Getting Started on Research

Rebecca Boden, Jane Kenway and Debbie Epstein
Covering all of the major aspects of the role – research, teaching and administration – as well as networking and advice on good conduct in relationships with colleagues, these books are likely to be of considerable assistance to people entering the profession.

CLIVE SEALE, Brunel University

The Academic’s Support Kit is excellent. And it is not just for academic starters either. This is a collection of books for everyone, whether you are starting your academic career or just learning new things. I am sure that you will find the advice and perspectives offered in these books to be very useful and that you will benefit from the experiences shared.

ROBERT MORRELL, The University of KwaZulu Natal

After a really tough year these were the first texts that I read in my vacation. As a result, I am no longer thinking of a vacation as a time to relax, but as a time to learn. I am looking forward to the prospect of getting back to work – and of putting some of the authors’ suggestions into practice.

SANDRA SINFIELD, London Metropolitan University
getting started on research
The Academic’s Support Kit

Building your Academic Career
Rebecca Boden, Debbie Epstein and Jane Kenway

Getting Started on Research
Rebecca Boden, Jane Kenway and Debbie Epstein

Writing for Publication
Debbie Epstein, Jane Kenway and Rebecca Boden

Teaching and Supervision
Debbie Epstein, Rebecca Boden and Jane Kenway

Winning and Managing Research Funding
Jane Kenway, Rebecca Boden and Debbie Epstein

Building Networks
Jane Kenway, Debbie Epstein and Rebecca Boden
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Finally, as ever, our greatest thanks go to our nearest and dearest, without whose tolerance, love and hard work these books would not be in your hands today.

R.B.
J.K.
D.E.
Introducing the Academic’s Support Kit

Before you really get into this book, you might like to know a bit more about the authors.

Rebecca Boden, from England, is professor of accounting at the University of the West of England. She did her PhD in politics immediately after graduating from her first degree (which was in history and politics). She worked as a contract researcher in a university before the shortage of academic jobs in 1980s Britain forced her into the civil service as a tax inspector. She subsequently launched herself on to the unsuspecting world of business schools as an accounting academic.

Debbie Epstein, a South African, is a professor in the School of Social Sciences at Cardiff University. She did her first degree in history and then worked briefly as a research assistant on the philosopher Jeremy Bentham’s papers. Unable to read his handwriting, she went on to teach children in a variety of schools for seventeen years. She returned to university to start her PhD in her forties and has been an academic ever since.

Jane Kenway, an Australian, is professor of education at Monash University with particular responsibility for developing the field of global cultural studies in education. She was a schoolteacher and outrageous hedonist before she became an academic. But since becoming an academic she has also become a workaholic, which has done wonders for her social life, because, fortunately, all her friends are similarly inclined. Nonetheless she is interested in helping next-generation academics to be differently pleasured with regard to their work and their lives.

As you can see, we have all had chequered careers which are far from the stereotype of the lifelong academic but that are actually fairly typical. What we have all had to do is to retread ourselves, acquire new skills and learn to cope in very different environments. In our current jobs we all spend a lot of time helping and supporting people who are learning to be or developing themselves as academics. Being an accountant, Rebecca felt that there had to be a much more efficient way of helping
people to get the support they need than one-to-one conversations. This book and the other five in the *Academic’s Support Kit* are for all these people, and for their mentors and advisers.

We have tried to write in an accessible and friendly style. The books contain the kind of advice that we have frequently proffered our research students and colleagues, often over a cup of coffee or a meal. We suggest that you consume their contents in a similar ambience: read the whole thing through in a relaxed way first and then dip into it where and when you feel the need.

Throughout the *ASK* books we tell the stories of anonymised individuals drawn from real life to illustrate how the particular points we are making might be experienced. While you may not see a precise picture of yourself, we hope that you will be able to identify things that you have in common with one or more of our characters to help you see how you might use the book.

**Pragmatic principles/principled pragmatism**

In writing these books, as in all our other work, we share a number of common perceptions and beliefs.

1. Globally, universities are reliant on public funding. Downward pressure on public expenditure means that universities’ financial resources are tightly squeezed. Consequently mantras such as ‘budgeting’, ‘cost cutting’, ‘accountability’ and ‘performance indicators’ have become ubiquitous, powerful drivers of institutional behaviour and academic work.

2. As a result, universities are run as corporate enterprises selling education and research knowledge. They need ‘management’, which is essential to running a complex organisation such as a university, as distinct from ‘managerialism’ – the attempted application of ‘scientific management techniques’ borrowed from, though often discarded by, industry and commerce. What marks managerialism out from good management is the belief that there is a one-size-fits-all suite of management solutions that can be applied to any organisation. This can lead to a situation in which research and teaching, the *raison d’etre* of universities, take second place to managerialist fads, initiatives, strategic plans, performance
indicators and so on. Thus the management tail may wag the university dog, with the imperatives of managerialism conflicting with those of academics, who usually just want to research and teach well.

3. Increasingly, universities are divided into two cultures with conflicting sets of values. On the one hand there are managerialist doctrines; on the other are more traditional notions of education, scholarship and research. But these two cultures do not map neatly on to the two job groups of ‘managers’ and ‘academics’. Many managers in universities hold educational and scholarly values dear and fight for them in and beyond their institutions. By the same token, some academics are thoroughly and unreservedly managerialist in their approach.

4. A bit like McDonald’s, higher education is a global business. Like McDonald’s branches, individual universities seem independent, but are surprisingly uniform in their structures, employment practices and management strategies. Academics are part of a globalised labour force and may move from country to (better paying) country.

5. Academics’ intellectual recognition comes from their academic peers rather than their employing institutions. They are part of wider national and international peer networks distinct from their employing institutions and may have academic colleagues across continents as well as nearer home. The combination of the homogeneity of higher education and academics’ own networks make it possible for them to develop local identities and survival strategies based on global alliances. The very fact of this globalisation makes it possible for us to write a Kit that is relevant to being an academic in many different countries, despite important local variations.

6. In order to thrive in a tough environment academics need a range of skills. Very often acquiring them is left to chance, made deliberately difficult or the subject of managerialist ideology. In this Kit our aim is to talk straight. We want to speak clearly about what some people just ‘know’, but others struggle to find out. Academia is a game with unwritten and written rules. We aim to write down the unwritten rules in order to help level an uneven playing field. The slope of the playing field favours ‘developed’ countries and, within these, more experienced academics in more prestigious institutions. Unsurprisingly, women and some ethnic groups often suffer marginalisation.
7. Most of the skills that academics need are common across social sciences and humanities. This reflects the standardisation of working practices that has accompanied the increasing managerialisation of universities, but also the growing (and welcome) tendency to work across old disciplinary divides. The Academic’s Support Kit is meant for social scientists, those in the humanities and those in more applied or vocational fields such as education, health sciences, accounting, business and management.

8. We are all too aware that most academics have a constant feeling of either drowning in work or running ahead of a fire or both. Indeed, we often share these feelings. Nevertheless, we think that there are ways of being an academic that are potentially less stressful and more personally rewarding. Academics need to find ways of playing the game in ethical and professional ways and winning. We do not advise you to accept unreasonable demands supinely. Instead, we are looking for strategies that help people retain their integrity, the ability to produce knowledge and teach well.

9. University management teams are often concerned to avoid risk. This may lead to them taking over the whole notion of ‘ethical behaviour’ in teaching and research and subjecting it to their own rules, which are more to do with their worries than good professional academic practice. In writing these books, we have tried to emphasise that there are richer ethical and professional ways of being in the academic world: ways of being a public intellectual, accepting your responsibilities and applying those with colleagues, students and the wider community.

And finally . . .

We like the way that Colin Bundy, Principal of the School of Oriental and African Studies in London and previously Vice-Chancellor of the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, so pithily describes the differences and similarities between universities in such very different parts of the world. Interviewed for the Times Higher Education Supplement (27 January 2004) by John Crace, he explains:

The difference is one of nuance. In South Africa, universities had become too much of an ivory tower and needed a reintroduction to the pressures
of the real world. In the UK, we have perhaps gone too far down the line of seeing universities as pit-stops for national economies. It’s partly a response to thirty years of underfunding: universities have had to adopt the neo-utilitarian line of asserting their usefulness to justify more money. But we run the risk of losing sight of some of our other important functions. We should not just be a mirror to society, but a critical lens: we have a far more important role to play in democracy and the body politic than merely turning out graduates for the job market.

Our hope is that the Academic’s Support Kit will help its readers develop the kind of approach exemplified by Bundy – playing in the real world but always in a principled manner.

**Books in the Academic’s Support Kit**

The Kit comprises six books. There is no strict order in which they should be read, but this one is probably as good as any – except that you might read *Building your Academic Career* both first and last.

*Building your Academic Career* encourages you to take a proactive approach to getting what you want out of academic work whilst being a good colleague. We discuss the advantages and disadvantages of such a career, the routes in and the various elements that shape current academic working lives. In the second half of the book we deal in considerable detail with how to write a really good CV (résumé) and how best to approach securing an academic job or promotion.

*Getting Started on Research* is for people in the earlier stages of development as a researcher. In contrast to the many books available on techniques of data collection and analysis, this volume deals with the many other practical considerations around actually doing research – such as good ways to frame research questions, how to plan research projects effectively and how to undertake the various necessary tasks.

*Writing for Publication* deals with a number of generic issues around academic writing (including intellectual property rights) and then considers writing refereed journal articles, books and book chapters in detail as well as other, less common, forms of publication for academics. The aim is to demystify the process and to help you to become a confident, competent, successful and published writer.
Teaching and Supervision looks at issues you may face both in teaching undergraduates and in the supervision of graduate research students. This book is not a pedagogical instruction manual – there are plenty of those around, good and bad. Rather, the focus is on presenting explanations and possible strategies designed to make your teaching and supervision work less burdensome, more rewarding (for you and your students) and manageable.

Winning and Managing Research Funding explains how generic university research funding mechanisms work so that you will be better equipped to navigate your way through the financial maze associated with various funding sources. The pressure to win funding to do research is felt by nearly all academics worldwide. This book details strategies that you might adopt to get your research projects funded. It also explains how to manage your research projects once they are funded.

Building Networks addresses perhaps the most slippery of topics, but also one of the most fundamental. Despite the frequent isolation of academic work, it is done in the context of complex, multi-layered global, national, regional and local teaching or research networks. Having good networks is key to achieving what you want in academia. This book describes the kinds of networks that you might build across a range of settings, talks about the pros and cons and gives practical guidance on networking activities.
The purpose of this book is to help you know enough about the research process to get you going and to establish a research career. If this is the first book in the Academic’s Support Kit that you are reading, then you may find it useful to read ‘Introducing the Academic’s Support Kit’ before you read any further.

This book will be especially useful for you if you are in any of the following categories. Someone who:

- Is a research student of some sort.
- Has had an academic job for a while but who has not yet managed to get going on research.
- Is in their first academic job (with or without a research degree).
- Has made a career change and has recently become an academic.
- Is a casual (sessionally or hourly paid) teacher in a university who would like to develop an academic career in the fuller sense.
- Has already done some research but who is not entirely confident that they have got the hang of things yet.
- Is a more experienced academic who is mentoring someone in one or more of these categories.

This book is not meant for contract researchers, who will, inevitably, be working to someone else’s agenda, though they may also be wanting to do their own work and would find the book useful for that purpose.

You may:

- Want to develop a successful academic career as a researcher or a teacher-researcher.
- Feel and/or actually be under tremendous institutional pressures to develop a research profile.
- Be someone who is genuinely inquisitive, self-driven, and who really wants to do research for its own sake.
Whatever, you are likely to be ready to go but may not be confident about how to set about it. Many good academics are compulsive over-achievers who nonetheless feel surprisingly insecure and ambivalent about their own achievements. Anxiety about research is therefore an extremely common phenomenon. We have lost count of the number of highly successful academics who constantly feel as if someone is going to ‘find them out’ for being ‘inadequate’. This book should help you to acquire some good basic knowledge and to cope better with these common feelings of inadequacy.

In many disciplines it is common for people to become academics as a second career after time spent working in a profession of one kind or another. In others, it is more likely that you will have progressed directly, or with a very short break, from undergraduate studies to a postgraduate degree and then an academic job. Whatever your background, you may be surprised to find that you already have many of the skills and personal attributes that you need to become a successful researcher. If you have become an academic after a period as a professional, many of the skills and competences that you have had to develop and deploy in your everyday working life will be incredibly important and useful. If you are a continuing student, with no professional work experience, you will have recent and relevant study/research skills.

Some of the relevant skills for successful research that you might already have acquired in whole or in part are:

- Curiosity and an enquiring mind.
- The ability to read, digest, summarise and synthesise complex material.
- The capacity to work with others to achieve your goals.
- The competence to grapple with complex technical issues and techniques.
- Enthusiasm for seeking out new challenges without feeling (too) intimidated.
- The ability to organise yourself and manage your own work.
- Good problem-solving, observational and communication skills.

In any case, successfully developing your research will require some strong personal motivational forces. These can include:

- Working on something that can sustain your interest over a long period.
• Doing research on something about which you feel passionately.
• Feeling that your research work can really make a difference in whatever way is important to you.

If you can’t identify any of these forces, or any like them, then think again about what you want to research or indeed whether you really want to do research. For many academics, research is the thing that really makes their job worthwhile. Conversely, doing research that you do not enjoy can make you extremely miserable.

Finally, we’d like to introduce you to some people who are in the kind of position we think would lead them to find this book useful.

Sasha’s first career was as a senior nurse and she had been very successful in her work. She had enjoyed her part-time masters degree, for which she had received a distinction. Consequently, when she was approached to apply for a post in health sciences at the university where she had done her masters, she leapt at the chance to become an academic. Soon after her appointment, the government audited research activity and she was not deemed to be acceptably research-active. At that point, this was not a particular problem as she was such a new academic. Over the next few years she found that she had little time and less support to become research-active. In her department there was a clear line drawn between the higher-status researchers and the lower-status vocational teachers. Although she kept trying to do research, she gradually gave up hope that she would ever be able to achieve the standard required. As you can imagine, by this time her confidence was shattered.

John had worked successfully as a lawyer for a number of years before his wife died, leaving him with sole care of his young children. He took on a teaching post at a local university because it enabled him to combine working with his childcare commitments. He joined a department with quite strict divisions between those who taught and those who did research. The then head of department told him that he should concentrate on teaching and ‘not bother his head with
research’. He did as instructed and, for ten years, was an exemplary teacher. The policy of the university then changed and John came under increasing implied and overt pressure to become research-active. However, he had so completely excluded himself and been excluded from the research culture that he simply didn’t know where to begin. His sense of personal well-being and happiness at work were severely disrupted.

Mukesh had been a teacher of French in a university for a few years when the head of department gave him a project and forcefully suggested that he should do a PhD in the area. At the same time, he advised Mukesh never to do research in anything you were not interested in because you would never finish it. Mukesh did indeed complete his PhD, but the exercise left him with little passion for or real skill in research. This, combined with the arrival of two children in swift succession, meant that he failed to pursue a research career after completing his PhD. As the higher education climate changed, Mukesh found himself under increasing pressure to commence research again, but found it psychologically difficult because of his previous experience.
In this chapter we discuss the question of what academic research is and how to begin to establish your own identity as a researcher. In particular, we look at the thorny question of what you can research and how you can choose, formulate and move on from your research questions.

What do you mean, ‘research’?

All kinds of people do ‘research’, either in their private lives or as part of their work. Journalists, police officers, teachers, travellers and tour guides all need to find things out. For instance, the tourist or the tour guide may want to find out about a local church. They might ask local people, the priest, or consult history books, travel guides, parish records, the internet or simply go and look around the church itself. What they probably want is some interesting factual information to be entertained by or to entertain with. This is all research in the general sense, but it is not academic research.

An academic researching the same church would have very different objectives, depending on their own disciplinary perspectives. For example, an ecclesiastical historian might be interested in the role of this particular church in the history of Catholicism in the region, or its role in sustaining religious beliefs and observances in a local area. A sociologist might be interested in the social functions of the church, or its role and power in local culture and everyday life. An economist might be interested in the system of local tithes that sustain church finances and in how it impacts on the local economy. An education academic might want to explore the role of the church in local schooling and the curriculum and churches as pedagogic agents. An English scholar might be interested in the ways in which local churches, congregants and
priests feature in the literature of the area, while an art historian might want to study the artworks in the church or the role of Church patronage of artists in developing particular genres or tastes. What all these academic researchers are seeking is much more than the factual information sought by the tourist or the tour guide. The academics want some deeper understanding or knowledge of social, economic, political, cultural or aesthetic life. Their interests are broad and deep and tackle fundamental questions.

So the type of research that we’re talking about is done in order to gain deeper understandings or knowledge, rather than just to acquire information or facts, unlike Charles in the following vignette.

Charles was a non-research-active teacher at a university. He had to go and see his Director of Research for an interview. She asked him for an explanation as to why he wasn’t doing research. He protested that he was doing research. He explained that he ran a business consultancy business in his ‘spare’ time and that this frequently involved him making quite complex research investigations in order to solve his clients’ individual business problems. The Director of Research explained, patiently but through gritted teeth, that such research was not academic research because it only provided individual answers rather than more comprehensive explanations.

In order to get to grips with what research in your own academic field means, you should aim to participate as much as possible in the research culture of your department, university or wider academic community. Read your colleagues’ work, go to research seminars in your department and others, go and talk to people whom you know to be active researchers and read widely. In this way, you will begin to get a feel not only for what is going on, but also for what is interesting in your area and for what it means to be a researcher.

What can I research then?

Almost any social, political, cultural, economic or aesthetic phenomenon, issue or problem can be the subject of academic research
in the wider social sciences and humanities. The key thing is not what it’s about, but the way that you approach the issue. If you are looking for a subject for your research the best thing to do is to develop a real sense of curiosity about how the world around you works or let yourself be open to ideas, objects, experiences or events (current or historical).

