you need to have a good idea of what you want to find out and how you are going to do it. Outlining a clear idea of what you want to achieve will play a valuable role in keeping you on course. The process of formulating a rationale for research is discussed in detail in Chapter 4, and the process of writing a research proposal is the focus of Chapter 9.

Secondly, when starting to outline your research, you need to think about whether your project is achievable. You need to find out what sorts of things are typical for a dissertation in your department, and how your research idea compares. This includes the number of people you might need to interview or survey, the methods of data collection and analysis, as well as more practical concerns around cost.
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I WISH I’D KNOWN ... TO LOOK AT AN EXAMPLE DISSERTATION 3.2

Many universities will provide examples of dissertations, which can provide a good indication regarding these types of expectations.

(p. 29)  “Read examples of past good dissertations and journal papers reporting empirical research—both will give you a good guide for what you are trying to achieve in your dissertation. Looking at how other people have presented and reported their research is definitely something I still find useful!”

— Dr Kate Burningham, Reader in Sociology of the Environment, University of Surrey

Making sure your dissertation is achievable also means finding a balance between originality, ambition, and the expectations around an undergraduate dissertation or research project. This is the pinnacle of your degree so it is important that you are proud of your work at the end of it! However, speaking to your supervisor and looking at past dissertations will help you manage your expectations, and avoid taking on a project that reaches beyond what is expected of you. It will also help you identify any issues that might impede you in carrying out your intended research, and the likelihood of you being able to navigate them.

Thirdly, you need to think about the theoretical approach and method(s) to employ. Try to consider how the methods you want to use will help to address the aim(s) and objectives of the research. Draw on your existing knowledge of research methods to do this. Think about what kinds of methods you enjoy using and what types of methods will be most effective in addressing your aims. Be aware that you may need to undertake additional training to improve your knowledge of a particular method, or read about it in more depth. Also think about issues around sampling and access when planning your research. What might be an appropriate sample and how can they be accessed? Without careful consideration of these issues, you are likely to encounter problems later on (see Chapter 10). Theoretical considerations should also not simply be an ‘add on’ to your dissertation. Think about what kind of theoretical approach is suitable for your research, if this is required in your discipline, and how it may influence the methods you use.

Fourthly, you will also need to ensure that the project is suitable in terms of ethics. Ask yourself whether your project is likely to cause any harm to the participants. Is informed consent required, and will your participants be in a position to give it? Can you make sure that anonymity and confidentiality are maintained? You will find a detailed discussion of
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ethical issues in Chapter 8, but we’d also again advise you to look through previous dissertations and see the types of projects that were completed. This will give you an idea of the types of things that are ethically plausible for a dissertation.

Fifthly, another good place to start when planning a research project or dissertation is with the guidance you are provided by your university or college. There may be, for instance, particular requirements regarding the structure of the project, the word count, and rules regarding contact with your supervisor. You don’t want to end up wasting time doing research that fails to satisfy the requirements set out by your institution. If you are only allowed to see your supervisor on four occasions for half an hour during the process of writing your dissertation, then you don’t want to ask questions about things that are covered in the guidance, or use up all these contact points at the beginning of your project. Our advice in relation to the guidance is simple: follow the requirements you are given in your handbook.

Some of the key requirements that are likely to be in the guidance include:

- **The deadline**—Like other assignments, your dissertation will have a deadline. This is likely to seem a long way off when you start, but it will soon begin to appear on the horizon. If you need an extension, you will also need to familiarize yourself with the procedures and ensure that you submit any request on time.

- **Word limit**—While the word limit will differ depending on where you are doing your dissertation, it needs to be adhered to. Though it is often difficult to remove words that you have lovingly crafted, cutting them is better than being penalized for failing to follow the rules. It is also worth noting that if you are a long way under the limit, you may be more likely to be criticized for leaving something crucial out of the dissertation.

- **Structure**—Look for information regarding the structure of the dissertation that you need to follow. This often differs between institutions, but is generally provided in the handbook. This will help you to get a sense of what the final dissertation will look like and can assist you in thinking about the amount of words (roughly) you expect to see making up each section. Your supervisor can help you think about this process.

- **Ethics approval**—Without ethics approval you are unlikely to be allowed to undertake empirical research. Each university has its own ethical review process, and you need to make sure you follow these processes.

- **The role of the supervisor**—The handbook often provides guidance about what you can expect from your supervisor, and what your roles and responsibilities are in this relationship. This may include information about what work your supervisor can look at. For instance,
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there may be a limit to how much of your dissertation your supervisor can look at prior to marking it. If there is a limit, then you need to be aware of it. This will enable you to consult with them about what work is most useful to obtain feedback on.

