1. **What is research?**

Research is nothing more complicated than ‘finding out’ about a particular topic of interest. People actually carry out research all the time: finding out the times of buses, trains, events; investigating routes for car journeys or places to visit; looking for good shopping deals, and so on. Most people are ‘natural researchers’ as they track down relevant information.

Obviously, ‘research’ in the world of higher education has taken on a more specialist meaning: it is particularly associated with finding out ‘new knowledge’, pushing the frontiers of understanding. But all this means at undergraduate level is a *fresh understanding* of the topic.

You carry out research every time you prepare an essay or assignment. But you might well also have to complete a longer dissertation, often in the final year before graduation. The purpose of this is threefold: to help you student consolidate your learning; to give you a chance to show they you use your academic skills to explore a topic of your choosing; and to prepare the ground for later postgraduate work by getting you to extend your existing research skills.

2. **Initial Questions**

Two initial questions are absolutely foundational:

- What is going to be the central focus of the study?
- What is the best method for gathering the information needed?

Many students come unstuck because they do not spend enough time thinking-through these initial questions. It is normal for researchers to start out with just a hazy idea about their ‘research question’. But the dissertation will almost certainly come to grief unless the research focus is quickly sharpened: either students will find the topic is too vast or tutors will criticise the project as too vague and generalised. Keeping asking: what do you really want to find
out?
Similarly, what is the best way of approaching the project? How will you get all the information you need to do the job properly?

3. **Research methods**

In many subjects, the main task will be reading – gathering as much information as possible from a wide range of current scholarly literature: journals, books, and, where appropriate, reliable internet or other electronic resources. You are expected to summarise this knowledge, analysis the key themes, ideas and theories running through the material, and apply this to the specific topic you’ve chosen for your project. Essentially, the key method here is ‘playing with the material’ – sifting through the relevant information to identify the salient points, testing and evaluating the arguments, looking for gaps and weaknesses in the theory, and using these ideas to form your own point of view.

Some projects may require an additional element of empirical data. This raises two key issues:

1. **What is the best method for gathering the kind of data you need?**
   
   a. If you require statistical information, you need to use one of the quantitative methods – methods that count things, ideas, etc. Data of this type is often collected through questionnaires, but there are many other possible methods – for example, counting cars using a road, or counting people using a service.

   b. If you require more detailed personal information – for example, information relating to attitudes, values or beliefs, you need to use a qualitative method – structured or semi-structured interviews, case studies, participant observation, and so on. As always, however, the method must ‘be fit for purpose’ – it must be an appropriate and valid way of collecting the data you require.

2. **Do you need clearance from the Faculty Research Ethics Committee?**

   The answer is always ‘yes’ if your study involves ‘human subjects’ – that is, your study involves people rather than things. Often, all that is required at undergraduate level is completion a simple online form, though more detailed information may be required.

Both of these issues raise important questions. Make sure you read some of the relevant literature and discuss these matters with your supervisor before you start work on your project.

4. **Getting started**

You may have to submit an initial proposal before they start the research project. This is important because:

- Your supervisor has responsibility for checking that your proposal meets the module and/or course requirements, and it is better to find this out at the start rather than the end of the dissertation process!
- Your supervisor will want to know that the project is ‘do-able’ – that is, that you can achieve what you say you want to achieve in the time and with the resources available
• The Research Proposal is part of the process of refining your ideas; it helps to press home the question: what do you really want to find out?

Departmental procedures for Research Proposals vary. ALWAYS check the module/course handbook for precise information about the forms to be filled in and where/when a proposal has to be submitted. If in doubt, ask your supervisor.

5. **Research planning**

Dissertations typically take a long time – usually longer than you think. Good planning and effective time management are thus essential.

Work back from the final deadline and include ‘emergency time’: remember whatever can go wrong will go wrong, so be prepared for illness, computer problems, family or work crises and so on. You will also need time to draft and edit the report. Valuable marks are often lost because students try to cut corners or look for short cuts. For most people, the only route to success is a lot of hard work. All of this needs to be built into your planning schedule.

A significant amount of time will be needed for the literature search and review, particularly if you are a slow reader. If your project involves empirical data you will need to allow plenty of time to collect this. Leave plenty of time for analysis: even with the help of computer programmes such as SPSS or Nvivo, the collation and analysis of empirical data is a long process and has to be done carefully. Build in ‘thinking time’ to gather your own thoughts on the data. Finally, allow enough time for drafting and editing the dissertation.