Sometimes you might read something or hear something that you disagree with so profoundly that you decide to research the area yourself. At other times, you might hear or read something that sparks your interest and catches your imagination. One of Rebecca’s colleagues recently railed to her about students who came to see him asking, ‘What should we research?’ He had been in the supermarket that morning and noticed that a cleaning product called ‘Jif’ had been renamed ‘Cif’ as part of a global rebranding exercise. He argued that something as simple as this brand name change could be used as the starting point of research on all aspects of globalisation, including global capitalism, branding and marketing.

Some people will have an area of technical or professional expertise that they can build on to develop their research interests. But your initial interest in something is likely to result in a research project that is sustained by your own curiosity and passion for it. Once you have identified a broad area, think about how you can use your technical or disciplinary knowledge to focus on this subject to develop real understandings.

An important part of the process of developing your research topics and ideas is your reading of the available literature. Starting to dip into it at this stage should provoke your interest and curiosity, help you formulate your ideas further and start to engage you in argument in your area.

**Vivienne was registered for a PhD in history at an Ivy League university in the USA. Her original proposal was to do with the historical development of ethnic identities in the American south. Her reading in her first year showed her that she was much more interested in the literatures of women’s history and the history of slavery than in that of the history of the south. Sparked by her interest in these topics, she changed her research proposal completely and did her thesis on the gendered history of slavery.**
It sounds straightforward: find something in your everyday world that catches your interest and then ask big and deep questions about it. However, in our experience the single most difficult task for any new researcher is to move from a general curiosity or even a specific interest in something to being able to frame it as a subject for academic research.

The best question to ask yourself to ensure that you have made this shift is “If I do this investigation and somebody then asks me, “So what?” will I be able to give a credible answer?” That is, will the answers you reach be of interest beyond the information you have collected itself and to anyone other than yourself? You must be able to frame your subject in such a way that you move from description to explaining what the data you have found means. In other words, you must be able to theorise your subject.

Roger started his research on a particular UK factory at the University of Ambridge. His supervisor, an economic historian, had persuaded him to collect reams of facts and figures about output, finances and markets, etc. Roger did not enjoy this research and had little passion for how the subject was developing. He then moved to another university, where a new supervisor persuaded him to use theories of how social and cultural capital are formed to examine the socio-economic and cultural impacts on community formation of the development of the particular factory. Suddenly, the minutiae of the money value extracted from the business by the owners and how it was spent extravagantly in fancy London stores became a way of explaining how social classes sought to distinguish themselves and ensure their social positions.

How do I define what I’m going to research?

We can think about people’s research as nested, as shown in Figure 1. There are three principal levels:

- **Personal intellectual projects.** These are the overarching themes and areas that you really want to know about and will spend years,
possibly your whole career, developing. For instance, Sigmund Freud was interested in the workings of the subconscious and the influence of early experience on later emotional and psychological development. Of course, few academics will ever have the status and long-term impact of Freud. Nonetheless, having their own personal intellectual project will substantially enhance their work.

- Research agendas. These encapsulate clusters of research topics that hang together in the here and now. One of Freud’s agendas was to understand the particular dynamics that contribute to the formation of adult sexuality.

- Research topics. These are specific, individual foci that should fit within your broader research agenda and personal intellectual project. Within his agenda on the formation of sexuality, Freud investigated such topics as hysteria, melancholia and dreams through his clinical practice. Individual research projects are formulated to investigate one or more specific research topics.
You can't do good research unless and until you identify your research topic. People with an established research identity tend also to have personal intellectual projects and research agendas and choose research topics within them. The level of abstraction and theorisation tends to increase as you move from individual topics towards your personal intellectual project. This is to be expected as you begin to get a more comprehensive grasp of the whole area. You can expect an iterative relationship between these three levels as work at each impacts on your thinking, the research you do and the direction you want to go in next.

Researchers tend to start with a topic and the whole enterprise subsequently grows into an agenda and a personal intellectual project. If you start in this way, you will need to have some kind of feel for or notion of what the bigger picture is and how your personal intellectual project might eventually develop. This is part of ensuring that the work you start on has a long shelf life and is capable of sustaining not only your interest but the interest of others. It needs to be capable of a greater level of theorisation and abstraction than you may start with. Ideally, it will also be capable of becoming a field which is demonstrably ‘yours’ or in which you are a major researcher.

Miguel became fascinated with the governance structures of his own university and started to investigate them systematically. After discussing this with his mentor, he realised that there was a wider research agenda here: what his university did reflected the state of higher education in the country generally. A whole stream of related topics concerning higher education suggested themselves. This research agenda soon grew into a personal intellectual project to investigate notions of governance in the not-for-profit sector inhabited by universities.

On a career note, if you really want to make a name for yourself, try to identify topics, agendas and personal intellectual projects that you can make very much your own territory. Conversely, never believe that the fact that there is no research in a particular area is sufficient justification for you to do it.
Madhur, a well established researcher with an international reputation, was told by a group of feminist doctoral students that they felt exposed because their research topics were risky, endangering their chances of getting academic jobs in the future. They asked Madhur how she felt about the fact that her research was in a very contentious area. Madhur said that when she had started her work in this area, just after her PhD, she had a strong sense that it would be politically important and valuable as a contribution to theory. The fact that she was one of only very few people who were doing research in her area meant that her first book was one of the first two or three such books in the world. Strategies that felt risky could also therefore bring high rewards. She might have ended up being unable to get a job, but she was confident when she started that what she was beginning to work on was worthwhile. On the other hand, working a well-trodden field carried different consequences. Had she continued with her doctoral research area, the work might have been just as good, but she would have been one of many people doing good stuff in her field and therefore may have had a lower profile.

There are a number of issues to bear in mind here.

- First, whilst being innovative and imaginative are all well and good, it doesn’t excuse you from the necessity of making sure that what you are doing passes the ‘so what?’ test and can make a sustained and valuable contribution.
- Second, breaking new ground can appear and feel risky, even foolhardy, but if you have done your homework in defining your research topic, this is not necessarily the case.
- Third, keeping to the mainstream and going over fields that have already been well ploughed may appear less risky, but in fact carry the danger of never getting the recognition you may deserve as you struggle to compete with many others in the same area.

**What should I read?**

There is a whole range of different sorts of literature that you will need to read as a researcher. We define these as follows:
• **Research literature.** This is the body of academic work produced by researchers working within or affiliated to academic institutions. Such work will normally be published in academic, refereed journals and books published by recognised academic publishers. If you look at *Writing for Publication* you will find a more detailed description of what constitutes ‘academic literature’. In brief, the crucial test is whether the publication has been refereed by other academics – this is called ‘peer review’.

• **The ‘grey’ literature.** This term is often used to describe research reports published by and/or for policy-oriented organisations such as governments, supranational organisations such as the World Bank or the OECD, non-governmental organisations, trade unions and so on.

• **Professional literature.** Professional bodies worldwide usually produce publications, above and beyond their newsletters, which aim to facilitate detailed discussion of professional practice between practitioners. Sometimes academics use these journals to disseminate research findings to practitioners. You should bear in mind that such articles will be written in a style different from their more usual academic publications and will usually refer to the latter.

• **Other publications.** These include newspapers, newsletters of organisations, popular books and magazines, and so on.

A problem that researchers frequently encounter is how to identify the research literatures relevant to their project and which to exclude. There are two sorts of difficulties people find.

First, they think they have to read absolutely everything that might possibly have a bearing on their research. This is because they do not yet have a strong sense of belonging to a particular community of scholars with whom they are, in their thinking at least, in conversation. Whilst reading widely is good, there does come a point at which you have to put some boundaries in place and get on with your own work rather than endlessly seek to keep up with the plethora of other people’s work. Often people have a primary affiliation to a particular field of study and most of their reading will be in that discipline or in a particular interdisciplinary space. By and large, having such identifications will eventually help you put some boundaries around the literature you decide to use. If you are a novice researcher, it’s a good idea to take advice from your doctoral supervisor or a research mentor on where to start and stop reading.
Second, people think that there is ‘nothing to read’ in their field because they are looking too specifically. As Keiko’s story demonstrates, there will always be something relevant, though it may not be on your specific topic.

Keiko was an architect who had taught the technical aspects of building design for many years. She started her PhD looking at the role of architecture in the construction of ‘disability’ and particularly the impact of building design on people with short-term memory loss. She went to her supervisor and complained that there was no literature relevant to her interests because no-one had ever written anything about such issues. Her supervisor despatched her to the library to read the extensive sociological and cultural studies literature on disability. Engaging with this sophisticated literature assisted her in developing the theoretical and conceptual basis of her thesis.

You shouldn’t cling desperately to your own narrow subject area. Explore other literatures and take some risks in spreading your net wider. This will usually enrich your study conceptually. What you are looking for are areas of literature that help you to think deeply and imaginatively about your own topic.

Eventually you will be able to locate yourself and your personal intellectual project in a particular area of literature and this will become what people call your ‘epistemic community’ (more on epistemology later). Once you know what this space is, you should know:

- Who the key thinkers are currently and have been over time.
- What the central debates in the area are, both historically and contemporaneously.
- The difference between various research methodologies.
- How to distinguish between key innovative thinkers and those who have made use of and developed their work in more specific ways. This will allow you to be more discerning in your reading.
- Who is at the cutting edge in your areas, and you should be able to distinguish between short-term fads and more lasting influences.

In other words, you need to know your way around your intellectual home and be able to rearrange the furniture in ways that please you.
Here are some good ways to start identifying and locating your literatures:

- Try an electronic key-word search of on-line databases. When you do this you need to be thoughtful and selective about your words.
- When you get your search results, work out what it is immediately possible to exclude. You will be able to decide this on the basis of your disciplinary affinities and your reading of the abstracts.
- Take note of which authors and journals come up frequently in the search results.
- Follow up on authors and texts that appear with regularity in the bibliographies, seem important, particularly interesting or contentious. This is called ‘chaining’ and will help you to map the field.
- Talk to other people in similar and related fields and find out which authors they find particularly useful.
- Go to the library (yes, actually go) and browse along the shelves next to the books you know you are interested in. Stephen Kemmis, a well known Australian academic, calls this ‘grazing in the groves of academe’.
- Go to the current issues of journals in your disciplinary area. You can sign up to such electronic journal alerts as SARA and EMERALD, which belong to the big publishing houses and will automatically notify you by email of the contents pages of the latest issues of your selected journals.

Having done all this, you will clearly need to be highly selective in your eventual choices and develop the capacity to synthesise the literature you use. One useful way to think about the sorts of things you do as you immerse yourself in the research literature comes from a well known taxonomy developed by Bloom, as illustrated in Table 1. In our experience, many novice researchers stop at stage two from Bloom’s taxonomy: understanding.

Another possible approach to sorting out the literature is to ask yourself (and make notes on) the following questions as you read.

- Who is talking?
- What standpoints or personal histories are they bringing with them?
- Whom are they talking for and to?
- Who benefits (i.e. in whose interests do they speak)?
- What is the impact of what they say?
In our experience, most people who want to get started on research try to bite off more than they can chew in picking a research topic. They don’t yet know what their personal intellectual project will become, as this is something that usually grows with time. However, they may have a research agenda, which they confuse with an immediately researchable topic. Supervisors and mentors, therefore, frequently spend a good deal of time and effort in persuading and helping people to define their topics more closely and focus on something achievable in a known and limited time span. Don’t be worried or concerned if your resulting research topic appears too narrow. If you have worked things through and thought about the bigger picture, you should have a reasonable degree of confidence about how your topic fits into wider contexts, as Thabo’s experience shows.

Thabo arrived to meet his prospective PhD supervisor wanting to do ‘something about post-colonialism and literature’. After discussion, he developed a research proposal that was near enough to being do-able for him to be accepted on to the PhD programme, but he still needed to define more closely precisely what it was that he would do. In the event, his topic was about how Southern African post-colonial writers had, so far, responded to the AIDS pandemic.
People often want to know how big their project should be. This is a bit like asking ‘How long is a piece of string?’ and you won’t actually know the precise answer straight away. However, in certain situations, you will be given a specific external constraint. For example a doctoral student will have a maximum and minimum period of time during which she will be expected to produce a thesis with a prescribed maximum word length. Apart from such situations, you will generally be much freer to define the parameters of your project yourself or sometimes in conjunction with collaborators or a mentor.

The question then becomes ‘How do I decide how big to make this project?’ Think very carefully about the practical constraints under which you have to work. They include time, money, skills and access to sources of data and help and advice. For instance, it is no good deciding that you want to do research on a literary manuscript held in a private collection in another country if you have a heavy teaching load, no funds for travel and cannot be sure that the owners of the manuscript will allow you access to it. If you are a totally novice researcher and are unsure about whether you will like, or be any good at, research you may want to deliberately pick a very small and contained first project. Getting something successful under your belt can be a major confidence booster. Some people get this by doing a dissertation on a masters degree course, but not all.

Where are the pitfalls?

_Mind the gap_. When you think about your research topic or agenda, it is tempting to start off by looking for ‘gaps’ in the research literature. This is a real chimera. It makes us think of the image of a British dry-stone wall; these are built from unevenly sized rocks, carefully fitted together without mortar and so riddled with tiny gaps. These walls last for many years but need maintenance, and parts have to be rebuilt from time to time. In our image the wall is the metaphorical body of research and researchers are anxiously examining it in microscopic detail to find the tiny gaps so that they can quickly plug them. It does not occur to them that the holes may have been left to allow for drainage, or because it simply isn’t worth filling them in. And, of course, at the same time as they are looking for holes to plug there may be another bit of the wall crying out for attention. Rather than look for holes and gaps in existing knowledge, you need to think about what’s really engaging your interest.
and what’s really worth doing. Doing it may involve rebuilding bits of the wall, or even laying the foundations of a new one.

Avoid the totally parochial and truly trivial. It may sound contradictory for us to say, at this point, that you should avoid doing parochial research. After all, we have been pressing you to look to the world around you for your research ideas. What we mean, here, is that you need to avoid doing research that is of interest only to you and your immediate colleagues and which is not capable of broader theorisation and conceptualisation. Every year academia presents to itself awards for improbable research. Some of it is quite valuable: other stuff just shouldn’t have been done. We think it best to avoid this type of publicity for your research. Here are details of the 2002 winners.

The 2002 IgNobel Prize Winners

**Biology**


**Physics**


**Interdisciplinary research**

Karl Kruszelnicki of the University of Sydney, for performing a comprehensive survey of human belly button lint – who gets it, when, what color, and how much.
Chemistry

Theodore Gray of Wolfram Research, in Champaign, Illinois, for gathering many elements of the periodic table, and assembling them into the form of a four-legged periodic table table.

Mathematics

K.P. Sreekumar and the late G. Nirmalan of Kerala Agricultural University, India, for their analytical report ‘Estimation of the Total Surface Area in Indian Elephants.’ [REFERENCE: ‘Estimation of the Total Surface Area in Indian Elephants (Elephas maximus indicus),’ K.P. Sreekumar and G. Nirmalan, Veterinary Research Communications, vol. 14, no. 1, 1990, pp. 5–17]

Literature

Vicki L. Silvers of the University of Nevada-Reno and David S. Kreiner of Central Missouri State University, for their colorful report ‘The Effects of Pre-existing Inappropriate Highlighting on Reading Comprehension.’ [PUBLISHED IN: Reading Research and Instruction, vol. 36, no. 3, 1997, pp. 217–23.]

Peace

Keita Sato, President of Takara Co., Dr Matsumi Suzuki, President of Japan Acoustic Lab, and Dr Norio Kogure, Executive Director, Kogure Veterinary Hospital, for promoting peace and harmony between the species by inventing Bow-lingual, a computer-based automatic dog-to-human language translation device.

Hygiene

Eduardo Segura, of Lavakan de Aste, in Tarragona, Spain, for inventing a washing machine for cats and dogs.
Economics

The executives, corporate directors, and auditors of Enron, Lernaut & Hauspie [Belgium], Adelphia, Bank of Commerce and Credit International [Pakistan], Cendant, CMS Energy, Duke Energy, Dynegy, Gazprom [Russia], Global Crossing, HIH Insurance [Australia], Informix, Kmart, Maxwell Communications [UK], McKessonHBOC, Merrill Lynch, Merck, Peregrine Systems, Qwest Communications, Reliant Resources, Rent-Way, Rite Aid, Sunbeam, Tyco, Waste Management, WorldCom, Xerox, and Arthur Andersen, for adapting the mathematical concept of imaginary numbers for use in the business world. [NOTE: all companies are US-based unless otherwise noted.]

Medicine


Source: http://www.improb.com/ig/ig-top.html

A little bit of exercise . . .

We think that at this point in the book it is probably a good time for you to do some retail therapy. Most serious academics like good stationery. Go to a good stationery store and buy yourself one or two large-format hardback notebooks. These may have lined, squared or plain paper, as you prefer, but must be of good quality. We will return to the question of these notebooks later. You will also need some nice pens that you enjoy using. (We like to have fibre-tip pens in as many different hues as possible as this suits our note-taking styles.) Once you have your notebooks, you might like to write yourself some notes in response to the following queries:

- What are my motivations for doing research at all? Are they positive and will they sustain me in the enterprise?
Where do my research ideas come from? Are they things that I genuinely find fascinating and absorbing and that will sustain me through all the hard work? Are they subjects that will get me out of bed in the morning (or even in the middle of the night if I wake up with a good idea)?

• Is my proposed research idea capable of passing the ‘So what?’ test? Can it lead to theorisation? Is it part of a big picture? Can I begin to see where agendas and personal intellectual projects will develop?

• Is my topic sufficiently focused, given all the constraints under which I must work?

• Above all, is this a topic that I can really get passionate and enthusiastic about?

If you can do this exercise and write more or less positive answers, then you are taking the first steps towards good reflexive practice as an academic researcher. Indeed, these sorts of notes can eventually end up as the starting point of formal research proposals, which we discuss in detail below.

Framing research questions

Having successfully identified your research topic, the next step is to develop a set of specific questions that your research project will set out to answer. The one golden rule is that you must have at least one research question and possibly more.

But why do I have to have research questions?