- **Marking criteria**—The handbook may also include some information about what your dissertation will be assessed on. The marking criteria act as a guide for examiners to help them make judgements about the quality of the work. It will often refer to things like appropriate use and understanding of methods, strength of the argument, use of evidence, and originality. When writing your dissertation, it is a good idea to refer back to this to make sure you are fulfilling these requirements. 

- **Format**—All universities have different requirements about how the dissertation should be presented. This will include the type and size of font, the style of referencing, and instructions regarding binding. Again, it is important that you familiarize yourself with these requirements as it can help you avoid having to make unnecessary changes.

### FINDING YOUR WAY 3.2

In addition to providing a maximum word count, guidance is likely to include information as to what is included in the word count. Familiarizing yourself with this is really useful in your planning. For instance, an appendix doesn’t always count in the word count and can be a useful place for additional sources, such as information and informed consent sheets and the interview questions used. Also check to see whether your footnotes and bibliography are included in your word count.

### Structure

In order to plan your project, you will need a good understanding of what a dissertation looks like, and institutions will usually have specific requirements regarding structure. Therefore, it is useful to have an idea of a typical structure when planning your dissertation and to think about the time allocated to each task.

Although the structure can differ, it is common for a dissertation to be structured in the following manner:

- **A title page**—This includes (at a minimum) the title of your project and your name (or registration number).
- **A contents page**—This contains (at a minimum) a list of chapters and page numbers.
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• **Introduction**—A section providing an overview of your project. It explains your interest in the topic and sets out the structure of the dissertation.

• **Literature review chapter(s)**—Your literature review sets out the existing work in this area and what has previously been identified, as well as highlighting any gaps in the literature.

• **Methodology**—This includes a discussion of the methods chosen and the theory behind them, as well as justification for your decisions. Drawing on methods literature throughout, this section also discusses the sample and ethics. There is more to a dissertation than the communication of the results of your research. It is just as important to show the examiners that the methods underpinning your research are appropriate. (p. 32)

• **Findings chapter(s)**—Both a description of the data and the presentation of it. Often this chapter is combined with the following one, as it can be difficult to separate your findings from the analysis.

• **Analysis/discussion**—This contextualizes the findings. It brings the different elements of the dissertation together, linking the research questions to the findings, building on the existing literature in the process.

• **Conclusions**—This draws your conclusions together, stating clearly what the work has identified and how the research questions were addressed. It is also likely to reflect on possible areas for future research.

Having an idea of this structure will help you to get a sense of what the final dissertation may look like, and thinking about your dissertation in this manner—with separate but interrelated chapters—can make doing your dissertation a less daunting and more manageable prospect.

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**I WISH I’D KNOWN ... TO BREAK THE DISSERTATION INTO MANAGEABLE CHUNKS 3.3**

Thinking about your dissertation structure as a series of discrete, but interconnected tasks can make the business of actually doing it much less imposing. By breaking up the writing, for example, it can feel more like a collection of shorter essays, similar to those you have previously written, which link together to make a coherent whole. This can be helpful when planning your dissertation too, where you can break the process up into smaller, more manageable chunks.

“I wish I’d been told to think of a dissertation as the equivalent in content to three or four related essays linking to a similar..."
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Managing your time

One of the challenges of completing a good dissertation is that while the long-ranging nature of the deadline creates a sense of dread, it often fails to create an immediate feeling of urgency—until it is almost upon you, that is! Often, the main reason why some students do not fulfil their potential in their dissertation project is a lack of planning, rather than a lack of intellect or ability. So, when you are beginning to think about your research project, it is important to firstly think realistically about when you work best; whether you feel at your most productive in the morning, afternoon, or sometimes even later at night. Ask yourself what sort of tasks should be planned for those more productive time slots. Then, think about what you can do with the time that is available to you before your submission date. It is common for research projects to take longer than expected, and it is possible to get carried away with your research and find out later that you are running out of time. It is all too easy to do lots of reading for the literature review at the beginning, and then delay data collection. At some stage, a decision has to be made to stop reading and start writing. Forcing yourself to move on is important and a well-developed plan can be helpful in this.

A timetable is a very useful tool for keeping you focused on your dissertation and the different elements of it that you will be required to complete. If you can create a schedule that articulates the time needed for each part of your dissertation, it makes it easier to ensure you have space to complete each task.

I WISH I'D KNOWN ... TO FACTOR IN OTHER ASSIGNMENTS WHEN DEVELOPING A TIMETABLE

If you have other university assignments to complete while doing your dissertation it is useful to think about their hand-in dates and factor them into your dissertation planning.