In short, a good dissertation takes a lot of time. Start well ahead of the deadline, draw up a schedule of personal targets and goals something like this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I will finish the...</th>
<th>by....</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research proposal</td>
<td>given deadline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Ethics submission</td>
<td>given deadline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literature search and reading</td>
<td>so many weeks (set own realistic deadline)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empirical data gathering</td>
<td>so many weeks (set own realistic deadline)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data analysis</td>
<td>set own deadline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Processing the ideas and evidence</td>
<td>set own deadline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drafting the initial report</td>
<td>set own deadline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edit and revise initial draft</td>
<td>set own deadline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Submit finished product</td>
<td>given deadline</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6. **Reading the literature**

Remember the tricks of the trade: be ruthlessly targeted - what do you really need to read? Do you really need to read every word of every book, or do you only need part of a section or chapter? Look for the clues to narrow down the focus – the index or chapter introductions, for example. Use a similar approach with journal articles: use the abstract to check out whether the article will help with this specific project.

Keep clear notes of all your reading – partly as a way of starting to process the information, and partly as an aide-de-memoire. It is crucially important that you keep a clear record of all the bibliographic information and page numbers.
you will need for your references.

When you have collected as much background material as you can, make a list of the key points. What is directly relevant to your work, and what is merely secondary? Keep the focus.

The purpose of all this reading is to show that:

- you know your subject – you understand what is already known
- you can apply this existing knowledge to your specific research project

The aim is to set up a kind of dialogue between the theories and ideas you have read and the results of your own thinking: does your data confirm or challenge the ideas put forward in the literature? What are your own ideas? Where is the evidence to support your point of view? throughout.

6. **Drafting the dissertation**

Prepare a dissertation plan, setting out the data in the required format for your project (ALWAYS go back and re-read the instructions given at the start of the project. ALWAYS do what it says). A fairly typical dissertation will probably follow a pattern something like this:

- **Introduction**: set the scene for the research project, show why it is important and/or interesting and indicate any problems or gaps in the current knowledge
- Set out a summary of your chosen **method** – and give a rationale: why did you choose this method, and can you justify its use in this particular project? What alternative methods might have been used, and why were they not chosen?
- **Literature review**: a brief summary of the key points made in the books and journals consulted, and a critique of this material – what is missing, do these ideas or theories work, and why/why not? What kind of overall picture starts to emerge from this literature, and what is missing?
- Presentation of any empirical **data** (this will vary a little, depending on the quantitative or qualitative method used)
- **Analysis** of the data, identifying the key themes, trends or patterns
- Presentation of your **findings** – what do you make of this material and (if appropriate) what evidence can you produce from the empirical data to justify your point of view?
- **Discussion** of the how what you’ve found out relates to the literature
- **Conclusions** (and check: have you actually done what you said you would do in the introduction?)

Make sure your assignment is clearly structured, with good summaries at key points. There should be clear links between the sections, with everything set out in a logical order. Make sure the ‘flow of thought’ in the sequence of ideas really works!

7. **Using your supervisor**

University education is about developing the skills required for independent learning. This means that students are expected to take a high degree of responsibility for their own work.
The role of the supervisor, therefore, is not to direct your research, still less to ‘spoon feed’ you. They are there to guide and check that your work is on target. Your supervisor is essentially a mentor – a senior colleague who is able to offer helpful advice from their own experience and give some immediate feedback. They will advise, challenge, discuss and – if necessary! – warn. But they will not do the work for you.

Normally, supervisors want to establish a kind of ‘contract’ which spells out mutual expectations as fully as possible: how often will you meet, what work does the supervisor expect to be completed in advance of each session, how will feedback be arranged, and so on. Supervisors expect you to be self-disciplined and motivated enough to complete work by agreed deadlines. You should therefore contact them well in advance if you run into problems that will make it difficult to agreed deadlines. Supervisors expect – and have the right to expect – a fully professional approach from students. This means that:

- You (and they) will keep appointments unless genuinely and unavoidably delayed
- You (and they) will keep in regular contact to check out how things are progressing
- You (and they) will complete agreed tasks on time
- You (and they) will check things out if you are uncertain about the correct process
- You (and they) will prepare a clear agenda for each meeting – what do you need to get from the session?
- You (and they) will fix dates for your next supervision each time you meet

Supervisors are extremely busy people, often engaged in demanding research of their own. This does mean that they can sometimes appear elusive or difficult to contact; please be patient and persevere: email is often a better way of raising initial queries or questions, and they can then arrange an additional meeting if it is felt necessary.