In the previous section we talked about finding and defining your research topic. This will have enabled you to understand and explain what you are interested in and why it’s worth looking at. Going a step further, and defining one or more research questions within that topic, enables you to say exactly what you are looking for as well as why you are looking at it. Having a question focuses our analysis and forces us to have an argument that runs through our work. This is important because it protects us from the temptation of indulging in pure description without trying to achieve the deeper understanding reached by theorising what we are doing. Figure 2 shows the part that research questions can play in a virtuous cycle of knowledge creation.
Other reasons why we start with research questions are that developing them makes us delimit what we are going to do and become very focused in our research. This may sound pedantic, but a research project that is never finished or that spreads out uncontrollably in every direction is really of no use to anybody.

It is also kinder to readers, users and/or beneficiaries of your research to start with specific questions. That way they can see what you have attempted to do and how far you have got in achieving it.

Finally, having clearly set out questions avoids the perils of the pugilistic, or even friendly or well intentioned, questioner at conferences or vivas who takes great delight in asking why you haven’t looked at x or whatever their particular hobby horse is. If you have well worked out questions, you will always be able to respond to such questioners by saying, ‘My questions were [such and such], and what you suggest is/may be extremely interesting but was not the focus of this project.’ In summary, one of the purposes that research questions serve is an authoritative defining statement about what the research focus actually is.

**FIGURE 2** The circuit of question, theory and argument production

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**But don’t you have to have hypotheses?**

Some people, especially in the social sciences and some aspects of the humanities, may be encouraged to frame their research questions as formal ‘hypotheses’. Even if you’ve never heard of the idea of a hypothesis in research, you should read this section because it will help you to understand what follows.
The notion of a ‘hypothesis’ comes from the natural sciences. The classical scientific method of research, as described by Karl Popper in his book *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* published in 1934, commences with the development of hypotheses. A hypothesis is a formal statement, usually grounded in observation – for example ‘living creatures can fly only if they have feathers’. Using the scientific method, the objective is to test such hypotheses. By their nature, they cannot be proven because there always might be other effects that explain a phenomenon. But whilst hypotheses cannot ever be proven with absolute certainty, they can be disproved. For instance, to use the example above, the scientist might discover flying insects (which of course don’t have feathers). This process of disproving hypotheses is known as ‘falsification’. All hypotheses must be falsifiable; that is, capable of being tested. Just one example that disproves a hypothesis destroys it. This type of research is known ‘deductive’ and in the social sciences the tag most often attached to it is ‘positivist’.

Early social scientists sought to present sociology and psychology as ‘scientific’ in the same sense as physics or chemistry. This was partly because of the higher status given to knowledge produced as part of a ‘scientific’ process, which led to what one might term ‘physics envy’. The equivalent in literary studies was the notion that every text (especially classical ones) has a fixed meaning, and the task of the researcher was to find out what the meaning ‘really’ was. In legal studies, the equivalent is what’s known as ‘black-letter law’: the detailed study of what legislation says rather than looking at law as a social, economic or political phenomenon. There are many other such examples in all branches of humanities and social sciences.

In all these areas, these approaches are underpinned by a belief that the ‘truth is out there’ and there is an objective answer that can be discovered by research. Yet, even in the natural sciences, this classical approach to knowledge building is being questioned and problematised. Despite this, it can sometimes feel uncomfortable for new researchers to accept and give voice to the idea that knowledge can only ever be partial and is always subjective.

Examples of (loosely worded) hypotheses in social sciences might be:

- Stock markets efficiently process information from company annual reports such that the resulting stock prices accurately reflect the real market value of the companies.
• Boys achieve higher marks in school tests when they are taught to read by male teachers.
• Capital punishment reduces the murder rate.

It is likely that a number of our readers will work within this tradition and find it to be a productive approach. We think that there are a number of problems with such positivist approaches.

• The process isn’t as objective as you may think at first. The very selection and formulation of hypotheses imply a subjective view of the world. Few researchers would formulate a hypothesis and then spend a lot of time and effort testing it if they did not have a good subjective hunch that the answer would be interesting.
• People don’t usually formulate hypotheses that they expect to be easily falsifiable. Formulating a hypothesis implies that you think it is likely to be ‘true’ and creates that impression among others, including the people you are researching (if you tell them what your hypothesis is) in ways that may well affect the outcomes of the research.
• Starting from hypotheses tends to lead to answers to questions about ‘what’ but not about ‘why’ something is as it is.
• Because the investigation of hypotheses is reliant on the investigation of observable phenomena, we can only explore that which we can see. This creates problems when the phenomenon or process you want to investigate is not directly observable. If, for example, you formulated a hypothesis that women do the bulk of child care because they want to, you would not be able to observe the operation of gendered power or unconscious motivations that might explain why they express such a desire.
• Because hypotheses must be falsifiable (that is, you can test them), they will always be rather simplistic. Complex social processes are not the subject of simple hypotheses and cannot be captured in this way.

Despite these reservations, which you will find amply expressed elsewhere in the research literature, this type of positivist research is still carried out in certain areas of the social sciences and humanities. You may find that the dominant way of doing things in your disciplinary area or university department is positivist. Remember that, as long as you do your work well, you do have the option of breaking away from
such practices or of sticking with them. If you feel that such methods of investigation are the best for what you want to do, then be aware of the pitfalls and problems outlined above.

So what is a good research question?

We have already argued that you need research questions to frame and guide your research. So this section is really about what constitutes a good research question. It is, unfortunately, much easier to come up with poor or problematic questions than with good ones. The characteristics of good research questions are as follows.

- They don’t invite true/false testing in the way that a hypothesis would.
- They don’t have the answer contained or implied within them.
- They don’t invite ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answers. Instead, the answers are likely to be complex and richly nuanced.
- They do facilitate a closely focused investigation, helping to keep the researcher on track. That is, they are not so broad that they allow the researcher to wander all over the place looking for answers.
- They are questions that are answerable through investigation and do not rely on belief or faith. For instance, ‘Does God exist?’ is not answerable other than through belief or faith. It is not, therefore, a research question, even for theologians (who may well do research into what drives religious belief, or the historical nature of particular holy texts).
- For relatively inexperienced or novice researchers, having a research question framed in such a way that it has a question mark at the end can be a wonderful way of ensuring that your question is really tightly formulated and focused.
- Research questions should be brief.
- Research questions should be able to be coherently grouped within a project, such that you have one or two principal questions with, perhaps, a few subsidiary sub-questions for each main one. Save surplus questions for future projects or you may find yourself trying to find out the answer to life, the universe and everything.
- Good research questions are the result of a rigorous process of developing and refining one’s ideas.
- They have a demonstrable relationship with the existing literature in the area. This means that you will have had to begin to read the
literature more closely in order to develop a good feel for the shape of debates in your area and are reasonably confident that your answers will make some new contribution to knowledge.

- Good research questions lead to projects that are achievable within the time and other constraints under which you must work.
- Good research questions are amenable to constant revisiting and adjustment where necessary as the research progresses.
- In any research, you will have to be selective about what you look at. Good research questions will make transparent, to yourself and others, the basis of your selection.

In sum, good research questions are do-able and answerable. They focus the mind, the enquiry and the product. The consequence of not having good research questions to start with are evident in Douglas Adams’s writing.

In the late Douglas Adams’s excellent ‘trilogy with four books’ (The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy, Life, the Universe and Everything, The Restaurant at the End of the Universe and Goodbye and Thanks for all the Fish) a central theme was that the world had been created as a giant experiment by mice in order to determine the answer to ‘life, the universe and everything’. In the first volume the answer emerged as ‘42’. This prompted a mere Earthling, and part of the experiment, ‘Dent, Arthur Dent’, to ask what the question was. The whole of the next book was the search for the question, which turned out to be ‘What do you get if you multiply six by nine?’

Apart from having written a very amusing comment on many aspects of life in late modernity, Douglas Adams illustrates beautifully the need to start with good, answerable questions. Because the question of ‘life, the universe and everything’ is unanswerable, the solution found doesn’t make sense and turns out to be the answer to quite another question.

A very important reason for ensuring that you have good research questions to start with is that otherwise the whole process of research can become unmanageable. If you are trying to answer the riddle of
### Table 2: Research questions and hypotheses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hypotheses</th>
<th>Principal research questions</th>
<th>Subsidiary research questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stock markets efficiently process information from company annual reports such that the resulting stock prices accurately reflect the real market value of the companies.</td>
<td>How do stock markets process the information they receive from company annual reports? By what means, and to what extent, does such information processing impact on share prices?</td>
<td>What are the regulations, processes and structures that shape the way information is processed? Do stock markets actively promote the belief that share prices accurately reflect the real market value of the companies listed? If they do, by what means?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys achieve higher marks in school tests when they are taught to read by a male teacher.</td>
<td>Is there a relationship between boys’ measured achievement in reading and the gender of their teacher? If so, how can it be explained?</td>
<td>How do boys in classes with similar demographic characteristics taught by women and men differ in scores on a standard reading test at the end of their first year of compulsory schooling? Is there a difference in the way boys construct their identities at this age when taught by men and by women? What are the implications for boys’ school-based reading achievement?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capital punishment reduces the murder rate.</td>
<td>Is there a demonstrable relationship, and if so what, between perceptions of punishment and murder rates?</td>
<td>What are the different motivations that murderers have or express? In cases of premeditated murder, do the murderers say that they actively considered the likely punishment and what effect, if any, did this have on their actions? Is there a perceptible difference between murder rates in comparable countries/states and how can we account for them?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
‘life, the universe and everything’, you have no basis for deciding what to do or how to set about doing it. In the vignette below we see the panic that can set in if there is no good research question in place (or if the researcher doesn’t focus on the research question).

Giacoma advised one of her students who had just started some fieldwork where they were observing children in a classroom. The student was beginning to panic because she was totally unable to make a note of all that happened in the class and was worried that this would compromise her research. Giacoma pointed out that you are not expected to make a note of every single thing that happens. A bird flying past a window will not appear in your field notes, for example, unless it causes some kind of major disruption relevant to your research. What you note is dependent on what your question is.

In Table 2, we have taken the examples of hypotheses we gave you earlier and recast the research questions in the same areas, so that you can see the significant differences between the two approaches.

How do I write my research questions then?
Before you frame your questions, you must have your topic clear in your mind. At this point, it is useful to write about what really engages your interest and why. Writing in this way often helps people to clarify their questions. This happened to Alexandre.

Alexandre was exploring the dualistic nature of the working lives of dentists working in small country practices, who have to be both dental professionals and business people who make a profit. He had been working for some time on this doctoral research but had never clearly articulated what his research questions were. As a practising dentist himself, working in a small practice, he had a very personal and intuitive sense of what the important research issues were. However, this was not sufficient to enable him to make sense of his
considerable data and shape it into a thesis likely to be awarded a doctorate. He was really struggling with writing the thesis and did not know which way to turn. A new supervisor asked him what his research questions were and he was unable to state them clearly, even though he was nearly at the end of his maximum registration period. After a stiff drink and much cursing (sotto voce), the new supervisor made Alexandre write a diary of his day at the office. Together they analysed the activities he had undertaken and used this as a means of explicating the key questions that had implicitly driven Alexandre’s fieldwork. Once he had done this, Alexandre was able to formulate clear questions and to begin the real work of writing his thesis. His key question was ‘How do small dental practices deal with the dual imperatives of making money from a business and simultaneously acting in a professional capacity for their clients?’ An added benefit of this exercise was that his diary, the analysis of it, and the writing he had done on the questions, formed a strong, engaging and convincing introductory chapter for his thesis. Alexandre achieved his PhD with flying colours, but he would have saved himself much time and anxiety had he undertaken a similar exercise at the very beginning of his work.

In parallel with clarifying what exactly is engaging your interest, a good step is to visualise what you want to know about your topic and what you or others want to do with that knowledge or what impact you want it to have. You may want to do one or more of the following things:

- Satisfy your own intellectual curiosity.
- Make an intervention in or contribution to intellectual and theoretical debates.
- Influence policy makers.
- Raise others’ consciousness around particular issues.
- Get your PhD in the shortest possible time.
- Get issues on to agendas.
- Meet publication targets that have been imposed on you.

You need to think about what you want the finished product to look like and do, as this will be largely determined by the nature of the
questions you ask. As Rebecca’s old boss used to say, ‘Never ask a question if you don’t know what you are going to do with the answer.’ That is, there is an important and synergistic link between questions and final products.

Once your questions begin to take some sort of shape in your head, it is time to return to your hardback notebook and your word processor and write an exercise that Jane Miller, a well known British academic, has called ‘the autobiography of the question’. She suggests to students that they tell the story of how they became interested in the research question that they plan to address. Once they have written this story, they can move on from their own interest in the question to thinking about wider contexts and where their question sits in relation to the existing literature in the field.

This is something that we get all our students to do when they are starting a research project. The beauty of the exercise is that it forces you to do many of the things we have been urging on you up to now:

- It makes you think about where you are coming from on the topic and why it is interesting or important to you.
- It makes you think about the origins of the question.
- It encourages you to articulate the ‘so what?’-ness of the question.
- But, most important, it forces you to have a question (or two).

A really good suggestion that we’ve heard is to write your research questions on a nice piece of coloured card and pin it above your work space so that it is clearly visible. This should have the advantages of directly and immediately reminding you what your question is and of encouraging you to keep it short enough to fit on the card.
If you’ve started to formulate research questions, you have gone a good way towards beginning a research project. The next stage is to write a plan of your intended work to act as a guide and to make sure that you think through the major issues before you begin. In this chapter we will guide you through the process of writing research plans, or proposals, stage by stage. At each stage, we detail what you need to think about.

What is a research proposal?

Once you know what you want to do your research about and have formulated some research questions, you need to think about how you will actually carry out the research. Doing a research project always involves several different activities and sorts of thinking, some sequential, some running in parallel and some iterative.

Because research is a complex process, it’s always a good idea to write yourself a good plan of where you are going and what you are going to do along the way. In this way, you will have a kind of route map to guide you as you travel the research path. However, this path is a little like the roads in *Alice through the Looking Glass*: it sometimes changes direction when you are not looking. So it’s important to remember that you can’t rely on the map completely. You must keep revisiting it and adjusting it to your changing needs and directions.

These route maps are usually called research proposals. There are some situations in which you may well be required to write a research proposal. For example:

- If you want a place on a research degree programme.
- If you want a bursary to do a research degree.
- In some universities it will form part of a progression exam on a research degree programme.
If you are looking for funding for your research, however small, from your own university or some external funding body.

In some cases, especially when the research is in collaboration with or investigating an external body, that body will need to see the proposal in order to decide whether or not to give you access and assistance to do your research.

If you want your employer to give you time to do the research; for example, you may want a reduced teaching load or a sabbatical or paid time off from a non-university job to allow you to do the research.

You may need to get formal approval from your university that your proposed research conforms to certain ethical guidelines. In order to gain this approval, you will need to present a proposal.

In any case, even if you are not required to write a research proposal, it’s a really good idea to do one for your own benefit. Writing a research proposal will:

- Help you to be sure that you have a viable research project.
- Provide a clear ‘route map’ for the research.
- Enable you to identify any possible problems and issues with the proposed project.
- Assist you in choosing an appropriate supervisor or mentor who knows the area in which you are interested. (More on choosing mentors later.)
- Help your mentor or supervisor support you, as they will know what it is you are trying to do.
- Give a project a momentum of its own, almost a material form.
- Give you a reference point to monitor your progress as the project develops. This can give you a lot of confidence and a big boost to your morale.

**Writing research proposals**

What we will do now is take you through the generic stages and sections of a research proposal. Whatever your discipline or research area, you will need to give consideration to the matters we are about to describe. However, the language you use to address these may differ according to your disciplinary home, as will the relative weightings you give to the various aspects. Also, your proposal will need to be tailored
to the specific expectations of its various audiences, such as research funding bodies, PhD committees and so on. This is discussed further in *Winning and Managing Research Funding*. For your own purposes, your research proposal is likely to include a section on each of the following areas:

- Background and rationale: the ‘so what?’ -ness of the research topic.
- Research questions: what, precisely, are you trying to find out?
- Available literature: the public story so far.
- Theoretical frameworks: the e-word and the o-word.
- Methods: your investigative and analytical techniques.
- Ethical considerations: will your research do harm?
- Time scales: establishing phases and deadlines.
- Dissemination: getting it out and about.

Writing your proposal will be an iterative process, especially in relation to your reading and framing of questions, but remember that, like a lot of academic writing, proposals tend to read best if they are presented in a linear way. The order in which we have outlined the sections is not the only logical order possible and you will have to decide what works for your proposal, always remembering that what you present must be clear, coherent and cogent. Remember, also, that in an actual research process the various stages of research run concurrently, iteratively and sequentially.

**Background and rationale: the ‘so what?’ -ness of the research topic**

Now is the time to go back to your hardback notebook, as the notes that you made on your research topic and the ‘so what?’ -ness of it are about to come into their own.

This section needs to explain the background, issues and the ‘so what?’ -ness of your proposed research. As we explained before, the best research issues usually start because someone has been curious about the world immediately around them or has had their interest stimulated by something they have seen, heard or read. You might care to start with your own experiences, describing how it is that you came to be interested in the subject – a brief ‘autobiography of the question’.
The importance or ‘so what?’-ness of the proposed research will lie in the contribution you think it can make to knowledge, to intellectual and theoretical debates, to policy and practice in particular areas – in sum, to our understanding of the world. You need to use this section to convince the readers of the proposal (and yourself) that your project is worth the time and trouble.

Research questions: what, precisely, are you trying to find out?

It is essential to formulate your research questions very clearly and explicitly in your proposal. If you have more than one principal question, you may want to number them. If you have subsidiary questions, they should come immediately after the principal question they relate to. It is necessary to have an answerable question that is clear and sufficiently well defined/focused for you to do the research implied within an appropriate time-frame and the available resources.

If you work in an area in which you are required to put your questions in the form of formal hypotheses, these need to be very clearly stated and numbered. The usual convention is to number them as $H_1$, $H_2$, $H_3$ and so on.

Available literature: the public story so far

In developing your research topic and questions you will already have engaged with the literature sufficiently to be able to give a good account of what is known about the answers to your questions and which theories and concepts you expect to find particularly useful. The proposal itself will contain only a relatively short section on the existing literature, but what you write there will need to demonstrate that you know what you are doing and have a good idea of what has been done before.