“I wish I had known the real practicalities of balancing my dissertation with my coursework demands.”
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To create a timeline, identify the start and finish dates of the dissertation process, and then begin to consider the units of time that you will use to allocate sections of work. For instance, you could use standard months or weeks, but you might also want to base it around weeks in the university calendar. Once you are happy with this, you then need to identify the major aspects of your research and the time they will take. This should include leaving plenty of time to check through your dissertation, as well as more practical tasks like checking references. Factor in things like waiting for questionnaires to be returned—and probably sending out reminders—or negotiating access with participants. Don’t forget to allow plenty of time for writing and getting your drafts of work checked by your supervisor. Also always build in some room for contingency.

FINDING YOUR WAY 3.3

Remember to include any holiday periods in your timeline. These are important to you too as they will refresh and revitalize you, helping you to complete your dissertation!

Many institutions require you to get your dissertation professionally bound. You need to make sure that you factor in time to do this; otherwise you could end up missing the deadline. Remember, many other students will be looking to have their dissertations bound at around the same time, so the binders are likely to be fairly busy at that time of year.

I WISH I’D KNOWN ... TO MAKE AN ACHIEVABLE TIMETABLE 3.5

Once you have sketched out your timetable, look to see if it is realistic. Be honest with yourself about your milestones and whether they appear feasible. Your supervisor should also be able to give you guidance on whether your plans are realistic.

“I wish I’d known how important it was to make an achievable timetable and stick to it.”

— David Coningsby, Student, Geography, University of Chester
While it is better to try and stick to your plan, it does not have to be definitive. You may need to revise the timetable as you go along, and every researcher comes up against unexpected problems and pitfalls at some point. Expect some uneven progress and uneven patterns of success. It may be that feedback from your dissertation supervisor means that you need to spend more time focusing on a particular chapter of your dissertation. The important thing is that you are still aware of what needs to be completed and how much time you have left. You don’t want to let things drift and then have a last-minute rush.

You may find it helpful to look at the example of a sensible and realistic time plan detailed in Figure 3.1. This is called a **Gantt chart**. This example involves the use of interviews, and you can see that some tasks overlap on the timeline. This means that you could begin transcribing while you’re still collecting data. You may find it helpful to study this timetable and adapt it to your own research plans, in discussion with your supervisor.

![Figure 3.1](image)

**Example dissertation timetable**

There are innovative options for creating timelines and tracking progress using software that you may wish to consider using when creating a plan. There are, for example, a number of online calendar apps that can be used to map out your dissertation timeline. Many can be connected to your email so that reminders are automatically sent to you.
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Managing yourself

Of course, you may be good at drawing up a comprehensive plan for your research, but it is important to remember that you then have to make it work. So it is worth taking some time to think about how you like to work, and the types of working environment that are most productive for you. Remember that there is often a difference between where we like to work and where we are most productive. Are you able to work in the university library, or do you find that you are easily distracted by other people around you? Are you able to work more effectively at home when nobody is around?

One of the most difficult things about your dissertation is getting started, and there are a million and one reasons why you might put it off. So, you need to develop strategies to self-motivate. Developing and sticking to a timetable is one way of ensuring that you get started. You can also show this to your dissertation supervisor and use it to agree some dates, which fit with your plan, for producing pieces of work. It is also no use trying to read everything about your topic area and then not writing anything down. You need to be systematic in how you search for literature (see Chapter 5) and what literature to include in your dissertation (Chapter 6). Reading endless amounts of literature can be one way of putting off getting started.

Struggling to get started—or ‘writer’s block’—is often the result of wanting your writing to be perfect, especially when you are handing your research to expert academics. You may be afraid your work won’t measure up to your supervisor’s expectations. These feelings are natural and normal. Remember that your supervisor is there to help, and in the first instance you need to ‘get it written’, not necessarily ‘get it right’. Drafting your writing, as we show in Chapter 17, is an important part of the research process.

It is very easy to procrastinate about different elements of your dissertation. While some procrastination is normal, you are likely to risk getting behind in your study timetable. Being proactive about making decisions will help your progress, and seeking advice from your dissertation supervisor is also likely to be important because they might be able to help you develop more effective writing strategies. Indeed, many writers compound their problems by employing weak writing strategies. Fortunately, there are a number of other things you can do to help you get going:

- Try free-writing, which involves writing down anything that comes into your mind regarding the topic for 10–15 minutes. Don’t worry about spelling mistakes and full sentences—just get it written. You can then begin to work with what you have produced. While personal preferences are a factor, we find it useful to do this on a word processor as it is much easier to keep and edit at a later date.
• Break up study time into blocks of different lengths, and set yourself challenges or targets within each block. You could also set yourself targets in terms of the number of tasks you achieve in a day or a week.

• Be clear about your boundaries, so when you are working, ensure that you are indeed working. Make sure people understand this and don’t interrupt you unless absolutely necessary.

