Project Managing Your Thesis or Dissertation

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Learning Objectives

- Familiarity with some basic project management principles applicable to managing the challenges of a thesis or dissertation
What do you consider to be typical challenges of writing a thesis or dissertation?
What Problems Can Arise with One’s Supervisor?
1. Supervisor gives you less help & direction than you expected.*

Project Management Principle:
Set Standards of Engagement
(as early on in the process as possible)
2. Supervisor has low interest in, or disagrees with some fundamental aspect of, your research project

Project management principle: 
Achieve Buy-In
3. You and your supervisor have different expectations of what you should accomplish in your dissertation.

**Project Management Principle:**

*Define the Scope of the Project*

- How long should your project be?
- What standards will be used to evaluate the work?
- What parts of the dissertation will be “delivered” when?
- When will the dissertation be completed?
4. Supervisor very busy, leading to long waits for feedback

Project Management Principle: Identify Constraints
(so that you can factor them in to your scheduling)
Another Challenge of a Dissertation:

What problem can a distant deadline cause?
Procrastination

I’ve got loads of time
Avoiding procrastination/increasing motivation

• Beware the “I’ve got lots of time” justification for procrastinating. The human brain is a great excuse generator, so make sure you set standards of engagement for yourself as well.
Routinize your schedule as far as possible, so that you’re always working at the same time of day (or night). Let habit work *for* you instead of against you.

Make sure that the routine works for you. When does your brain work best? What days/times of day (or night) do you have the most energy for mental work?
When you’re specifying your daily task, make sure the goal you create is **SMART**.

**S** – *Specific* (What exactly do you want to achieve by the end of the time allotted for the task?)

**M** – *Measurable* (How will you know you’ve achieved it? What are the indicators?)

**A** – *Attainable* (Is it a goal you can actually accomplish given the allotted time, your familiarity with the task, etc.)

**R** – *Relevant* (Does the goal connect with your values and broader personal goals?)

**T** – *Timebound* (Have you created a time frame for accomplishing the goal?)
Create *External* Motivation for Times When Internal Motivation isn’t enough

- Schedule regular meetings with your supervisor—meetings that correspond, ideally, with the completion dates of project stages.
- Schedule a few Writing Support appointments in advance, so that you are forced to have a piece of writing ready on those dates.
- Plan rewards for yourself at the completion of various project-related tasks. A good idea is to convert a temptation—one that normally leads you to procrastinate—into a reward.
Another Challenge of a Thesis or Dissertation:

Project is large and complex
What Problems Can a Large, Complex Project Cause?
Challenge: Large, Complex Project

Fear

Meet Thesaurusaurus

Are you hiding from him?
Fear can set off a cascade of negative emotions:

1. Fear
2. Avoidance
3. Guilty Feelings
4. Plunging Self-Esteem
5. Low Self-Efficacy (feeling like you can’t do it)
The first thing you have to do, then, is cut
T-H-E-S-I-S-A-U-R-U-S
down to size*
and take one step at a time.

* Repeat as many times as necessary
Challenge: Large, Complex Project

Project management principle: Break Down Tasks
What Are the Main Tasks in Your Thesis or Dissertation?
Challenge: Large, Complex Project

- Research
- Writing
- Editing
- Defending
What Are the Sub-Tasks Involved in Each of the Main Tasks?

- Research
- Writing
- Editing
- Defending
Possible Research Sub-Tasks

- Online research
  - Search for articles, read, summarize/analyse articles

- Field research
  - Travel to site, observe/record

- Lab research
  - Set-up experiment, run experiment

- Archival research
  - Travel to archives, search archives, read/record/analyse archival materials

- Survey creation

- Survey distribution/collection

Challenge: Large, Complex Project
Possible Writing Sub-Tasks

Introduction*
Background/Lit Review
Methodology
Results
Discussion
Conclusion/Recommendations
Appendices
Bibliography
Abstract

*NB: Sections are not necessarily written in this order, and there is a recursivity to the writing process that must be taken into account.
Challenge: Large, Complex Project

Possible Editing Sub-Tasks

- Meeting with supervisor
- Meeting with writing tutor
- Incorporating feedback
- Proofreading/copy editing
- Creating title page, abstract, appendices, etc.
Challenge: Large, Complex Project

Possible Defending Sub-Tasks

- Meetings with supervisor
- Creating presentation
- Practising presentation
- Mock defence
- Defence
Estimating how much time you’ll need *without* breaking down the project is a bit like estimating how many gumballs are in an opaque gumball machine.