To reiterate, this is not the same as reviewing the literature to find a gap, which, as we explained above, is a bit of a trap for unwary researchers. You will already have a fairly clear idea of what sort of thing you want to look at and therefore your visit to the literature isn’t to find a topic. Rather, the proposal needs to make two points clear on the subject of literature.
First, you need to talk about the work of others that provides empirical data and/or creative insights that contribute to answering your questions. This will demonstrate that you have refined your questions, and that the answers you eventually produce are likely be a real contribution to knowledge. You will be able to show what further evidence you need to collect to answer your research questions more fully.

Second, reference to the literature will enable you to pinpoint those theories and concepts useful to you in trying to make sense of your own research.

Most important, you must make a convincing case as to why your research would create valuable and useful knowledge that builds upon or challenges existing work in the field.

**Theoretical frameworks: the e-word and the o-word**

One of the problems we frequently see in research proposals is the absence of any explicit theoretical framework. Research without a theoretical framework is description and does not qualify as academic research or as a contribution to knowledge. We cannot say it too often or too loudly.

One of the biggest reasons why people avoid talking or writing about theory is that they feel excluded by the language which people use. In particular, it may take a long time to be confident in the use of commonly used words in academic writing (but not in the rest of the world) such as ‘epistemology’ and ‘ontology’.

Debbie, Rebecca and Jane all admit, to each other and now to you, that when they were novice researchers they had to return to the
dictionary many times to clarify their understanding of ‘epistemology’ and ‘ontology’. Here is our best attempt to explain them in readily understandable ways.

**Epistemology**

Here’s one of the many dictionary definitions that we find useful:

‘The philosophical theory of knowledge, which seeks to define it, distinguish its principal varieties, identify its sources, and establish its limits’

(from *The New Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought*)

What this means to us is that epistemology is a theoretical framework for making sense of how the world works or some aspect of how the world works. It’s about what counts as knowledge in your world view. For example, all three of us are feminists and we see feminism as an epistemology. What this means, in practice, is that the lens through which we view the world is shaped by certain understandings about gender, power and the position of women. So an epistemology may be defined as a particular sort of lens that allows you to make sense of some aspect of the world around you in a particular way. Different lenses (different epistemologies) will obviously give different views. No epistemology can give you a total view of the world, because they only allow you to see from particular perspectives. So it’s useful to have a whole range of epistemologies available. Foucault conceptualised this as a theory toolbox.

Everybody, in daily life, no matter what they do, makes sense of the world according to their understandings and theories about it. These may take the form of religious beliefs or common sense or cultural values or social norms and they may not be explicit or apparent even to the person themselves. What distinguishes academic research epistemologies from these everyday epistemologies is that they are expected to be explicit, rigorously defined and robust. That is why we call them theories. You cannot make sense of your data without an epistemology/theory.
If ‘epistemology’ is about what counts as knowledge, ‘ontology’ is concerned with the nature of the knower. It is about how our place in the world, identity and embodied experiences impact on the way in which we see the world and, consequentially, the epistemologies that we find meaningful and useful. It follows that our ontological perspective will have a significant impact on which epistemologies we are drawn to and how we use them. We’ve noticed that the early authors in new fields of enquiry such as gender, race, sexuality and disability are often ontologically steeped in the issues they are investigating: they are women, ethnic minority people, lesbian or gay people, or people with mental or physical impairments.

In your ‘autobiography of the question’ you will have begun, either implicitly or possibly explicitly, to make connections between your own ontology and epistemology.

We do not believe that any knowledge is ‘objective’ or that researchers can take a god-like stance as knowers. It is therefore important to be clear, up-front and honest about your ontology and epistemology in your research. This will enable your readers to understand where you are coming from and to make a judgement on the quality of your work based on that understanding. Saying who you are and where you are coming from will not stop people who genuinely believe in the possibility of ‘objective truth’ from criticising you for being partial and subjective. But at least, in contrast to them, you will have been honest about your subjectivity and partiality. And remember, subjectivity is not and should never be synonymous with lack of rigour. Being clear about your frameworks is part of that rigour.

You should therefore use your proposal to clarify what theoretical resources you will be drawing on and why. There should, therefore, be clear linkages between this discussion and your discussion of the literature. In particular, you need to explain the relevance and usefulness of your theoretical framework to your proposed project. You need to give particular consideration, at this point, to the issues that
loom large within your chosen theoretical framework and how they will affect the research process.

**Methodology and methods: your investigative and analytical techniques**

Definitions of methodology differ confusingly and vary greatly between disciplines. However, a reasonable definition is that it is the package of epistemology, ontology and method that shapes and informs your research project. People in different disciplines have different methodological approaches:

Methods are the ways in which you go about collecting, locating or creating the material you are going to analyse and the associated practical techniques. For example:

- A cultural theorist might use auto/biography, stories and myths, novels, poetry and plays, visual images, films and television programmes, newspapers and so on.
- People in the creative arts often produce a work of art, a play or an exhibition and write an exegesis of it.
- An art historian might use both cultural artefacts and archival material about the people who created and consumed them.
- An economist might garner government statistical data and use this to construct a model to generate research results.
- A sociologist might go out and interview people, participate in some aspect of their lives or distribute survey questionnaires.

It’s difficult to find a collective name for all the different kinds of material mentioned here. In the social sciences, it tends to be called ‘data’ and, for convenience, we will use this term. But remember that we are using the term inclusively.

Finally, there are research traditions that don’t rely on data, even as broadly defined. These are the types of research – such as pure mathematics, logic and some branches of philosophy and theology – which are purely conceptual and directed at the resolution of abstract problems.
We’ve already explained that the proposal mirrors the research process itself and therefore, like research, your proposal must represent a coherent and integrated process. The questions you are seeking to address, together with your epistemological perspectives, will inform the methods you choose. The methods you decide to use should enable you collect and analyse the data that you need in order to answer your questions using your chosen epistemological perspectives. Figure 3 gives a visual image of the kinds of processes and linkages discussed so far that should be explicit in your proposal.

To summarise, this section of a research proposal should consist of a detailed description and justification of how you will actually go about collecting and analysing your data. That is, what data will you collect, how will you collect it and how will it be analysed? You need to justify why these are the best methods for your question(s).

Use your imagination in solving the problem of how to collect the data that you need. People often resort to what seems like the simplest, easiest and even the most ‘objective’ method of data collection. This is not necessarily the best method for answering the questions you are trying to ask. Methods such as questionnaires, for example, may evoke feelings of fatigue and ennui among the target recipients, especially if those recipients have no empathy with, or particular interest in, what you are researching. On the other hand, where people feel strongly
about an issue a questionnaire may be a very good source of data. At Rebecca’s university, for example, a long and detailed questionnaire survey to all staff about the research culture in the institution produced a very healthy and very rapid response rate. Rebecca attributes this to the fact that staff were either antithetical to research or deeply committed to it. Either way, everyone was very keen to have their say.

Helen and James demonstrated admirable ingenuity and imagination in designing their data collection methods.

---

**Helen**

Helen, a marketing academic, was researching people’s food shopping and consumption habits. She needed to know what they bought and how they used it. Rather than simply send out a questionnaire or carry out an interview based on memory, she asked her respondents to write a list of the foodstuffs in their fridges and cupboards. She used the list as the basis of a guided discussion with the respondents.

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**James**

James was doing research in cultural studies/sociology on how children form their identities, including how they see ‘home’ and the part it plays in who they think they are. As a starting point, he gave the children a disposable camera and asked them to take photographs of ‘home’ (that is, whatever ‘home’ meant to them). When he had developed the photographs (including several of front doors and pets) he used them to discuss with the children why those particular images meant ‘home’ to them.

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Practical matters such as whether or not you will get physical access to the data you need or whether you have the practical skills you need to access it are real considerations in research design. Will you have enough time to collect the data required? Will your data collection requirements stretch the goodwill of those on whom you depend for access?

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In 1945 the border between Germany and Poland was redrawn and some formerly German territory became part of Poland. As a result, many of the regional government records relating to the formerly German territories passed into Polish archives and were often catalogued in Polish. Cathy
was a fluent German-speaker but her Polish was non-existent. Access to these crucial records was therefore dependent not only on obtaining funding for research trips to Poland, but also on learning enough Polish to interrogate the catalogues and negotiate with Polish archivists.

In this section, it is absolutely essential to describe not only how you will collect your data but also how you will analyse it. Data analysis is often scantily done or left out completely. This seriously weakens many proposals.

Data analysis needs two things: first, an appropriate theoretical lens through which to view and make sense of the material collected; second, appropriate tools and techniques to organise, categorise, sift and manage it. You will need to refer back to your theoretical framework and your research questions to be absolutely sure that you explain how you will use and address them in your analysis of your data.

Explain what skills you will need and whether you have them or how you will acquire them. Think about the particular software or other tools available (see later in this book), and how you will acquire the skills to use them. It’s a good idea to visualise yourself sitting down with your carefully collected data and asking ‘What do I do now? How do I make sense of all of this?’

**Ethical considerations: will your research do harm?**

Later in this book we will give detailed consideration to ethical practice in research. For the proposal, you will need to ensure that your reader is confident that you have thought carefully about the ethical dimensions of your proposed research and, where appropriate, that you intend to comply with all relevant ethical guidelines and procedures. Sometimes research may have no obvious ethical issues attached to it. However, we think that research completely devoid of any ethical considerations or consequences whatsoever is a virtual impossibility.

**Time scales: establishing phases and deadlines**

It is important to map out a reasonable schedule of your work so that you can monitor your progress and manage your project effectively. If your project is externally funded, bear in mind that your funders may also ask for a time schedule and even ask you to report against it. Start
with your intended finishing date and do not underestimate the amount of time that it takes to polish your draft writing into a finished product.

In Table 3, we show the timeline of a real project involving a number of researchers. On this project the researchers had to juggle a number of conflicting time constraints. These included the time scale that the organisation under investigation imposed, the need to use research assistants and also the proposers’ own busy schedules. Note that many of the activities are concurrent.

### Making an impact: getting it out and about

You need to make a clear statement in your proposal about how you intend your work to have an impact. We deal with this issue in much more detail in *Building Networks*. Making an impact may involve three different sorts of dissemination of your research output.

#### To other academics

A key indicator of the worth of much research is whether it is publishable in refereed academic journals, as an academic book or as a chapter in an academic book. You may like to give some consideration at this stage to what sorts of things may be publishable and where you would like them to appear.

Also think about which conferences you may wish to give papers at. This may involve conferences that will give you high academic visibility, which can help with your career prospects, but just as important is to find smaller conferences where you can have a good and detailed discussion about your work and get constructive feedback that will help you improve your papers and other writing. If you are seeking funding for your project, you may be able to ask for money to go to these conferences as part of the research funds.

This kind of dissemination is especially important if you wish to pursue a career as an academic in a university.

#### To relevant non-academic users and beneficiaries of your research

These may include people who were involved in the research process as gatekeepers and/or respondents, possibly the people who funded your
### TABLE 3  Women’s participation in research activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Task</th>
<th>Responsibilities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2002 May</td>
<td>Advertise researcher posts internally</td>
<td>PMG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Submission of proposal and consent procedures to university ethics committee</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 June</td>
<td>Interviews for researcher posts</td>
<td>RA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 September</td>
<td>Project starts</td>
<td>RA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September–December</td>
<td>Initial literature review (reading of the literature continues throughout the project)</td>
<td>RA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September–December</td>
<td>Analysis of secondary data on women in science</td>
<td>RA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September–October</td>
<td>Design of research instruments</td>
<td>RA, PMG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October</td>
<td>Advisory group meeting to advise on research design and access</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>End October</td>
<td>Submission of survey questionnaire and interview schedule to ethics committee</td>
<td>RA, PMG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November</td>
<td>Distribution of survey questionnaire</td>
<td>RA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December–Early January 2003</td>
<td>Survey data entry</td>
<td>Casual employee(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December–January 2003</td>
<td>Interview recruitment</td>
<td>RA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January</td>
<td>Survey data analysis</td>
<td>RA, PMG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February–June</td>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>RA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May–July</td>
<td>Interview data analysis</td>
<td>RA, PMG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July–September</td>
<td>Preparation of report</td>
<td>RA, PMG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September</td>
<td>Draft report to advisory group</td>
<td>PMG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October</td>
<td>Dissemination of report Seminar to present findings</td>
<td>RA, PMG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003–4</td>
<td>Conference attendance Preparation/submission of papers for publication</td>
<td>RA, PMG</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*PMG Project Management Group. RA Research Associate.*
research and, indeed, anyone else or any other groups who might find your work of use or interest.

The form of such dissemination may include a workshop for policy users, articles in appropriate professional journals or newspapers, a popular book, magazine articles or public lectures. For instance, if you were conducting research into children and young people, you might want to hold a special conference for such groups of people and include it in the costings and dissemination strategy.

**Through the popular media**

This means of dissemination can reach wider audiences and, if well done, can be effective and very beneficial to your personal research profile and that of your university. However, media exposure is fraught with dangers and we would strongly advise you to seek professional help, support and training in how to deal with journalists. Your institution’s press office should be able to help in this regard. A good way of attracting media attention is by producing good press releases. Again, your institution’s press office, if there is one, should be able to guide you in this. If you anticipate that your research will attract media interest, make sure that there are plans for dealing with it in your proposal, especially if that interest is likely to be hostile.

**And finally . . .**

When you have done all this and have a complete draft research proposal, get other people, your peers as well as those more experienced than you, to read it and comment. This will help you to revise the proposal before you proceed further. That way, you will ensure that you start off on a firm footing.
Doing your Project

This is a very practical chapter. In it we include practical advice and handy hints, tools of the trade, writing, coping with uncertainty and dealing with problems.

Now that my proposal is done, what next?

If you’ve prepared a good proposal, you’ve already started your research project. This planning phase is a bit like planning a big vacation trip abroad. So what have you done so far?

• You’ve identified where you want to go – or rather, you have a topic.
• You’ve started to familiarise yourself with the place you are going to by reading the tour guides and novels about the area – in other words, you’ve started to engage with the literature.
• You’ve decided precisely where you’re going to stay and why – that is, you have framed your research questions.
• You’ve packed your bags with everything that you think you might need at this point – just like your suitcase, your theory toolbox is full of useful stuff for making sense of your work.
• You’ve decided what you are going to do when you are there – that is, what data you need and how you will collect and analyse it.
• You’ve thought about your impact as a tourist on the environment you’re visiting – in other words, what the ethical dimensions of your research are and how you will deal with them.
• You have your dates for your holiday and all your bookings are made for going away and returning – in other words, you’ve established a sensible schedule for getting all the work done.

A bit like being very well planned for your holidays, having a good proposal makes you feel confident and relaxed and lets you enjoy
yourself more, but plans don’t have to be rigidly kept to if there are good reasons for changing them. If you arrive at your hotel and you don’t like it, it’s better to find one you do like than to have a miserable time. Or you might go on holiday and find that there’s a much more interesting place to stay than the one you had planned, possibly one with fewer tourists and more surprises. Inexperienced tourists are more likely to have to adapt their plans as they go along; they don’t know the good places or the perils of distant locations. In the same way, less experienced researchers should expect to have to modify and adapt their plans as they gain knowledge, experience and confidence in their areas.

What all this means is that you will need to return at regular intervals to your research proposal in order to think about whether you are still on track and whether you need to adapt your plans in the light of what you have done so far, the knowledge you have gained, the additional reading you’ve done and other events. A very short project, such as a masters dissertation, may not need you to do this. There is a direct correlation between the length and size of a project and the extent to which the proposal will need to be adapted during the course of the research.

Practical points for budding researchers

Research journals

We usually call our hardback notebooks research journals. Other people call them research diaries or research notebooks. What you call them is your own business. The important thing is to have them and to use them sensibly. They are the single most important tool of your research career.

Many academics seem to be obsessed with using the latest technology. Students often ask if they can keep their research journals on their computers. We don’t think this is a good idea. The whole point about the hardback notebook is that you can: take it to fieldwork sites and into libraries and archives; take it on the bus or train; keep it by the side of your bed; leaf through it in the bath; take it on holiday; staple things into it; easily draw pictures or diagrams; and easily show it to your mentors or supervisors.
People also often ask us what they should write in their research journal. Our answer is that, like any diary or journal, it’s personal to you and should contain what you find useful. Figure 4 is a picture of the sorts of things that we keep in our research journals and the vignette below illustrates one way of using them.

**FIGURE 4** What to write in your research journal
When Miranda was doing her PhD she started her first research journal in a big red hardback book. She took it into the school where she was collecting her data and the children very quickly took to calling it ‘your big red book’. Even when she had filled up her first notebook and gone on to the second, which was not red, the children continued to refer to it as ‘your big red book’. She used the journal to make notes of her observations in the playground and classrooms, to write down snippets of conversation that she overheard and to draw maps of how the children were using the space, and diagrams of how she was thinking. The children regularly used to ask her to show them what she had written about them, which she did. As they got to know her better, and became more confident with her, they would ask if they could write or draw in her book from time to time. The notebook thus contained children’s writing and drawing as well as Miranda’s.

Look after yourself

Research is hard work. Don’t make it harder by failing to take good care of your mental and physical well-being. Sleep, rest and relaxation are not unwarranted time-out from research but essential ways of keeping yourself going. Obsessive overwork is bad not only for you but also for your colleagues and your family. And it doesn’t necessarily lead to the best research.

It may sound obvious, but don’t put yourself in dangerous situations if you can possibly avoid it. Build in safety routes and mechanisms to protect yourself. If you are going to do fieldwork, make sure that somebody knows where you are going and when you should be coming back. In this day and age of mobile phones, it’s a very good idea to carry one at all times and keep it on, with the ringer set on silent so that it doesn’t disturb your research. Don’t be neglectful of little things that can become big problems. It’s okay to make decisions based on personal safety considerations about what research you will and won’t do.