• Consider using rewards or treats—perhaps watching your favourite TV series with a takeaway—but make sure you have earned it! Try to be disciplined with this. If you have allowed yourself ten minutes to go for a walk, don’t then get distracted by going shopping for an hour. This certainly won’t help your progress.

• It is important to monitor distractions. So take some time to think about how long you spend on things that distract you from your work, and then consider how long it then takes you to settle down to work following them. It can often be quite a lot of time that you didn’t realize you were wasting! But, now you’ve identified what distracts you, and how much time it takes to negotiate these things, you should be able to recognize when you are going into ‘distraction mode’ and reverse the process.

• Think about how you are organizing the notes you make. For instance, are you using headings so you can find things? Are you repeating information? You need to work efficiently—and that includes being able to locate material easily. (p. 37)

• While we all like to have extended periods of time to get stuck into our work, sometimes that is simply not possible. Try to identify where these shorter periods of opportunity occur during your working week, and plan to do less arduous tasks then. For instance, some people like to timetable ‘email activity’ toward the end of the day when they have less creative energy. This means they can ignore the irregular distraction of checking their email throughout the day and deal with it all in one ‘timetabled’ event. We also have other colleagues who never schedule meetings in the morning, and others who use their commute to work as an opportunity to read.

• You may find it helpful to keep a research diary to record the practical steps that you went through during your dissertation. It will be much easier to write up a methodology chapter if you have something like this to remind you of what you did, when, and how.

• Think about your reference management strategy and what works for you. You could save valuable time at the end of your dissertation by writing down references properly when making notes. You might also choose to use reference management software to help keep track of important work in the field.

• It is important to recognize that your mood or energy levels can affect your progress at various times throughout the dissertation. There may be times when you need to give yourself a break or focus on dissertation tasks that you may find easier. For instance, if you are
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If you are struggling to be in the right frame of mind for writing a difficult aspect of your dissertation, you may find it easier to work on an element of the dissertation you find more straightforward and leave the more challenging component to another day. This is better than not achieving anything, and is perfectly acceptable. However, at the same time, don’t put off the difficult part indefinitely!

I WISH I’D KNOWN ... HOW TO DEVELOP WRITING STRATEGIES 3.6

Developing realistic writing strategies from the start will ultimately help you to complete your dissertation. This involves developing personal writing goals.

“I wish I’d known to set myself smaller, achievable goals as I progressed with my dissertation so it wasn’t all down to the last days of writing. A goal could be to read three journal articles today and write down three main points for each, something which is achievable.”

— Sophie Worrall, Student, Politics and International Studies, University of Warwick

“I wish I’d known to make sure I have set times to work on the dissertation every day.”

— Junayna Al-Sheibany, Student, Politics and International Studies, University of Kent (p. 38)

Working with Your Supervisor

At the start of the dissertation process, many departments will allocate you to an academic member of staff who will act as a guide through the dissertation process. This is your supervisor and they will be one of many ‘resources’ you can use to make your project more successful. They are there to provide practical advice and suggestions, give feedback on your work, and offer general support and encouragement. Supervisors can also act as a calming influence if needed.

WORKING WITH YOUR SUPERVISOR 3.2
Effective use of dissertation supervision will enhance your prospects of successfully completing your dissertation.

“Every student can and will succeed as long as they are willing to invest the required time and effort—and that also means using the support and resources available to them, including the help of supervisors and lecturers.”

— Dr Ingrid A. Medby, Senior Lecturer in Political Geography, Oxford Brookes University

Working with your supervisor is likely to be very different to your experience of working on other modules, and it is important that the process of being supervised is a positive one. Indeed, it is important for both staff and students to develop strategies to ensure the relationship is as productive as it can be. In order to do this, you need to understand what your supervisor is, and isn’t, there to do.

FINDING YOUR WAY 3.5

Supervisors are normally assigned students who have chosen a topic area they are familiar with. However, if too many students want to do the same topic area for one supervisor to supervise them all, or if someone changes their topic, a non-specialist supervisor may be assigned to some students. Fortunately, this is unlikely to impact on the quality of support you receive. Not only do social scientists have to specialize in many areas—and therefore have wide-ranging knowledge—their primary role is to oversee the process of the dissertation, and all should have relevant experience in managing research projects. It can also be worth consulting other academic staff on ideas for your topic, such as key reading. But remember that they are likely to be busy and can sometimes take a while to respond. They are more likely to be receptive if they think you are well prepared and genuinely interested in the topic rather than trying to take shortcuts.