Challenge: Large, Complex Project

Now estimate how much time...  

...each sub-task will take
Project management principle:
Estimate Time Needed for Completion of Each Part of the Project
In order to estimate time to completion for each subtask, consider:

1. The Nature of the task:
   - Can you complete it at your desk, or do you have to travel somewhere?
   - Is there a reasonably stable relationship between time put in and the end product?
   - Does being able to start it depend on the completion of a prior task?
   - How big is the subtask? (# of pgs.; degree to which material must be processed, e.g., Discussion section vs. Bibliography)
2. Your Past experience with the task:

- Do you have the necessary skills already to tackle the task? If not, you may have to factor in learning time. E.g. Improving knowledge of APA

- How long have similar tasks taken in the past? If you haven’t paid attention in the past, or you have no prior experience with the task, now is the time to start self-monitoring.
3. Your other commitments during that time period
   - How many hours can you actually afford to spend on the project in a given week or month? As long as you consider this question in advance, you can move back starting dates if necessary.
Now expand your estimates!

You need to give yourself a margin of error in case of unforeseen circumstances. Add ≈ 20%
E.g.: Reading and Summarizing 60 Research Articles

- Can complete at my desk; doesn’t depend on completion of a prior task.*
- From self-monitoring, I know it takes me ≈ 1 hr to read & summarize 10 pgs of a research article in my field.
- I have an average of 15 hrs/wk for the task; that’s ≈150 pgs/wk—or about 10 articles (given average article length of 15 pgs); so it’ll take me ≈6 wks to read & summarize 60 articles. +20% ≈ 7 wks. If I start at beginning of May, I’ll aim to finish by, say, June 15th.

*Assuming that the articles have already been found and sifted through for relevance
Project management principle: Create a Schedule
Put Estimates into a Gantt Chart with a Project-Management tool like Tom’s Planner

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task</th>
<th>Resources Needed</th>
<th>Complete/Incomplete</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.0 Do additional research</td>
<td>Library Database</td>
<td>Incomplete</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 Create/send out surveys</td>
<td></td>
<td>complete</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 Find 10 relevant articles</td>
<td></td>
<td>Incomplete</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3 Read &amp; summarize articles</td>
<td></td>
<td>Incomplete</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.0 Write first draft</td>
<td></td>
<td>Incomplete</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 Draft introduction</td>
<td></td>
<td>Incomplete</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 Draft Literature Review</td>
<td></td>
<td>Incomplete</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 Draft Methodology sec.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Incomplete</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4 Draft Results section</td>
<td>Returned Surveys</td>
<td>Incomplete</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5 Draft Discussion section</td>
<td></td>
<td>Incomplete</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.6 Draft Recommendations</td>
<td></td>
<td>Incomplete</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.7 Draft Conclusion</td>
<td></td>
<td>Incomplete</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.0 Get feedback</td>
<td>Supervisor</td>
<td>Incomplete</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.0 Write second draft</td>
<td>Supervisor's feedback</td>
<td>Incomplete</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

May 2016

10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19

Work backwards from the due date (if you’ve been give one) to determine your start date, or work forwards from your start date to estimate when you will be finished.
Comparing Project Management Software


Relevant features to consider, especially for group work:

- Collaborative software (email, texting)
- Issue tracking software (for identifying, updating, and resolving project glitches)
- Scheduling (Gantt chart)
- Resource Management (Assigning tasks, Lab time, Computer time, etc.)
- Document Management system (for when you have to store and keep track of shareable documents, possibly in conjunction with a specialized reference manager like Mendeley)
- Workflow System (notifies group members when one task has been completed and the next is to begin)
Project Management Principle: Monitor Your Progress

- Are you meeting all your deadlines? If not, why not? Do your estimates need to be revised? Are you being a perfectionist? Are you lacking motivation? Is a critical phase of the process stalled, so that you can’t proceed any further?
If, for whatever reason, your progress is stalled, don’t hide from your supervisor. Communicate!!

Last Project Management Principle: COMMUNICATE!
Thanks for Coming!