Trupti was a young South African Indian researcher. She was doing an ethnographic study of several different kinds of school in post-apartheid South Africa. Because of the high level of violence in certain
parts of the country and in particular schools, she and her supervisor discussed in detail where she should go, and she avoided going to schools (and types of schools) where she might be in danger of being raped or suffering other serious violence. Even though this meant that she did not explore every possible type of school, she completed an excellent PhD that made a significant contribution to knowledge.

On a much lighter note, it’s crucially important to build in treats for yourself to ensure that sometimes you do things just because they’re nice for you. Treats can be as big or little as seems appropriate. They might include: eating more chocolate than is good for you, taking the dog for a walk; stopping work to watch a soap on TV, going on holiday, going to the theatre, reading a trashy novel, chatting to friends on the phone or cooking a nice meal. Choose your own poison, but we would avoid making tobacco, alcohol or other drugs your principal rewards or coping strategies.

File it!

It’s important to develop a good hard copy and computer filing system for your research project because it helps you to:

- Keep track of all of the materials relating to your research project.
- Keep valuable things safe.
- Establish a complete history or audit trail of your project that complements your research notebooks.
- Work efficiently and find things that you need when you need them.
- Know what materials you have.
- Manage the project.
- Develop a personal archive of research materials that you and your research collaborators and students may use in the future.

The types of materials you may accumulate include:

- Photocopies of papers.
- Newspaper cuttings.
• Your project proposal.
• Old notebooks.
• Letters and other correspondence.
• Drafts of pieces of writing. Old drafts can be very useful if you lose all your electronic copies of work – at least you can scan in an older version to help you recover from the loss.
• Drafts with comments written on them by others. You will find most people unwilling to repeat the exercise if you carelessly lose their notes.
• Official forms.
• Details of monies spent or expenses claimed. University accounts systems, worldwide, are inherently fallible – so keep your own records.
• Books, pamphlets, reports, etc.
• Photographs.
• Audio and video-tapes or mini-disks.
• CDs, computer diskettes or memory sticks with back-ups of electronic material. Such back-ups of current work should be made at least once a day when you are writing intensively and at least once a week at other times.

You will acquire a lot of things that really need to be kept safe. This means not just filing them carefully but also protecting them from the extremes of temperature and the ravages of children and family pets. If something like copies of computer files are irreplaceable then keep copies in different locations.

Eiko, a student at Kobe in Japan, was finalising her masters dissertation at the very moment when the massive and destructive earthquake of 1995 occurred. As the earthquake developed momentum, she quickly saved her dissertation on a diskette and ran out into the street clutching it to her chest. It was her only copy.

You have to devise your own system for keeping these materials in an accessible and methodical way appropriate to your project and way of working. Possible methods include:
• A series of box files.
• Putting things in plastic pockets (we like plastic pockets a lot) and filing them in lever-arch files.
• Plastic crates.
• A special place on your bookshelves.
• A drawer(s) in a filing cabinet.

Don’t wait until things get in a mess and you have a huge and dispiriting pile of what looks like rubbish in the middle of your office floor. Neither should your computer desktop be in chaos – you also need to develop systems for electronic filing and labelling. It might be a good idea to set a regular time, maybe when you know that your mental energy tends to be quite low, to do your filing. On the other hand, don’t run away with the notion that endless hours spent devising ever more sophisticated filing systems constitute research work.

Work avoidance and security zones

Work avoidance is something that everybody does and everybody beats themselves up about. If anyone tells you that they don’t do it, then they are lying, probably to undermine your confidence. Take no notice.

Reasonable amounts of ‘work avoidance’ activity are perfectly normal and acceptable, even desirable. We will come back to this later. So don’t
worry if, when you get stuck doing a piece of writing, or when you mean to make a start early in the morning on something difficult, you end up making yourself endless cups of coffee, reading the newspaper, cleaning the house, doing the crossword or taking the dog for an extra-long walk. You probably need this time and space to get yourself and your brain into gear. Remember that good research is, at least in part, a creative process and most people can’t be creative ‘to order’.

Avoidance becomes a problem only when these activities squeeze out time for work and you end up not doing it at all or being so late that you miss important, immovable deadlines.

Some activities that look like work avoidance are actually important ways of giving ourselves a comfort and security zone that enables us to work. As the following vignettes demonstrate, particular rituals may be an important part of the working day, especially when what you are doing is done on your own and is difficult and/or intensive and intimidating, as the stories below show.

Ng is a social psychologist who also trains other academics in the use of software for data handling and analysis. Despite his advanced computing skills, he confesses that he cannot start a piece of academic writing unless he is sitting at his desk in his comfortable study, wearing his ‘white writing shirt’ and using his ‘nice fountain pen’.

Helen, now sadly dead, made her own bread. When asked how she found the time to do it, she said, ‘Whenever I’ve got a really busy day at home, working on my research, I make a loaf of bread.’ She explained that the various physical activities, which need to be done at different times throughout the day, of mixing and kneading the dough were important ways of pacing herself and giving herself a bit of a break and a structure. She also said that the sensual pleasure of the smell and taste of the freshly baked bread were a major treat at the end of her day’s work.

Time and motion

It’s important to think about how you will organise, protect and use your research time. Very few people are in the fortunate position of
being genuinely full-time researchers. Even full-time doctoral students usually have to do some teaching or other paid work and full-time contract researchers often get dragged into administrative work in their organisations.

If you are a university teacher or part-time research student, your research time is likely to be quite constrained and very precious. It is treacherously easy for your research to become the part of your work that slips off the edge of your over-full in-tray – destined to disappear into oblivion. You need, therefore, to think and act proactively about strategies for ensuring that your precious time is ring-fenced, safeguarded and used well.

Diana Leonard, a well known British academic, uses a modified version of Parkinson’s Law to explain what happens to research time. She says that there are four different kinds of work that research students and academics have to do:

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<td>urgent and important</td>
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She maintains that the urgent and trivial invariably drives out the non-urgent but important. Of course, research work is usually non-urgent but important. The trick is to forget about the trivial, whether urgent or not, and concentrate on the important.

The best sort of research time is that which is ‘joined up’. That is, it comes in significant chunks, where you can really bury yourself in what you are doing without the interruption of teaching, other work, family, meetings, etc. Never underestimate the amount of time it takes to get back into a project that you have had to put on one side, even for a few days. You will not work effectively if you try to do your
research in the ‘odd hour’ here and there. It just won’t work like that. If you teach, you must try to ensure that your teaching timetable is compacted into the smallest possible space so that you have consecutive, whole days to spend on your research.

Another good way of protecting time is to spend your research time away from places where you will be interrupted. For many academics, this means staying at home, though if you have young children or other responsibilities it may not. It may mean, if you really need some headspace, renting a cottage on a remote island away from the phone, your family and the email. Less expensively, it may mean having a study at home well away from the other inhabitants of the house.

Margaret is a political scientist. She was desperately trying to finish her first book, but had a time-devouring family. She resolved this situation, on her limited budget, by buying a kit garden shed and erecting it in the backyard. She fitted it out so that it was homely and spent her research time in there.

For most busy academics the real time-vulture is pointless bureaucracy that seems to engulf us at an ever-increasing rate. People in more junior posts and those on marginalised forms of employment contracts (fixed-term or untenured) are in a difficult position here, as they may feel obliged or even coerced into doing this sort of work. There are two strategies that you can employ to help you. First, you can do what you have to do but don’t get sucked into it and never believe that it is truly important. The second is with care and good grace, to ‘just say no’. That is, don’t go to meetings unless you really need to be there. Give your apologies and explain that you are (1) in an archive, (2) conducting an interview, (3) giving a research presentation at another university, (4) trying desperately to finish a book/chapter/paper that will attract prestige to your institution/department, (5) ill or (6, a favourite among some) ‘at another meeting’. If you are an academic and you are giving your students a good deal and doing your research well, then you justify your salary without getting bogged down in what is usually bureaucracy invented by people who can neither teach nor research well but who are trying to justify their salaries. Have confidence on this.
Fiona is a busy Australian academic and successful researcher. Her university funded her to go to an overseas conference to deliver a research paper. On her return she was pestered with a series of increasingly imperative demands from her ‘line manager’ to submit a report on the conference. In fact she was busy running a research centre and writing her next paper. Eventually she relented and wrote her report. It read, in its Caesarean entirety, ‘I went, I delivered, I returned.’ The report was accepted and filed, in the right folder, in the right file and on the right shelf, where no-one ever looked at it again. We think Fiona got the balance just right.

In describing how to write a research proposal we urged you to include a time schedule for the completion of the research project. The reason was that it is very useful to have deadlines and to try to stick to them. Schedules help you to manage your time.

Try to define your schedules by setting regular milestones for achievement – small packages of work that together, and cumulatively, constitute the whole project. This not only boosts your morale as you can tick them off, but also gives you a sense of climbing a series of small hillocks rather than scaling Mount Everest in one go. Milestones also help your mentors to gain a sense of what progress you are making with the work.

In setting yourself a timetable, particularly for writing, you should always estimate how long you think something will take and then build in a comfortable margin for the inevitable slippages that occur.

When writing something specific, set yourself a daily timetable. If you finish your allotted work early, take the rest of the day off and go and treat yourself.

**Don’t mess about**

Doing any research requires the tolerance, co-operation and assistance of other people. Such people include: mentors and supervisors; research respondents; your employer; your family; your research collaborators; other students if you are on a course; librarians and archivists; publishers; funders; etc.

Conducting research is inherently problematic in that it’s not always possible to do what you’ve said you will do, or to stick to the
schedules and deadlines that you set yourself or that others have imposed on you. Sometimes failure to keep to your commitments and delays is really unavoidable. You may have to work around such issues as serious illness, bereavement, having to cover for a colleague at work or unexpected problems with the planned research.

Despite these facts of life, it is incumbent upon you, as the researcher, to make every reasonable effort to do what you say you will do in an efficient and timely way. For example, if you agree to meet someone whom you are going to interview and you have agreed a time, a place and the length of the meeting, you should honour that agreement.

If you can’t keep to your commitments you must, at the earliest opportunity, explain the problems to those affected and develop a strategy for rectifying them. Most people are very understanding if you keep them informed of what’s happening. This kind of honesty will help you develop good relations with all those people who are essential to your research.

**Take note(s)**

You need to take notes on your reading, and some people like to keep these separate from their research journals. You will use the notes for many projects and for many years to come. You don’t want to have to try desperately to remember which project you were doing when you read a particular article or book in order to find your notes. Try to develop a system that suits you.

**Tools of the trade**

So far, our discussion of research equipment has been quite low-tech and confined to the joys of nice stationery. It’s time to get technical. We take it as axiomatic that researchers will be able to use popular word-processing packages. By the way, it is well worth getting yourself a typing tutor program and spending the time learning to touch-type. This may slow you down for a while if you are a fast two-finger typist but will bring its rewards in the medium and long term. There are other standard software tools, such as Excel and PowerPoint, which it may be well worth learning to use.

In addition to these standard tools, there exist a number of software packages designed for, and some designed by, academics. These fall into two broad camps: those that help us organise our research materials and those that are analytical tools.
We find that you really learn how to use a software package only when you need to use it. Software training courses that are unconnected with reasonably immediate use get consigned to your mental dustbin unless they are of the brief ‘taster’ sort designed to show you the capabilities of the software and give you enough confidence to get going on your own.

The one software device that we regard as absolutely essential for all researchers, no matter what their topic, and regardless of their discipline, is a bibliographic database program. There are many different software packages that do this job, the most common of which are EndNote, Reference Manager and ProCite (all pretty similar). What can you do with a bibliographic database?

- You can input the complete bibliographic details of anything that you may wish to use or cite in your work. This includes: books, journal articles, websites, book chapters, manuscripts and other archival material, statutes, films, newspaper articles, television programmes, maps, theses, scores, letters, works of art and many more. The program will have a pre-set way of recording most of these and it will also be possible to customise your recording method and the type of thing you record according to your needs or the conventions in your discipline.
- You can make notes on the individual database records. This can vary from key words and short abstracts to extensive and detailed note taking.
- You can use the database, once you have compiled it, to search for material that you have recorded by author, subject, title, key words, medium and so on. You can then generate specific bibliographies for your own use or for others.
- Best of all, these packages have dynamic links with many word-processing programs. This means that you can insert citations as you write, using a special command. When you have finished your work, another command results in the automatic generation of a list of references at the end of your document. Using this facility is likely to save you hours of heartache and hard work at the end of a major project. We think it is like magic.
These programs also have the facility to allow you to choose the style of the referencing to suit the journal or publisher or university regulations that you have to comply with; they also have many built-in reference styles as well as the facility to add your own. It is worth checking, however, how suitable the particular program is for your discipline, as some of them are more oriented towards scientific disciplines.

- If you are working collaboratively, you can store the database on a networked system so that all the researchers in your team have common access to it.
- The Internet access functions of these databases allow you to access and download publications databases and also to launch URLs from your own database.

These software packages are extremely powerful tools, with many different functions. You may only use a few of them – but those few will be a lifeline.

It is likely that your university will have site licences for one or more of these packages. If it hasn’t, you should lobby hard for one to be adopted and for the kind of licence to be bought that allows members of the university to put it on to their machine at home. Stress to your administrators that most academics do most of their academic writing at home and therefore a licence that allows people to use the program only at work is virtually useless. Because most of these databases are very similar, you don’t need to worry if you move to a new job where they have a licence for a different program. You are likely to be able to import your library from your old program to your new one quite easily.

Carmen was doing her PhD in Spanish literature and had to use archives in several different countries. She put EndNote on her laptop and took it to the archives. She used EndNote not only for bibliographic purposes, but also to make notes on each manuscript that she examined as she was doing it. This database was crucially useful both in her analysis of the data and in writing and referencing her thesis.
There are a number of sophisticated software packages written specifically to assist researchers with data handling and analysis. Some of them are for qualitative material and some for quantitative. Some of the qualitative packages allow the use of ‘mixed methods’. That is, they will handle both qualitative and quantitative data.

Why do you need help handling data? If you have qualitative data, then it is likely that you have reams and reams of transcripts or notes or documents. The sheer physical difficulty of searching through these to identify themes pertinent to your analysis, or of finding particular passages or quotes, or of simply keeping track of what you have got and where, cannot be underestimated. Traditionally this task was undertaken manually. Rebecca is used to using coloured pens on the back of old rolls of wallpaper. Debbie also likes coloured pens, with different colours for each theme on the left-hand side of her text, and writes comments on the right-hand side. She also does things like cutting up paper and putting it in different places. Jane uses text highlighting on her computer screen. We know of people who cut up their interview transcripts and peg bits that they might want to quote on a washing line strung across their office.

Software packages promise some help in handling data. The best known qualitative data handling package on the market so far is NVivo, which is a close cousin of NUD*IST. It is said that NUD*IST and NVivo were developed by an Australian sociologist and her partner when she became frustrated at the sheer difficulty of analysing a very large quantity of qualitative interview data – particularly when her young child disrupted all her carefully arranged piles of cut-up interview transcripts.

Software data handling packages allow you to do two principal things. First, you can input any written or visual material in an electronic format. You can catalogue this, code it and search it. Second, within the program you can establish the themes through which you are analysing your data. Using these, you can then search your inputted data for material relevant to that particular theme or themes. Data handling packages do not analyse your data for you, but can take the tedium and risk out of more manual methods of data analysis. Saying you will use NVivo, or any similar package, in a research proposal is not synonymous with explaining how you will analyse the data.
Perhaps the reasons why people need software to help them with analysing quantitative data are more obvious. No-one really wants to sit and crunch through vast numbers of calculations, only to find that the answer wasn’t that useful after all. Software packages for quantitative analysis have been around for a good time and there are many of them. The most common ones are SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Scientists) and Microdata. There are many training courses and written training materials available to help people become acquainted with these packages.

**Web tools and skills**

Another essential skill is the ability to work effectively on the Internet. You need to be confident searching the Web, at the very least, and should experiment with different search engines to find one that suits your needs best. The Web can be a useful source of secondary data, literature and information crucial to your research. It is also a great way of searching libraries and you must be able to use the electronic databases to be found there. You will need a password for some of these, which can be obtained via your own university library. In addition, most major journal publishers now make articles in their journals available electronically, and there are some journals available only on-line. In order to access journal articles you, or your library, may well need to have a print and/or electronic subscription to that journal.

Some people are now making the Internet a major data-gathering tool. For example, you could:

- Set up a Web-based conference for your respondents to talk together.
- Ask respondents to send you email diaries and maintain a correspondence with them.
- Analyse conversations in Internet chat rooms.
- Read newspaper articles from around the world on a particular event.

If you do not feel confident using Web-based resources, do go and get help. Everybody had to learn some time. Librarians are often an excellent source of support and assistance in using the Internet in a whole variety of ways.
We offer you plenty of advice about writing styles, practices and publication in *Writing for Publication*. But it is worth making a few points here, if only to impress on you the real importance of starting to develop good writing habits and skills early in your research career.

Writing is often something that inexperienced researchers (and sometimes more experienced ones too) feel very anxious about. Having other people read your work can make you feel exposed and vulnerable. This fear can often make people put off writing for as long as possible. Often inexperienced researchers feel that, a bit like having all their ducks in a row before they shoot, they have to have accumulated every scrap of evidence, read every book and conceived of every idea before they put pen to paper or finger to keyboard. This is dangerous for two reasons.

First, there are remarkably few people who naturally write fluently, clearly and elegantly. Writing, like bricklaying or plastering, is an apparently prosaic skill that can actually be developed only by frequent and regular practice. The more writing you do, and the more constructive criticism you take note of, the better your writing will become. It is no good being precious or defensive about it. If you show your writing, as you should, to your supervisor, mentor and peers, you should expect to have it returned to you, especially in the early stages, covered in comments and suggestions. The only time when you are entitled to get upset about this is if they use a red pen (any other colour is fine) or if the comments are rude, unhelpful or both.

Second, in the social sciences and humanities especially, writing is an integral part of the research process. Even in laboratory-based scientific research, the process of articulating the work in its final written form is often a rewriting of the researcher’s laboratory notebooks. Writing is the means by which you achieve real unity with your data, sort out your ideas, articulate your thoughts, decide where you’ve gone wrong, discover the holes in your theory, work out what you really think and so on.