In the first instance, you will be able to get a feel for the nature of the relationship by reading the guidance your institution provides about expectations placed on both students and supervisors. Then, once you meet your supervisor for the first time, you will be able to establish the ‘ground rules’ of the supervision process. This should include a discussion about how you work best, and how this may impact on the timing and structure of supervision meetings. It is worth noting that students often have very different expectations and needs in relation to
the role of their supervisors, meaning that communication is vital in clarifying the nature of the relationship from the outset.

You also need to discuss typical expectations regarding contact arrangements, such as when you will be expected to complete work, as well as the nature of the feedback you will receive. This will ensure that you are working to an agreed plan with specific targets. When students attend meetings, many supervisors will expect them to bring something to discuss. So make sure you have a list of items that you can take into the meeting. This could take the form of general ideas or specific written work. The sessions should conform to the departmental guidelines in terms of frequency and you may find it useful to take notes about the event to provide a clear record of what was agreed.

WORKING WITH YOUR SUPERVISOR 3.3

Preparing for each supervision meeting will ensure you get the most out of the sessions. It can also help you develop other transferable skills.

“Make sure you plan for each meeting—have a rough agenda which you follow so that you get the most from your supervisor. This is a chance to practise your leadership and management skills.”

— Dr Ruth Penfold-Mounce, Senior Lecturer in Criminology, University of York

“When you meet with your supervisor, make sure you come prepared, for example bring a list of questions and use that to help guide the discussion. This book could provide a useful starting point for thinking about what you need to know or find out from them.”

— Dr Katharine A. M. Wright, Lecturer in International Politics, Newcastle University

There are a number of good practices that supervisors and students should adhere to in order for the supervision process to operate effectively—these are set out in Working with your supervisor 3.4.
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Supervisors should ...

- inform students of their rights and responsibilities
- clarify what they expect from their students
- undertake necessary training
- foster a relationship of trust with their supervisees
- make sure (wherever possible) interruptions don’t occur during meetings (p. 40)
- give students sufficient time in meetings (in accordance with any guidelines)
- schedule regular meetings, with clear expectations
- review students’ progress regularly
- offer constructive criticism

Students should ...

- always prepare sufficiently for meetings
- read the student handbook
- recognize their responsibilities in the supervision relationship
- foster a relationship of trust with their supervisor
- schedule regular meetings, with clear expectations
- attend regular sessions and come prepared for these sessions
- attempt to complete set work and work to agreed deadlines
- make notes on the meetings (where appropriate)
- be honest about progress

If you have any uncertainty regarding these processes, you should ask your supervisor.

Some supervision sessions may also take the form of group meetings. This sort of supervision is particularly useful for providing more general advice on a range of issues, such as literature searching techniques, writing up, etc. There is also some benefit in hearing about issues raised by other people, that you may not have thought about, as well as the responses to these issues. However, remember that all dissertations are different and not all the concerns that other students identify will apply to your research. Dissertations also often progress at different speeds, so comparing and contrasting ‘where you’re at’ is not always helpful.

I WISH I’D KNOWN ... NOT TO WORRY ABOUT WHAT OTHER PEOPLE ARE DOING 3.7
You can also email your supervisor to make quick queries, but make sure you have thought carefully about your question first. For instance, don’t email them about the hand-in deadline if this information is already available to you in the handbook. This is unlikely to endear you to them, given their already busy schedule. Also, be realistic in your expectations regarding their response time. Emails can avoid the problem of having to wait for a meeting, but there are also limitations, such as the time needed to write a response. For more substantive issues it is often better to arrange a meeting.

Don’t forget it is not your supervisor’s job to choose your topic (something some students seem to expect!). It is your decision what topic to choose, while taking on board guidance from your supervisor.

When you are in a position to do so, and you have the opportunity, try to get some feedback on your written work. But make sure that you leave your supervisor sufficient time to read your work in advance of meetings. Don’t send them something on the morning of the meeting and expect to have immediate feedback. The more time you can give your supervisor the more likely they are to be able to make thorough comments. From a supervisor’s perspective, there is nothing more frustrating than being sent work to read over the weekend for a Monday morning meeting. Be fair with your expectations.

“Don’t focus too much on what other people are doing. I often got disheartened by hearing that other people were way ahead of me, which was silly as it was not productive and only hindered me in getting on with my work.”

— Vilde Bye Dale, Student, Modern History and Politics, University of Essex

“Some students struggle with taking responsibility for their project. They can be inclined to blame their supervisor and the institution for their lack of progress. It’s helpful to remember that the academic credit is awarded on the basis that it is an independent project.”

— Dr Siobhan McAndrew, Lecturer in Sociology with Quantitative Methods, University of Bristol
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WORKING WITH YOUR SUPERVISOR 3.6

It is very important to keep appointments. You would be amazed how many students arrange meetings and then don’t turn up, without letting their supervisor know. You wouldn’t do it elsewhere, such as at work, so why do it at university? It is also an easy way to frustrate your supervisor.

“Students will often communicate less with their supervisor in the middle of the project—consistent attendance at meetings and responses to communication is vital throughout the research process.”

— Dr Ashley Dodsworth, Lecturer in Politics, University of Bristol

It can sometimes feel quite scary handing work to your supervisor, but you are not going to get the value of their feedback if you don’t show them anything—and your work might be much better than you think. And don’t worry too much if they make critical comments: these are intended to be constructive and to provide you with helpful suggestions that will help you improve your work. Feedback should also be directed toward positive aspects of your work, as well as where you might improve.

It is certainly not a personal attack against you. It is also a lot better to have feedback early in the process, rather than waiting until it is too late to do anything about it.

WORKING WITH YOUR SUPERVISOR 3.7

“I think it is better to ask your supervisor for guidance you think you may need, rather than spend time struggling to try and do it on your own. Supervisors are there to help, and they are used to working with students just like you—let them! It’s easy to get Imposter Syndrome, but everyone feels like that at some point. Don’t suffer because you are afraid to ask for help!”

— Ashley Taylor, Student, Politics and International Relations, University of Limerick

It is also your decision as to what you take on board in relation to your supervisor’s comments. It can be OK if you feel that the advice is unwarranted, but you will need to take responsibility for this decision,
and it may be worthwhile to revisit the issue with them before making a choice about the direction to take. Remember that your supervisor could be involved in marking the dissertation, so you may want to take this into account in your decision-making.

Dissertation study requires a high level of independence and often feels like a solitary pursuit. Your supervisor is not there to spoon-feed or micromanage you. They should, however, be providing you with support and guidance while seeing you regularly. You should also not keep putting off meeting with your supervisor if you have not done the required work. Instead, discuss reasons for this with them. It is not their job to chase you regarding your dissertation, and it is your responsibility to organize meetings. While they are not your counsellor, they do need to know about any issues affecting your well-being and ability to complete your dissertation. For instance, can deadlines be restructured to more accurately reflect your ability to meet them? Can they advise you in relation to an extension? Don’t expect them to guess that you have issues about something or need additional advice or support.

“I think it took me a couple of sessions to understand that I cannot expect my supervisor to give me the right answers to my questions and my confusions, but rather to just provide me with the guidance to identify issues and find the answers myself.”

— Stefania Irina Ionescu, Student, Politics and International Studies, University of Warwick

Unfortunately, sometimes the student–supervisor relationship does break down. In the case that you do not receive the kind of supervision that you expected and agreed on, then there should be processes in place for you to raise this as a point of issue. In the first instance you could discuss these matters with your supervisor. However, if you do not feel comfortable doing this, look for the named contact in your handbook. This will probably be the module convenor. They should be able to offer you further advice. You could also speak to your personal tutor or programme manager. There may also be a dedicated student support office that you could visit.
The importance of effective communication in maintaining a good supervision relationship can be seen in this hypothetical example of notes made at a meeting by a student and a supervisor. You should be able to see their different perspectives on the supervision process. Asking your supervisor about the expectations regarding supervision can help avoid these complications.

**Student Meeting Notes (John Sheridan)**

_I finally got to see Professor Waddle today; she is a busy woman! The phone didn't stop ringing during the meeting and she seemed to be having really important conversations about her research. Unfortunately, this meant I didn’t have much time to talk about what I was doing. I wish she had a bit more time for me. I suppose I am only a student and I know she has lots of important people to see before she goes away. I really did hope she was going to explain what she wanted from my literature review. She seems to think it’s ‘best to get on with it’, but I’m not really sure what that means in practice, or how to do it. Now I feel like I’ve missed the opportunity to ask her about it. I don’t want her to think I’m stupid!_

_She also wants me to start looking at the data sets after Christmas, but I don’t really understand what she’s talking about most of the time. When I do start looking at them I feel like I’ll need a lot of help as I know that I’m not that great at stats. Unfortunately, she said she’s going away for a month after Christmas, so I am not sure what I will do. I’m dreading it, to be honest._

_I’ve also overheard other students talking. They’ve already started their data collection and I feel like I’m falling behind already. It’s going to get a lot worse after Christmas. I just seem to have a pile of notes. It’s not like I haven’t been working. In fact, I’ve read lots and lots. But the more I read the less I know what to write. There is so much research out there! What should I focus on?_

_Professor Waddle is nice, but it’s rather intimidating speaking to her about my own research. I’m even more scared of sending her something! I just seem to lose my tongue in supervision and think of lots of questions afterwards. At least she gave me a very good reference for that job I got in the library. However, I’m finding that doing all these night shifts makes me rather tired and I keep getting horrible headaches. Maybe I am not cut out to be able to do a dissertation. I knew I would find it tough, but not this tough._  