We share Karen Locke and Karen Golden-Biddle’s (see Further Reading for details) serious pet hate for the notion of someone completing their research and then sitting down to ‘write it up’. The image that this phrase calls to mind is of an athlete deciding to run a marathon but to delay breathing until they pass the finishing line.
Your first attempts at writing will probably be schematic and eventually subject to substantial change. No-one can produce brilliant first drafts, and you should not be expected to do so either. One of Rebecca’s students told her that he had been surprised when he looked at the log of his MBA dissertation file: he had redrafted the entire document thirty-seven times. His MBA dissertation was awarded a distinction – the highest possible mark. Most people don’t redraft quite as often as that, but all successful academics redraft many, many times. The longer the piece of work the more redrafting will take place.

It’s never too soon to start writing. Having stuff on paper gives you a real and justified sense of making progress. It develops your essential writing skills. It makes the task of completing your final written work far less onerous and daunting. It means you have something to show for your hours of work, and that can be important if you are accountable for your time. If you need to talk about your work with others, you have something to give them that will form the concrete basis for a discussion.

Ultimately you need to become your own most effective critic so that you are not dependent on supervisors, mentors or other critical friends. This doesn’t mean you stop using them, but it does mean that you will be able to present them with a good-quality draft. This will avoid imposing on busy people’s time and goodwill and will help them to give you better advice.

When is enough ‘enough’?

There are two problems here: those people who are over-confident with no good reason and those who are under-confident with no good reason.

Over-confident researchers stop thinking and rush to publish before they have anything of interest to say. They are often very unreflective about their research projects and their work tends to be un- or under-theorised. If you are reading this book it is not at all likely that you are in this category, but you do need to be able to recognise such people, particularly when they try to undermine you and your confidence. They are usually wearing the Emperor’s New Clothes.

Conversely, we’ve talked previously about how some academics suffer from compulsive over-achievement combined with lack of confidence. The fear of being exposed as an academic fraud or interloper is often particularly intense among inexperienced researchers. But
even established researchers may continue to feel that way in certain circumstances. These common feelings, especially (but not only) among women, can make finishing a project quite difficult. It takes a long time and a lot of experience to get over such feelings, and they may well continue to lurk under the surface. They tend to inhibit us from feeling that we have ‘done enough’ on a project and, at their worst, can lead to a kind of paralysis.

We can only advise you that many people feel the same. You need to develop a realistic assessment of the quality of your own work and trust the judgement of those who are helping you. If you have good sources of advice (and we’ll be talking about how to access this in the next section) you should believe them if they say that you have done enough. Remember that no piece of work is ever perfect and the best is the enemy of the good. Seeking perfection is a fool’s errand. Our mottoes are:

Don’t get it right, get it written.
Write it, then get it right.

There’s a second feeling that stops us from stopping. This is where we continue to see interesting and unexplored corners in our research topic. We think that we have to keep going to cover every base and every theoretical eventuality. This is an inability to recognise when a research project has reached the stage where it possesses academic integrity and coherence, and can assume its rightful place as part of a body of knowledge. A good proposal and tightly focused research questions will all help to keep you on track here.
Graínne was at the end of her doctoral studies and close to submitting her thesis. Her work was on the consumption of Guinness and Irish national identity. Part of her argument was that Guinness did not advertise itself as particularly Irish in the UK or the USA. However, just as she was finalising her thesis the company produced a new advertising campaign that made explicit reference to the Irishness of Guinness. Graínne was thrown into a state of panic, thinking that she should revisit her entire argument and rewrite her thesis taking account of this latest advertising campaign. Her supervisor advised her to do no such thing. The work stood as an original contribution to knowledge by examining the phenomenon up to the company’s change of advertising strategy. Looking at the new campaign, Graínne was advised, would make an interesting subsequent piece of work after her PhD. Graínne passed her viva and got her doctorate.

A third reason why people have difficulty realising when enough is enough is that they simply can’t bear to let go. For such people, concluding a stage in their research is a bit like giving their precious baby away. For doctoral students, in particular, the period of their studies has often been very intense and personally formative and there can be a kind of terror that once you are no longer a student you will not know who you are. Debbie calls this ‘fear of finishing’.

The best way of overcoming this psychological hurdle is to think of concluding one piece or stage of a research project as something that will lead seamlessly to the next interesting thing to do. If you feel yourself suffering from these feelings, sit down and plan what you would like to do next in your research, taking care to see it as the development of a research agenda, or even a personal intellectual project.

Muddling through: fixing things when they go wrong

We’re very much aware that, up to this point, we have been counselling perfection. Paradoxically, we’ve also been advising you against self-flagellation. We appreciate the irony and hope you do too. The truth is that the research process is always messy and one of muddling through. Things can, and under Sods’ Law therefore always do, go
wrong. Research projects are usually planned and the final results presented as a seamless, neat and linear process. This is a snare and a delusion.

Unfortunately, inexperienced researchers are rarely made aware of this sad truth. Therefore when they encounter muddle, confusion, mistakes, obstacles and errors it enhances their own feelings of failure and inadequacy. Afraid of looking like the failures they feel they are, they don’t tell others of their trials and travails. That leaves everyone feeling and thinking that they are the only ones to be having difficulties.

To our mind, the mark of a really good academic is someone who can work their way through all these issues and is brave enough to tell others how they did it. In medical science, Alexander Fleming is a famous example of this. He discovered penicillin because he allowed the medium used for growing bacterial cultures to become contaminated through sloppy laboratory practice. His genius was in noticing that what had gone wrong was actually much more interesting and important than the experiment he had set out to do.

So what are the sorts of things that are likely to go wrong on your research project? It’s unpredictable, but we can tell you about the sorts of things that have gone wrong for some people we know.

Rachel and several colleagues were conducting a research project within their own institution which relied on the distribution of a questionnaire survey to all members of academic staff. The Personnel Department agreed to distribute the questionnaire with individuals’ salary advice statements to achieve proper coverage.

In fact, the Personnel Department failed to do so. Instead, it sent out bundles of the questionnaires with the pay slips to the various university faculties. It did not give faculty administrators any advice on the distribution of the questionnaires. Nor did they send enough questionnaires for all members of academic staff. Furthermore, they failed to inform the researchers that casual hourly paid academic teaching staff received their pay slip by mail at home rather than in their pigeonholes at work. Administrators in the faculties had placed the questionnaires in staff pigeonholes along with the pay slips. Where there was no pay slip they did not distribute the questionnaires. The
instructions on the questionnaire asked respondents to return it in the ‘enclosed pre-addressed envelope’. The harassed research assistant had forgotten to have these envelopes printed and attached to the questionnaires.

The research team met after this debacle to decide how to rectify the situation. They contacted named administrators of known competence in each faculty to establish how many members of regular staff had not received questionnaires, had further copies printed and distributed them to the faculties. They contacted Personnel regarding the casual hourly paid staff. Personnel declined to give the researchers the home addresses of such staff, but suggested that the Payroll Department would send out copies of the questionnaire with the pay advice slips the following month. The researchers contacted the Payroll Department, which declined to do the work.

The researchers then ascertained the number of casual teaching staff in each faculty and distributed hard copies of the questionnaire to each dean, with the request that they be placed in individuals’ pigeonholes. One obstructive dean declined to have this done for self-evidently spurious reasons. The project leader wrote back to him, copying the letter to the dean’s superior, pointing out the spurious nature of his objections and the fact that the university Ethics Committee had approved the project.

The survey was successfully conducted – eventually – with a good response rate from all the targeted respondent groups.

The lesson from this vignette is that excrement happens (to paraphrase politely). The skill comes in keeping a cool head and finding pragmatic solutions to obstacles and difficulties. In situations like this, it’s really important to call on all your resources, human, financial and otherwise, to solve the problem creatively. Remember that the published output of research is the polished version for public consumption. Real research processes go round in circles, up blind alleys, and fall over with alarming regularity. It’s like the swan swimming serenely across the calm lake, while simultaneously paddling furiously and invisibly under water.
Moving on: Developing Yourself as a Researcher

By the time you’ve got your first proper research project well under way, you’ve already begun to develop yourself as a researcher. In this chapter we want to look at two issues that will help you to continue that developmental process. These are: getting help and good ethical practice. These are more generic issues, but ones that should inform or shape every aspect of every research project that you undertake, and, indeed, your way of being in the world.

What is a professional researcher?

We would like to think that what you want is to become a professional research practitioner. So what is such a person like?

• They have a toolbox of personal attributes and skills that allow them to undertake academic research at an appropriate level in a professional and competent manner. The aim of this book, thus far, has been to give you some insight into what those attributes and skills are.

• They are capable of independent thought. They engage actively with the world and think creatively and innovatively about it. Good academics have a real buzz about them, interesting ideas and as much curiosity as killed the cat. They constantly ask questions. In this sense, they are a lot like young children who constantly, and often irritatingly, ask ‘Why?’

The actress Jodie Foster, who had been a star student at Yale, once made an alumni speech in which she told graduating students that ‘it’s not good enough to put change in the [parking] meter without questioning what the meter is doing there in the first place’
(Guardian, 19 December 1998). In similar vein, one of Rebecca’s old mentors, and a senior academic, once told her that ‘the job description of an academic is to ask difficult questions.’ Even in these times of ever-increasing managerialisation, it is important to take your role as a public intellectual, who asks difficult questions, very seriously.

- At the same time as being self-reliant, you have to be self-reflexive and know your own limits. A good academic knows what they are good at and when they need to find others to compensate for their weaker areas or complement their expertise.
- Given what we’ve said about the need for good academics to be independent, critical and creative thinkers, it may sound paradoxical, but they also have to be capable of making a real contribution to a team. Being a good team member is about bringing your strengths to the team and about letting (and helping) other team members contribute theirs. In other words, you should neither dominate nor become a dogsbody. In a good team, the sum is greater than the parts and all members of the team recognise both the strengths and the weaknesses that they and others bring to it.
- Collegiality comes into teamwork but goes beyond it. Good researchers also need to be good colleagues. Ideally, this is about being part of a co-operative, self-directed community where you have a sense of belonging, mutuality and shared values. While it is important to look after yourself and protect your own interests, it is equally important not to become selfish and look only after yourself and your research.

Getting help but not being helpless

Becoming a good academic is a process of development, not an innate set of characteristics. Academics are not born, like Athena, fully formed from Zeus’s head, or like supermarket chickens, oven-ready. Like any developmental process, people need help in getting there. Sadly, a lot of academics don’t get the help they need. It’s useful for mentors to ask themselves the question posed by an Australian academic, ‘What sort of help helps?’ Our primary motivation for writing the Academic’s Support Kit is our perception that there are a
lot of people in universities who do not receive the kind of mentoring they should. That said, we can’t emphasise enough that ultimately you are responsible for your own research career. You will frequently need to take the initiative and be a self-starter rather than waiting for other people to do it for you. A good mentor helps you to develop a strong sense of agency, as the following vignette illustrates.

Cynthia was encouraging her doctoral students to become involved in academic publishing in various ways. She was particularly keen for them to get a good practical understanding of the publishing process and its different stages and practices. She therefore suggested to some of her students that they should offer to edit a special issue of a journal. In the process of doing this they learnt a lot about putting together a coherent set of papers around a common theme, the editing and refereeing process, negotiating with managing editors of journals, the time it takes to do such work and dealing with referees’ feedback. The resulting special issue was accepted in its entirety by a respectable refereed academic journal and has now been published.

**Why don’t people get the help they need?**

The reasons why people don’t get the help they need are threefold. First, sometimes they are too proud, too shy or too scared to ask for help. These feelings are, in part, created and sustained by an academic environment in which there can be a perceived expectation that people will ‘just be able to get on with it’. The fear of being ‘found out’ contributes to reluctance to ask for help. If you are someone who is quite capable and intelligent, others, who could help you, may not realise that you feel you need help.

Second, some of the more experienced and senior people who should be providing such help simply don’t do their job. There are a variety of reasons. It may be because they are selfish with their time and energies or because they had to ‘just get on with it’ themselves and see this as a kind of rite of passage for becoming an academic. Equally, they may simply not have the know-how that you need – they may even be ill equipped to do the job they have been promoted into. They may have
poor social or communication skills and simply don’t realise that others need their help or they don’t know how to offer help. They might be judgemental or prejudiced – thinking, for example, that it’s not worth the effort to help women with young families to develop a research career. Or they may be going through a period where they are, themselves, under considerable personal or professional stress and simply have no reserves of time or energy to help others. Those in the last group, will, however, come round when they get control of their lives and when times are better.

Third, some institutions simply don’t take the formal training needs of staff seriously. Training courses can be useful ways of plugging specific skill gaps. Some institutions in some countries have got better at putting resources into the continuing professional development of academics, but it isn’t general. The best training is an extension, or formalisation, of the help provided by good experienced academics. However, some staff training is provided by people who don’t really understand what it is to be an academic. Consequently, they may put on courses that suffer from poor pedagogy or inadequate content. However, it has to be said that the very worst training, in our experience, is for management, appraisal or teaching rather than for research. Certainly you should lobby your university to provide the training you need but sometimes you may have to resort to putting on courses yourself. The following vignette shows that this can sometimes shame your university into attending to your and your colleagues’ needs.

Jenny and four of her colleagues wanted to be trained in the use of NVivo. Using her contacts, she located a suitable external trainer. The trainer was expensive, unless a full complement of participants could be recruited on to the course and the cost shared between them all. Jenny advertised the availability of the three surplus places around the faculty. She was inundated with requests for places. She eventually organised training for sixty-four people. All the trainees were positive and enthusiastic about the training they had received and most are now planning to use NVivo in their research. The university has, as a consequence of the demand created by this training, bought a site licence for the software.
Can I really ask for help?

We think that getting help, advice and support in your academic research is a reasonable entitlement, especially given the pressures to ‘perform’ that you are likely to be under. But, like any entitlement, it also brings with it certain obligations.

Because the sorts of help, advice and support you are likely to need will be particular to you, and because we live in the real world, it is likely that you will have to be proactive in identifying what you need and seeking it out. Don’t expect others to automatically divine what it is you need help with and freely offer it unrequested. Your colleagues are not mind-readers and are also busy with their own research and other work.

If you are at the very beginning of your research career, it is unlikely that you will be able to specify what your needs are, beyond saying that you need help in getting started. We hope that this book has gone some way towards helping you identify what you don’t know and can’t do as well as what you do know and can do. If you are at the very beginning, what you need is a friendly face, someone who will take an interest in your plans and take the time to chat with you and, metaphorically, hold your hand in the early stages. They may be able to give you the help you need at this stage themselves, or they may be able to point you in the direction of alternative sources of assistance. Often what you need is someone to give you enough confidence to feel that you can make a start, no matter how small your first step is.

Josie was a recently appointed lecturer who had successfully completed her MA but had not yet begun to establish herself as a researcher. The department she worked in had a tradition of getting more junior academics to join the research teams of those more experienced, but not of supporting them to do their own research. Josie wanted to do her own research and to register for a PhD in order to give her work some structure. The problem was that she didn’t really know what it was that she wanted to do for her PhD project and didn’t feel that anyone in her own department would be willing or able to help her define it, as that simply was not their way of working.
She became friendly with a new professor in another department whom she met at a management meeting. They met socially and she discussed her ambition to become a researcher and the problems of doing so in her own department. The professor encouraged her to continue in this vein and suggested that she write a brief research proposal outlining her interests. Josie did so, and the professor read it and suggested that it still needed to be focused. She also said that she was not really the best person to help Josie develop the proposal further and sent her to another senior woman in her (the professor’s) department. Josie had several meetings with this other woman, and eventually narrowed her focus sufficiently to be able to write an excellent research proposal. She was accepted to do her PhD in one of the most prestigious departments in the country at another university and her own department agreed to pay half her fees.

By now perhaps you have embarked on an initial research project based on a well worked-through project proposal. If so, you should have a sense of the sorts of help, advice and support you need. The types of things you might need help with include:

- Library skills.
- Understanding or ‘getting into’ theory and theoretical debates.
- Locating and joining suitable networks of like-minded researchers.
- Particular data collection and analysis techniques and tools.
- Writing.
- Finding conference venues to present your work and preparing for those presentations.
- Finding suitable journals to send your papers to.
- Organising your research.
- Thinking about how you might move on from one topic to a research agenda or a personal intellectual project.
- Finding ways of gaining access to research respondents, archives and other sources of data.

Always remember that you are perfectly within your rights to ask for help on such topics. What’s more, you would be foolish if you decided to struggle on miserably on your own.
Conversely, it is not okay to expect anyone or any system to carry you, to do your work for you, to mother you or to generally accept responsibility for your own personal professional development as a researcher. It is perfectly okay to have needs. It is not okay to be an over-dependent complete pain in the behind: this is unlikely to endear you to those people whom you most need to help you.

Sue’s early academic experiences had, through no fault of her own, severely affected her confidence in her ability to do research. A new head of department established a new mentoring system. The head of department and the person responsible for the mentoring scheme took care to ensure that Sue got a mentor who would be sympathetic to her problems and patient with her because her previous experience had made her distrustful and lacking in confidence. Sue worked hard with her new mentor, who in turn devoted enormous amounts of time and energy to her – seeing her once or twice a week in the early stages. Over the ensuing six months, with consistent support, Sue was able to analyse some data that she had previously collected but hadn’t known what to do with, write a conference paper, deliver it at the conference and submit it for publication in an international journal. During the summer vacation, when her mentor was away, Sue was notified that her paper had been accepted, subject to minor revisions. On her own she made the changes, resubmitted the paper and it was accepted for publication. Sue has now registered for a PhD – something that she would never have countenanced before this confidence-building mentoring process.

What Sue’s story shows is that, with help, even people who have had the worst of experiences can grow into being capable of taking responsibility for their work, defining a project and developing their own research career. Sue will continue to need advice and support – as all doctoral students and emergent researchers do – but she now does so as an confident and self-knowing person who is making reasonable demands of a system that has a duty to provide care and support if it wants her to do research.
As people who regularly have to provide support and help to colleagues, we would ask you to make strenuous efforts to avoid the following behaviours:

- Always assuming that those helping you are available 24/7 to deal with your problems, or that your problems are the most important thing in their lives.
- Dominating groups, meetings, etc., with your requirements and needs.
- Giving someone something to read and then getting upset if they can’t turn it round and give you feedback immediately. They will have many other competing demands on their time.
- Ignoring advice and feedback on your writing without good reason.