**Supervisor Meeting Notes (Professor Waddle)**

_John seems to be getting on fine with his dissertation, although he seems a little reluctant to hand me his work. I have been very busy recently so when he does make an appointment to see me, I wish he would make the best use of my time. I think that it’s been two and a half months since our last meeting. I was under the impression that_
3. Getting Started

the literature review was nearly done and he would have sent it for this supervision meeting. Never mind, it must be pretty much done. He also needs to start his empirical research soon as I don’t want him to get behind. John has a tendency to wander off topic quite a bit, and he seemed more comfortable talking about my research. Of course, I think my results are fascinating, but I can’t see why he’s so interested. I’m glad he’s interested, but I would have liked to know more about his progress. I think he knows what he is doing though.

Unfortunately, there were a couple of phone call interruptions during the supervision session which reduced our time a little, but John didn’t seem to mind. On another note, I did a reference for John and I was pleased to hear he got the job in the library. I think he was probably struggling a bit financially and I am sure the money will come in handy with Christmas coming up. I am away for a month after Christmas and I hope John sends me his literature review before I go away. I could do with it soon as I have lots to do before then. And by the time I get back he should have started to work with the data set too. I think his topic is really interesting and I am looking forward to hearing what he finds out.

It is quite evident that much is not going well with this relationship and how the supervision is taking place. John lacks openness and honesty with his supervisor, while Professor Waddle is not doing enough to ensure the student is focused in his approach. If you refer back to the good practice on supervision (Working with your supervisor 3.4), it is apparent that if they followed the principles set out they would be much less likely to encounter problems in the supervision process. This emphasizes the importance of establishing these ground rules.

It should also be noted that it is becoming more common for supervisors and students to come from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. This can have implications for the interactions that occur during supervision. Various supervision strategies may be adopted where such differences exist—although these strategies may also be useful where there are no cultural or linguistic variations.

There may be different expectations regarding turn-taking, for example, with some students expecting supervisors to frame meetings and take the lead. This may be a cultural deference to those in senior positions. Equally, there might be a reluctance to admit when there is a lack of understanding. These misunderstandings can be minimized by emphasizing the value of interaction in supervision, and in confirming expectations regarding the role of supervisor and student through ‘establishing ground rules’. Supervisors expect to have to clarify thoughts and ideas to students, so there is no issue with requesting additional explanation.
3. Getting Started

There might also be cultural differences in relation to the physical proximity between students and supervisors. These need to be clarified and dealt with sensitively. Body language is a significant aspect of all cultures, with various meanings associated with different gestures—and it is possible for misunderstandings to occur. Both students and supervisors need to be aware of their body language and how this may be interpreted.

**Expecting the Unexpected!**

It would be unrealistic to complete the whole dissertation process without encountering any sort of challenges. But that does not mean that it is easy to anticipate what those difficulties might be! At some point it is likely that you will lack the motivation you feel is necessary, or you might become fed up with the whole thing and just want it done and out of the way. This can even happen when you have chosen a topic that you are really interested in.

"I chose a topic that I am highly passionate about—Mexican drug cartels and narco-trafficking—based on having grown up with Mexican friends and heard stories about the Drug War. I have also learnt the language and spent time in México. I thought it would only be beneficial to have had such a big interest in a topic, but upon studying it more in-depth I often felt really bored and tired of it, and as if pursuing my dissertation project had taken away the fun from one of my specialist topics."

— Liisa Toomus, Student, International Relations and Global Issues, University of Nottingham

Speaking to your supervisor or taking a little time out can help, as can speaking to your peers, who may well have similar feelings. This is partly why it is important to allow for some slippage in your timetable. This can help at times when, for whatever reason, you are progressing more slowly than expected. Sometimes it is just a process of stepping back, giving yourself a break, and then immersing yourself back in the work. ‘Passive thinking’—where you go away and do something completely different—might seem like a waste of time, but it can actually be a very productive part of the creative process.
3. Getting Started

I WISH I’D KNOWN ... TO MAKE A START EARLY ON

3.10

Aim to do more than you think is necessary in your project early on. In fact, getting ahead of your schedule is positive. This will provide you with some leeway later on in the process.

“Get started early so unexpected setbacks do not impede your progress.”