On the whole, our experience is that people don’t always have a sense that it is okay to ask for support and help. At the other extreme, some people become time and emotion vultures. The best way to get balance is to sit down with the person or people helping you and agree about the basis on which you are going to get help. There will be an implicit/tacit contract in any such support relationship anyway, and it is better to make it explicit. Those who provide help and support are human beings with their own lives, needs and pressures. You need to achieve a certain level of reciprocity: the relationship should not be all one way.

**How do I avoid bad advice and how do I know it when I get it?**

This is a tough question. It’s a bit like when your car breaks down. You take it to a garage you don’t know and the mechanic takes one look underneath and comes up for air shaking his head, muttering, and talks about expensive parts and big labour bills. You know nothing about cars. What do you do? Is his advice good or is he incompetent or trying to take advantage of your credit card? There are a number of strategies that you might take to avoid the risk of bad advice – with your car or with your research:
• Take your car to a garage you know and trust. Similarly, seek help from sources that you know and trust. Look for people who are successful researchers themselves and who have a reputation among colleagues for being helpful, supportive and collegial. Pick your source with care.

• If you don’t know any garages, or any good sources of research help, ask around among people like yourself.

• If the mechanic makes you feel stupid and undermined there is a fair chance that they are trying to deceive you. Similarly, if the person helping you isn’t building your confidence but instead is bullying you, making you feel awful about yourself or is trying to get you to do their work instead of your own, then find another source of help.

• If the mechanic disparages the garage down the road, trying to get you to stick with them, it is reasonable to assume that they don’t want to be exposed for having given the wrong information. Similarly, if the person or people trying to help you try to prevent you from speaking to anyone except themselves they may be trying to exploit you, make you their own ‘little helper’ or otherwise prevent you from developing your own academic research identity and independence. The idea is that you get help to become an independent free-thinking academic, not that you are caught in someone’s shadow, doing their bidding.

By implication, if your help and advice are the inverse of all this, then it’s probably pretty good.

What are my potential sources of advice and support?

Advice, support and help tend to have two principal dimensions: the formal/informal and the obligatory/discretionary. In our experience, the utilisation and provision of formal sources is to some extent or another obligatory whilst informal sources are more likely to be taken up and offered on a discretionary basis. As with everything, how well all these things works is dependent not only on having good systems but on the individuals involved, how they choose to make them work (or not) and their interpersonal dynamics.

We set out below a range of sources of help, advice and assistance that you might choose to access and to offer others.
Research degree supervisors or advisers

This is at the far end of the scale in terms of formality. If you are registered for a research degree your university will have regulations that require you to have at least one supervisor/adviser. For the supervisor, this is formally allocated work for which they are accountable to the university. They should have clearly set out responsibilities and duties with regard to being your supervisor. This should ease the pain of getting them to help you: in a very formal sense, they are simply doing their job.

Every supervisory relationship is different, and the expectations of supervisors/advisers will, to some extent, differ from department to department, from university to university and even from country to country. Broadly, you should expect the following sorts of things from your supervisor/adviser:

- They should know enough about your research topic to be able to start you off in a good direction and keep you on track. Inevitably, the culmination of a successful research degree programme is distinguished by your becoming more expert than your supervisor and probably the expert in that particular field.
- They will engage with you on an intellectual level around your research topic. They should suggest readings and be able to challenge you in constructive ways on your ideas.
- They should be able to provide practical advice on matters such as organising your research, data collection and data analysis. It’s no good trying to be supervised by someone who has never done your type of research before.
- They should be someone with whom you can engage critically on ethical issues.
- They can and do help you develop your writing skills, not only for the thesis but also for publication of your research.
- They put you in contact with wider academic networks and help you develop your own.
- They can and will help you develop your wider and long-term academic career profile and think about that proactively. In short, they should also act as a sort of career mentor, not just a research adviser.
- They treat you with respect, courtesy and consideration, but at the same time are sufficiently demanding to keep you going when you are feeling demotivated and demoralised.
Unfortunately, bad supervisory practice abounds. The reasons why it doesn’t work are numerous. Sometimes, the interpersonal dynamics in what should be a very close intellectual and academic friendship simply aren’t right. This may not be anyone’s fault. It may just be that the chemistry is wrong. In that case, you should discuss the problem with your supervisor and, if it can’t be resolved, request a change of supervisor.

Sometimes the relationship doesn’t work because the supervisor fails to take his/her responsibilities seriously enough or does not even know what they are. On other occasions the supervisor simply may know enough about your area of research. Sadly, few universities provide proper training on how to supervise research students well and supervisors have only their own, sometimes very bad, experience to guide them. Sometimes students have to ‘manage upwards’: seeking to define the relationship in such a way that they get what they need.

Your relationship with your supervisor/adviser is a partnership in which both sides have responsibilities and you are entitled to have reasonable expectations about the other party’s behaviour. If there is not a good match between their expertise and your topic then you should discuss with your supervisor whether to change supervisors or to add someone with complementary expertise to your advisory team.

How can you avoid some, or all, of these problems? As with any prospective long-term, significant relationship, don’t get into bed with someone you don’t know. Beware of universities that simply tell you that you will be ‘assigned’ a supervisor or adviser. Departments with good research degree programmes and good supervisory arrangements would never accept students for whom they did not have an entirely appropriate supervisor.

For such a significant person, or people, you need to do your homework: check out their academic and personal reputation; discuss your proposed topic with them; read what they have written; see if they are willing to give you helpful and constructive advice on your draft proposal before you have registered. If you are applying to do a research degree in another country, it is particularly important to find out about your prospective supervisor before you accept a place on a programme. If at all possible, arrange to meet your prospective supervisor or, at the very least, have an email and/or telephone conversation with them. Overall, you have to judge whether this is a person you like, can work closely with and who can help you in ways that are appropriate and good for you.

Increasingly, universities are willing to support members of staff who do not have a doctorate in obtaining one. In such circumstances, and
for understandable reasons to do with financial and other resources, they are likely to encourage their staff to do a research degree within their own department or institution. This may or may not be the best course to follow. Each case needs to be carefully evaluated on its own merits. Table 4 may help you think/argue this matter through.

### TABLE 4 Where to do your PhD

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Own institution</th>
<th>Other institution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Finance</td>
<td>Usually no fee payable</td>
<td>A fee may be payable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervision</td>
<td>May not have a supervisor with the right expertise who is also sufficiently distanced from you</td>
<td>Choice of supervisor will be far less constrained</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional care</td>
<td>May have a greater vested interest in you succeeding at your PhD as part of their staff development. Conversely, may want to extract the maximum amount of teaching and administrative work from you</td>
<td>May have less commitment to you as an individual as a part-time student rather than a full-time colleague. Conversely their imperatives and demands may be a useful lever to help you manage your workload downwards in your own institution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geography</td>
<td>Your supervisor may be more readily accessible</td>
<td>You may have to travel long distances to meet your supervisor and regular informal contact may be quite problematic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widening perspectives</td>
<td>May promote parochialism in intellectual thought and even when it doesn’t it’s less likely to surprise you as you already know these people</td>
<td>More likely to challenge your thinking and widen your perspectives and you can bring something back to your own institution. Increases your knowledge of how other institutions organise things</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

for understandable reasons to do with financial and other resources, they are likely to encourage their staff to do a research degree within their own department or institution. This may or may not be the best course to follow. Each case needs to be carefully evaluated on its own merits. Table 4 may help you think/argue this matter through.

### Formal/informal mentoring schemes

Much of what we have said about supervisors/advisers applies equally to research mentors, whether formal or informal. So if you skipped that section because you are not a research degree student and don’t intend to become one, you might like to go back and read it.
By mentoring, what we mean is someone who takes an interest in you, your research and your career and is in a position which enables them to help you develop them. They will, therefore, be more experienced than you are.

When Roxanne was coming towards the end of her PhD she was fortunate to meet Ludmilla, a senior academic prominent in the field of gender and education. Roxanne was working in an administrative capacity to earn some money at a summer school for distance learners. Ludmilla was a very inclusive course director and made sure that Roxanne was included in all meetings and in as many of the academic activities as was practical and appropriate. Following the summer school, Ludmilla invited Roxanne to join a symposium she was organising at a major international conference – Roxanne’s first-ever conference paper. Since then, Ludmilla has helped Roxanne to shape her research agenda, offered her significant opportunities for publication, ensured that she was invited to take part in seminars where other significant academics in her field would be present and acted as a referee and informal career adviser.

Some universities or departments have established formal research mentoring schemes. This means that better established researchers in the department are formally matched with their less experienced colleagues on a one-to-one basis. Done properly, these schemes can be invaluable, as can be seen from the vignette of Sue and her research mentor. The reason they are valuable is that they can make sure that everyone who needs it has a port of call when they need help with their research. When they work well, no-one should slip through the net of research support and advice. An advantage of formal mentoring schemes is that they signal the willingness of those acting as mentors to give their time and effort to such work. This can make the mentees feel a bit better about ‘bothering’ their mentors and consequently more likely to use them.

Conversely, formal schemes can work badly. In some schemes, mentors are assigned without any consultation or agreement and often with little care. Mentors may regard their position as giving them carte blanche to become bossy or controlling with their mentees. Sometimes these schemes are honoured more in the breach than in the
observance. At their best they work something like, albeit probably less intensively, a doctoral supervisory relationship.

Whether or not you have a formal mentoring scheme in your department, you can also seek out informal mentors. Sometimes concerned senior academics will seek you out. These informal mentors may be in your own department, elsewhere in your institution or even at another university. They may be people you have met at conferences, through your own wider research community, journal editors or through teaching or committees as in the case of Roxanne, above. They may also be your ex-teachers for your first or master’s degree.

Inexperienced researchers often seem quite surprised that anyone should take a genuine interest in their research well-being. In fact, most good academics regard this kind of work as integral to, and one of the most rewarding aspects of, their professional practice. Many of them will be genuinely delighted if they find an early career researcher who is interested in the same stuff that they are and will derive pleasure from working with you and in watching you grow and succeed as a researcher. Many of these people will have benefited from just this sort of help when they were in your position, and should see this work as payback time. Alternatively, they may have received no such help and wish they had – their efforts represent an attempt to help you avoid the difficulties that they encountered.

You will have to rely on your judgement in deciding whether to accept proffered help or who to approach yourself. Be aware that some unscrupulous characters may just be keen to get their grubby hands on your data or your good ideas. However, fear of this shouldn’t deter you from accepting genuine offers. In seeking out a mentor the same kinds of considerations apply as in seeking a good research degree supervisor or adviser. They are most likely to be a work colleague, so you should be able to have a pretty good feel for what kind of person they are.

Julie had been a teaching member of staff for many years. She became increasingly anxious as, simultaneously, the university wound down the specialist subjects that she taught and she came under pressure to become research-active. The Director of Research in her department made a practice of having a ‘fireside chat’ with all members of staff at least once a year, just to see how they were getting on and whether the department could offer any further support and assistance.
During this chat, Julie and the Director of Research realised that they had a very strong mutual interest in the subject of taxation. Julie had excellent technical expertise and the Director of Research was able to frame the issues in a more theoretical way. The Director of Research suggested that Julie should conduct some research on this issue, gave her some ideas about how to approach it and suggested that she could come back for further help whenever she needed it.

Julie has proven herself to be a good independent worker. At each stage in her subsequent research she went off and tackled the task, returning to her mentor when she needed feedback on how she had done and advice as to what the next stage was. Within six months of their initial chat, Julie had written a paper and presented it at a major conference.

As part of what an English academic calls the ‘creeping cancer of managerialism’ most universities around the world have some sort of formal staff performance review or appraisal. This can be a formal system for grading academics’ performance in order to make decisions about tenure, promotion or levels of pay. Alternatively, it can be a system designed as more akin to a formal mentoring system with the added advantage that any developmental needs identified as a result of the appraisal process are formally notified to the university to action. (However, don’t hold your breath that anything will actually happen.) The worst sort of scheme fraudulently attempts to marry these two approaches, pretending to be helpful and supportive whilst really evaluating your performance the better to control you as an employee. Here we are talking only about those systems designed to act as types of mentoring schemes.

Such schemes can be extremely helpful, for two reasons. First, they make the university pay individual attention and consideration to each employee on a regular and individual basis. Second, they give the individual a formal opening to discuss what is concerning them, how they feel they’re getting on and what the university can do to further their research efforts. Such appraisals will take quite a long time and, to use it properly, both you and your appraiser need to prepare well. We think it important that such meetings are completely confidential, apart from an agreed record of what the university should be
providing for you, and should be addressing to help its academic staff. In other words, the record should not be about your performance but about that of the university. To paraphrase John F. Kennedy, in appraisal, but especially in records of appraisal, you should ask not what you can do for the university but what the university can and should do for you.

As with any other form of mentoring help that you get, in appraisal processes you should be treated with dignity, courtesy and respect, and you should make sure that you get positive help and guidance from your appraiser. Sometimes the management of universities attempt to impose schemes that are not regarded by academics themselves as optimal for these purposes. There’s many a slip betwixt cup and lip, and many academic departments, in such circumstances, freely adapt the scheme to something that is good for them while maintaining the fiction to the university administrators that the scheme is operating entirely as designed. We could not possibly condone such behaviour …

Ken’s anxieties about not doing research had reached crisis point when he had to have a formal staff appraisal. The professors in his department had objected to the university appraisal scheme because they saw it as insufficiently supportive and had ‘tweaked’ it so that it would be genuinely helpful to colleagues.

Ken carefully identified one of the professors, a well known and enthusiastic researcher, as likely to understand his dilemma over research. In a nerve-racking interview Ken confessed that he felt under awful pressure to do research but didn’t know how to do it. It was evident to his appraiser that he was extremely stressed and unhappy.

During the course of the appraisal interview, the sympathetic appraiser helped Ken to decide that he wanted to explore whether or not he could do research and identify an outline research topic about which he was enthusiastic. Subsequently, the professor acted as his mentor and research partner and Ken is now regarded as an active emerging researcher in his department.

He subsequently admitted to the professor and other colleagues that he had fully expected his appraisal to result in dismissal from his post. This confession was an object lesson to his appraiser, who had previously failed to appreciate the very serious stresses that some colleagues felt under with regard to research.
Research training courses

We have already written briefly about research training. Most institutions, these days, provide access to training for their research students, at least, and usually extend this availability to all academic staff. They may also provide research training specifically for staff, particularly in the use of IT. Training courses may also be offered by disciplinary associations, by other universities which open them up ‘for sale’ or by analogous professional bodies.

You will need to make a judgement about whether you need these and will benefit from them. Don’t become a training junkie and don’t go on courses where you can’t see any short or medium-term use for them. That is just research work avoidance. On the other hand, if you identify a need for a particular piece of training, don’t be afraid to ask for it, perhaps justifying the running of a course by demonstrating that others in your department, faculty or university would also benefit. As with mentors and supervisors/advisers there are good and bad trainers. If you can, it is worth asking around to find the good courses on the topics or issues that you need help with.

Research teams

By research team we mean a combination of any number of researchers (more than one) who are working together on a project or series of projects which may or may not be externally funded. Teams can be formally constituted or be just two or more people who have decided to work together.

Being a member of a research team can bring mixed blessings. Being in a good team can give you support, teach you new skills, overcome isolation and help you to get good access, a good reputation and publications. Conversely, in poor research teams the inexperienced or novice researchers are thoroughly exploited: they do the dogsbody footwork, are ‘invisible’ professionally in that they are not credited with the work they have done (especially in any publications) and can have poor security of employment. If you work with a good team it can be one of the best research experiences ever. If you work with a bad one, it can make you very unhappy indeed and/or seriously prejudice your career prospects. If in the early stages, for example
when the proposal is being drawn up, you are excluded, bullied or ‘put upon’ you should not hesitate to withdraw from the team. A team that starts in that way will carry on that way. They never mend their ways.

Before you join any team, it is a good idea to thoroughly check out your prospective colleagues in much the same way as you would a supervisor/adviser or mentor. Make sure that your expected contribution to the endeavour and the *modus operandi* of the team are clearly articulated. In particular, get prior agreement on matters such as who gets named on publications and in what order.

Don’t forget that, even as a ‘junior’ partner, you will have something useful to bring to the party. Don’t underestimate the real value of someone who will do basic and often routine work such as searching the literature, gathering data or keeping the project archive. You aren’t necessarily being exploited if that is your contribution: you are probably learning and rehearsing valuable skills and also learning how larger projects function. You should also be able, in a good team, and in time, to develop into a more ‘senior’ member, contributing your own ideas and suggestions for ways of moving the work forward. We have more to say on research teams and funded research in *Winning and Managing Research Funding*.

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**Research centres**

Often, academics in particular universities come together in different sorts of combinations than the regular departments or faculties. These may be constituted as research centres. The main reason why people set up centres is to give a better profile to the particular area of research that they are working in (and thereby attract more external funding). They also aim to provide a focal point for collegiate research activities around particular research agendas.

Centres can be good places for the emergent researcher to hang out: they are often interdisciplinary; provide a lively intellectual environment in a specific area; have plenty of on-going projects and research teams; and can attract prestigious visiting speakers and fellows, enabling emergent researchers to meet inspiring people who are the leaders in their field. They are sometimes quite well resourced financially. A good research centre will be a warm and welcoming place for beginning researchers.
Robyn was director of a very successful research centre in Australia. She made a point of involving doctoral students, postdoctoral fellows and early career researchers in all centre activities. A representative of each of these groups was included on the centre steering committee. They were encouraged to invite their own visiting scholars, to run their own seminars, initiate reading and writing groups and, where possible, were involved in externally funded research projects.

Readers groups

A reading group is an informal collection of people who are interested in similar sorts of literature or areas of research. They agree to meet regularly to discuss a prearranged paper, book or report. The purpose is to help people in the group get to grips with difficult theory or keep on top of new developments in the literature in that area. The group can be a very enjoyable and non-threatening way of doing this. In time, they may well become research teams as people start to coalesce around particular topics of mutual interest.