— Rachael O’Neill, Student, Politics, and International Relations, University of Nottingham

Dealing with unforeseen challenges can obviously eat into valuable time and resources, and you may have to develop solutions or change direction. This flexibility is important. A good management strategy is to consider what (realistically) might go wrong, and what contingencies you might put in place to deal with any delays. Recruiting participants, for example, can often take much longer than anticipated. Thus it is often worth thinking about what ‘plan B’ would look like. If you have planned to conduct research on what ‘Housing Officers’ thought of a new social housing initiative in your area, for example, but couldn’t find enough people to interview, it might be worth scaling back your research. Could you examine how the policy had been represented in the press? Or perhaps you could interview local residents who might be affected by the scheme? It may be that you never need to put these plans into place, but it is always good to have them there just in case. Sometimes changes are needed as a result of things that are well out of your control and that couldn’t have been predicted. This is not uncommon and should be seen as part of the research process.

Conclusion

Planning will help you to feel more confident about getting your dissertation in on time; it can also help you to negotiate challenges as and when they arise. Techniques like timetabling your planned progress, setting out your expectations of the student-supervisor relationship, and thinking about ‘plan B’ will provide you with a solid foundation for your research. Together they will help you negotiate the practical realities of planning and managing the research project.
3. Getting Started

**WHAT DO I NEED TO THINK ABOUT?**

- ✓ What areas of research are you interested in and what might the aims and objectives look like? Taking into account the dissertation requirements, including the handbook, do these areas of research seem feasible for this type of research project?
- ✓ Are you clear about how you work most effectively, and how this may differ in relation to an extended piece of work?
- ✓ What writing strategies might be useful to you?
- ✓ Do you understand how to create a dissertation timetable which also takes into account your other commitments?
- ✓ Are you clear about supervisory expectations and how to get the most out of the supervisory relationship?
- ✓ Do you know what your ‘plan B’ might look like? (p. 47)

**WHAT DO I NEED TO DO?**

- ✓ Read the dissertation handbook to make sure you are familiar with your department’s requirements.
- ✓ Decide on the subject area of your research, and establish your research aims and objectives.
- ✓ Identify how you work best in terms of timing and location.
- ✓ Construct a dissertation timetable to plan your project.
- ✓ Develop writing strategies to assist you with getting started.
- ✓ Establish the ‘ground rules’ of supervision with your supervisor once they are allocated.
- ✓ Develop a ‘plan B’ in case there are unexpected developments in your dissertation.

Access the [online resources](#) to help you to successfully complete your social research project or dissertation.

**DELVE DEEPER**

**Becker, H. (2007). How to Write for Social Scientists: How to Start and Finish Your Thesis, Book or Article. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.** While this is aimed at more advanced students than undergraduates, it is excellent in terms of getting you...
3. Getting Started

to think about what research means and what it will look like in the context of an independent project.

Michael, P. (1992). 'Tales of the Unexpected: Supervisors’ and Students’ Perspectives on Short-term Projects and Dissertations', *Educational Studies*, 18(3): 299-310. This interesting journal article, based on interviews with 22 staff-student undergraduate and postgraduate supervisory dyads, focuses on the students’ and supervisors’ expectations in supervisory relationships. It highlights variations in expectations. Ultimately, it shows the need for both students’ and supervisors’ needs and expectations to be continually reviewed in a supervisory relationship.

*Mind.* It needs to be acknowledged that student life in general, and the dissertation in particular, can be a challenging and stressful time. This can result in feeling rather pressured. While some of the tips throughout this chapter will help manage this process, it is important to develop strategies to keep yourself healthy and well while doing your dissertation (and in general!). This guide from Mind aims to support you during your time as a student and provides useful tips and guidance on how to keep yourself healthy and well.


**The Pomodoro Technique.** There are a number of techniques for managing your time during the dissertation process. One of these is the Pomodoro Technique. It is something you may find really useful. However, you must find a technique that works best for you.


**The Royal Literary Fund.** This resource provides support and advice on writing skills for those writing a dissertation. It is not presented as a conventional how-to guide, but rather provides a variety of voices on the processes of writing. These come from interviews with professional writers, successful doctorate students, and writing experts. These are particularly useful in thinking about the process of writing, drafting, and rewriting, crucial elements of a dissertation.


Todd, M., Bannister, P., and Clegg, S. (2004). ‘Independent Inquiry and the Undergraduate Dissertation: Perceptions and Experiences of Final Year Social Science Students’, *Assessment and Education in Higher Education*, 29(3): 161-173. If you want to look at supervision experiences and perceptions from a supervisor’s perspective you may find this of interest. This article
uses interviews to draw on the experiences and perceptions of staff supervising final year social science undergraduates.

**The University of Leicester.** A number of universities provide dissertation guides which are available online. This is one of the better ones. It addresses the process of planning and conducting a small research project, providing support for you in organizing, planning, and monitoring your project. It also includes examples of Gantt charts.

https://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/ld/resources/writing/writing-resources/planning-dissertation (Accessed 1 December 2017).