If no reading group exists for you to join, you might think about collecting some of your colleagues together and setting one up. Debbie has found that joining or setting up reading groups has been one of the most productive and supportive aspects of her academic career. She has made new academic friends, enjoyed a mutually supportive environment and read much more widely than she might otherwise have.

Research networks and associations

These are discussed at length in Building Networks, but it is pertinent to make some brief points here. Many academic discipline areas have associations of researchers, such as the American Accounting Association, the International Sociological Association, the Australian Association for Research in Education, the Modern Languages Association (in the USA) and the American Historical Association. These provide a focal point for communities of like-minded researchers. They usually engage in activities such as running conferences, publishing their own journals, staging doctoral colloquia, organising research training or setting up special sub-groupings for doctoral
students. In addition, these associations usually facilitate the organisation of special interest groups (SIGs): sub-groups of people with more specific interests.

It is worth joining the appropriate association in your country, other countries and possibly some international ones. This will give you access to a community of scholars outside your institution, conferences, special workshops and so on. They can be good places to start to develop a wider network of support and help.

Outside such organisations, or if one doesn’t exist, from time to time academics set up an informal network or grouping to help keep in touch and give each other support and share information. The Internet and email present an excellent way of doing this: both for identifying potential members and for staying in touch.

**Peers and academic friends**

The most important and long-lasting support that you can get will come from your peers and academic friends. Academia is a global community with relatively few inhabitants. This, combined with our propensity to move jobs and travel a lot, means that we often have quite a close-knit but geographically spread group of friends. It is this kind of friendship network that led Debbie and Rebecca in the UK to be writing this Kit with Jane in Australia. These sorts of friendships go well beyond the sorts of workplace friendships that people in other occupations tend to form. We think that it is a big compensation for what can otherwise be very hard work.

Is it okay to use such friendship networks as a source of help? We think so: friendships are, by definition, mutually supportive and everyone benefits over the long term. While one person may be more in need of support at one time, someone else will receive it at others. These networks are like help banks. Sometimes you pay in and sometimes you withdraw. We can’t tell you how to find your friends, obviously, but participating in the research culture of your department, university or general disciplinary field is an obvious first step.
have subsequently published papers, developed conference symposia and research proposals together. Having completed their PhDs and gone on to academic appointments at different universities they remain in close contact and regularly give each other support and academic feedback for their teaching and research.

Everyone has to form their own relationships, but here are some of the ways in which we have benefited from our friendship networks in terms of:

- Kicking around new and half-baked ideas in a safe space where we know we won’t be laughed at, thought stupid or ripped off.
- Reading of papers in early drafts by supportive but critical friends.
- Notification of and invitations to participate in interesting conferences, seminar series or research projects.
- Joint research and writing projects.
- Interesting and inspiring conversations.
- Knowing people at conferences whom you can hang around and have fun with.
- Telling us about interesting things that they’ve read which we should be reading too.

Librarians

University librarians are brilliant. We have found, with the utmost consistency, that whilst they are usually not researchers in their own right, they are very good scholars who take pleasure in having a comprehensive knowledge of the literature of the area in which they specialise and helping academics to access it. Even in times of straitened resources, they will usually do their utmost to help you. They also tend to be enormously patient as they take you, again and again, through the processes by which you can do literature searches, use the Web, and access international databases of literature. Cultivate good relations with them and respect their expertise. They will rarely let you down.

Books on research techniques

There are lots of books out there on how to do research and you may want to read some of them. Some are better than others, and we have
picked the ones we like in our Further Reading suggestions. Ironically, whilst one of the objects of research activity is to write and publish, academics rarely write and publish well on how to do research. Ultimately, learning how to do research is an experiential process, which requires a period of ‘apprenticeship’ either through doctoral studies or through active engagement in research and using such help and advice as are available. Books can help to some extent, but they provide a far from complete answer.

**Ethical practice in research**

We’ve already touched on the question of ethics in this book and now want to deal with it in more detail. We first of all want to draw a distinction between the structures for ethical approval for research which risk-averse universities and funding or research commissioning bodies establish and the notion of ethical practice as a research professional. We deal with each in turn.

Research governance is becoming a very trendy term. It basically means universities ensuring that they have in place formal procedures for ‘ensuring’ that ‘good practice’ is always followed. A major aspect of research governance arrangements is the establishment of procedures for scrutinising ethical aspects of proposed work and granting approval for it to proceed. The most common manifestations of these systems are university ethics committees and formal guidelines for the conduct of research.

We have mixed feelings about such formal systems. On the one hand, we find it hard to criticise the notion that researchers should always seek to apply the highest possible ethical standards in their research work. On the other, our experience tells us that all too often ethics committees represent the triumph of form over content. They may punctiliously insist that researchers keep to strict research protocols to avoid risk to the university regarding, for instance, the storage of data, but remain blind to issues such as the wider socio-economic consequences for marginalised groups of the release of that data. They may also insist on researchers following particular rules, regardless of their adverse impact on the research or the participants in it. Ethics committees are gatekeepers who can effectively stop your research going ahead if they are in some way prejudiced against it, as George’s story shows.
George wanted to do his masters research, a substantial undertaking in Australia, on the masculinities of young men who identified as gay whilst still at school. The Ethics Committee of his prestigious university insisted that he could not interview school students without the informed consent and written permission of their parents. Obtaining this would have necessitated informing the parents that the young men identified as gay. However, the potential research respondents themselves, with few exceptions, had kept their sexuality a closely guarded secret from their parents and did not want them to know. Indeed, many of them felt that their family relationships would be seriously damaged, that they might be thrown out of their homes and even that they might suffer physical harm should their sexuality become known within their families. In the event, George changed his research proposal so that he interviewed older men about their experiences when they were at school. This resulted in a successful masters dissertation, but did not – and could not – capture the kind of fresh experience that George had hoped for.

Of course, you will have to ensure that your research projects comply with the formal requirements of your institution and/or funder. Reference to the relevant ethical guidelines of your research association may prove helpful in demonstrating to ethics committees that your proposed research is of a satisfactory ethical standard. However, far more important in our view is that you develop a good sense of what it means to be a good ethical practitioner in your research.

Key to ethical practice is that you think carefully, deeply and reflexively about the power relationships in the research process. What sorts of power relationships do we mean?

**Consequences**

When people agree to act as respondents in research it is important to respect them, and to understand the consequences that your intervention in their life may have. Speaking with you might bring to the surface difficult feelings, memories or emotions – only for you to leave their lives almost immediately, carrying your data (their lives)
with you. We see this as tantamount to the researcher acting as vampire. Moreover, our dissemination and publication of respondents’ stories may expose them individually or as a community in many undesirable ways. Anonymity for an individual may be ineffective if the published research leads to the vilification of the group of which that person is a member. We therefore have to be both respectful and caring of respondents whilst we are engaging with them, but also mindful of the consequences of our findings for them and their wider group.

In a project that Debbie was involved in on how schools deal with violence, the team was very exercised about how to maintain the confidentiality of the schools which eventually took part in the research. The researchers realised that it had taken a great deal of courage on the part of the management teams of these schools, particularly where the schools were having considerable difficulty in handling the levels of violence within them. The researchers therefore made a number of decisions early in the project. They decided on pseudonyms for the schools before gathering any data and scrupulously referred to the schools in all their notes and transcripts by these. This meant that even if some of the data accidentally got lost or left on someone’s desk so that anyone who came into the room, such as a cleaner, might see, the school would not be identifiable by name. They also agreed, and wrote it into their contracts with the schools, that at no time would they do more than identify London as the city within which the schools were located and they would never mention where in London the schools were situated. This meant that they were limited in the way they wrote about the schools and their neighbourhoods and had to be very careful about their descriptions. However, they feel that the price was well worth paying in order to undertake the research.

Blast from the past

In some cases, researchers make use of historical data. The fact that the data may be about, or produced by, people who are long dead
does not exempt the researchers from their ethical obligations. It can also raise some interesting ethical dilemmas. For instance, if you are doing research that involves the use of diaries or private papers, you should give serious consideration to whether the individuals who wrote them intended them for public consumption. We are not saying that you shouldn’t use such material, but you should engage with the on-going debates about the ethics of such uses. Often, the descendants or other keepers of such papers may have concerns about the impact of your use of such material, as these two vignettes show.

In Australia there is an on-going debate about the use by historians of material describing Aboriginal culture written and collected by white colonialists (who subjected Aboriginal people to genocidal acts in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries). Aboriginal communities are concerned about the indiscriminate use of material produced by their oppressors that purports to describe their cultures and communities. One response to this by some state archivists has been to place access to such material under the control of the relevant indigenous groups. More broadly, a number of institutions have developed specific ethical guidelines for any research project that involves indigenous people or artefacts.

Asha’s doctoral research included biographical work on some nineteenth- and twentieth-century collectors of Chinese art and artefacts. She needed access to the private papers of these individuals, some of which were in archives and some in the hands of their descendants. She found that the keepers of the papers were generally extremely generous in allowing her access and, in some cases, opening their homes to her. As she wrote about the collectors, she became concerned that some of her more negative judgements might make her gatekeepers feel betrayed. While she did not wish to compromise her academic judgement, she was, nevertheless, careful in her expression so that she felt that she would be able to send the material to their descendants with a clear conscience and without causing them undue offence or pain.
A further area of ethical practice is in our relations and working practices with colleagues. In essence, this is about being a good colleague. Most aspects of unethical behaviour are perfectly obvious: plagiarism and other ways of not respecting the intellectual property of others such as stealing their research ideas; stymieing others’ research efforts and careers in an attempt to further your own interests or out of plain jealousy; not acknowledging the contribution of other people to your research; promoting research on the basis of favouritism rather than merit; and not giving people proper credit in the authorship of publications. We believe in the old adage ‘what goes round comes round’: that if you are mean now it will just come back to haunt you. Be generous, and others will generally be generous with you.

Researchers have a responsibility to the wider communities in which they live. We have already noted that one of the marks of a ‘good academic’ is that they take seriously their role as public intellectuals. What does this mean in practice? It means being aware of the impact that your research may have on how people think, what they believe and how they act. It means being prepared to talk to people who are not academics about your research without talking down to them – recognising that they are a legitimate audience for what you have to say, for their own reasons. Above all, you should never regard yourself as the producer of ‘objective knowledge’ the use of which you can or should dissociate yourself from.

What we’ve done in this book is suggest to you ways in which you might take the first steps towards becoming a researcher. We have looked at the generation of research topics, the refining of research questions, how to write a research proposal to act as a route map through the process, some practical points about actually doing your research and, finally, some thoughts about moving on and developing
as a researcher. Reading this whole book in one go may make the process of undertaking a research project appear quite intimidating. But you should bear in mind that the process we’ve described may take place over a prolonged period of months or even years, giving you time to reflect and learn as you go. Remember, also, that we’ve been trying to give you the kind of advice in one small book that we give to people we work with as and when they need it.

The reality of most researchers’ lives is that this process of undertaking research projects is repeated iteratively. Everyone learns as they go along, and we haven’t stopped yet.

Cumulatively, research projects should develop into research agendas, and eventually they should reflect the personal intellectual projects of individual researchers. Most people’s research eventually runs in a series of parallel streams. But those streams aren’t self-contained: there are points at which they meet, run together and then sometimes separate again.

As such, it’s important to regard your research from the very beginning as the start of a life’s work. You need to put in place all the practical things that will help you. This includes developing your skills, building your library and accumulating data, evidence and other materials that will sustain subsequent and continuing research projects.

Through all this, you need to think about achieving an identity as a researcher. The nature of academic research work is such that it isn’t usually constrained by fixed working hours or a set place of work. As such it becomes an integral, rather than a discrete, part of our everyday lives.

Although these sorts of work practices can be stressful, there is a beneficial aspect. It can be nice to do the kind of work which has a lot of flexibility and which becomes an enjoyable aspect of our everyday existence.
Further Reading

Coffey, A. and Atkinson, P. (1996) *Making Sense of Qualitative Data*, Thousand Oaks CA, London and New Delhi: Sage. This book introduces new researchers to the many different ways of analysing qualitative data. It is written in accessible language and provides a practical resource for thinking about the range of analytic approaches available to the qualitative researcher. It avoids a narrow ‘how to’ approach and is constructed as a tool to think through and make choices about data analysis, emphasising that there is no one way to do it. The book offers practical examples of the stages of analysis of ‘real’ data, from coding to narrative analysis, from theorising the data to using computer software as an aid to analysis. This gives the reader a valuable understanding of the processes of data analysis while avoiding an over-practical ‘guide’ that distorts data analysis as a mechanical set of linear steps.

Creswell, J.W. (2003) *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*. Thousand Oaks CA, London and New Delhi: Sage. This book is aimed at research students or academics who are working on developing an academic paper. The book breaks down the processes involved in writing a research paper into a set of steps, although this may suggest to the reader that research is a neat process made up of predictable stages. The strength of the book is that it considers the use of mixed methods, as well as separate qualitative and/or quantitative methods, and examines the ethical issues that may arise from these different research approaches. The book usefully includes many exercises to help engage the reader in making connections between their own research and the discussion in the book.

Golden-Biddle, K. and Locke, K.D. (1997) *Composing Qualitative Research*, Thousand Oaks CA, London and New Delhi: Sage. This book is immensely refreshing because it adopts a vehemently anti-‘writing-up’ stance, choosing instead to see writing as an integral part of the qualitative research process. The book carefully takes readers through the theoretical underpinnings of this approach and then delineates the various stages in the writing process. It is richly illustrated with examples of cogent and successful academic writing and is very well written itself.
Hollway, W. and Jefferson, T. (2000) *Doing Qualitative Research Differently: Free Association, Narrative and the Interview Method*, Thousand Oaks CA, London and Delhi: Sage. This is not designed as a manual but rather as a substantive exploration of using psychoanalytic approaches in qualitative research. It uses the case of research on fear of crime to argue for such approaches when asking ‘why’ questions – particularly those related to identity. It is worth reading, whether or not you do this kind of research, because of the important points it makes about method and, in particular, its excellent discussion of ethical issues in research.

Marshall, C. and Rossman, G.B. (1999) *Designing Qualitative Research*, 3rd edn, Thousand Oaks CA, London and New Delhi: Sage. This is a valuable book for those writing a research proposal for the first time. Marshall and Rossman identify two main aspects of the research proposal: the conceptual framework and the design soundness. The chapters then provide detailed and in-depth accounts of the ways to write a proposal that meets the challenges of these two aspects. The book engages the reader in thinking through the connections between the ‘what’ of the research, or the conceptual framework, and the ‘do-ability’ of the research, linking the methods with theoretical, epistemological and methodological underpinnings. The vignettes that are used to illustrate the process of constructing an argument in a proposal, giving examples of how others have approached the research proposal and have been able to convince the reviewer(s) that the researcher is worthwhile, ‘do-able’ and methodologically sound. The variety of vignettes offered helps the reader to think through his or her own research approaches.

May, T. (ed.) (2002) *Qualitative Research in Action*, London, Thousand Oaks CA and New Delhi: Sage. This collection considers the theoretical, methodological and epistemological complexities of contemporary qualitative research practices. It focuses on the connections between research theory and practice. The book is divided up into thematic sections, with the aim of providing coherence as well as highlighting links between research process and product. The central theme running through the book is ‘issues in practice’ and this is approached in a critical way to interrogate current social research practices through the examination of specific examples. Although it is suggested that the book may be used for advanced undergraduate levels, some chapters may be inaccessible to those unfamiliar with contemporary debates within qualitative methodology. There are some highly accessible chapters, though, for those new to qualitative research, and the whole book is very useful to those who want to deepen
their understanding of and engage with contemporary debates in the field of qualitative research.

Potter, S. (ed.) (2002) *Doing Postgraduate Research*, London, Thousand Oaks CA and New Delhi: Sage. This book is of particular interest to postgraduate students and new researchers. It is clearly laid out, readable and easy to use. It starts by explaining that research is not experienced as a smooth, linear process as many guidebooks would suggest. Drawing on accounts of a PhD student, the editor points out that research is not straightforward, and that coping with change and problems is part of the research process. The structure of the book reflects this insight and the reader is able to dip in and out as needed. Each chapter begins with a clear set of aims and has a series of activities designed to get the reader to engage with the issues raised by research, and to get her or him to start writing.

Punch, K.F. (2000) *Developing Effective Research Proposals*, London, Thousand Oaks CA and New Delhi: Sage. Aimed at postgraduate students preparing a research proposal in the social sciences, this book covers issues including the function and purpose of research proposals, the processes of developing and writing research proposals, issues in identifying approaches and frameworks, research design and ideas for getting started. The book includes some examples of successful research proposals, as well as a summary checklist of guiding questions to help develop and write a proposal. The chapters are concise and the book could be dipped into according to need.

Rudestam, K.E. and Newton, R.R. (2001) *Surviving your Dissertation*, London, Thousand Oaks CA and New Delhi: Sage. This book is aimed at doctoral students in the social sciences. The authors explain that the research phases can be thought of as ‘a research wheel ... a recursive cycle of steps that are repeated over time’. Part I concentrates on getting started, including issues involved in finding a research focus, generating research questions and getting to grips with the different methods of inquiry available. Part II moves to a focus on the dissertation chapters, including literature review, method and different ways of presenting the analysis of the data in writing. Part III shifts from product to issues of process including overcoming barriers, writing processes, using the computer effectively and ethical issues.

A strong research proposal. It addresses both practical and theoretical issues involved in research. It is clearly laid out and relatively easy to use. Each chapter begins by setting out its aims. The book is interactive, with cartoons to make it visual and lively, key terms clearly defined and various exercises aimed at engaging the reader in an active learning process. The eight chapters include: research and the research problem, information and how to deal with it, types of research, the nature and use of argument, more about the nature of research, research quality and planning, research methods, preparing the research, proposal and starting to write. This provides an overview of some of the theoretical perspectives in research and a guide to the stages involved in the research process, but is of particular value at the beginning of a research project when developing a proposal.
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