5

Managing your project

Introduction • Managing time • Mapping your project • Piloting • Dealing with key figures and institutions • Sharing responsibility • Using computers • Managing not to get demoralized when things do not go as planned • Summary • Exercises • Further reading

Introduction

So, you've decided what topic to focus on in your research project. You've worked out your research approach, and settled on the techniques and methods you will use. You've located and begun to read some of the literature relevant to your topic. How do you actually manage and progress your plans so that you carry out and complete your project in the time and with the resources you have available? That is the subject of this chapter.

The chapter focuses on the various skills which you will need to bring into play, or develop, in order to manage your research project effectively, and to cope with the problems that will arise as you proceed with your work.

The following issues are covered:

- **Managing time**: how to use your time for research.
- **Mapping your project**: scheduling your research into the time you have available.
- **Piloting**: testing your research plans before committing yourself.
- **Dealing with key figures and institutions**: the roles of supervisors, managers, employers and universities.
- **Sharing responsibility**: using formal and informal relationships to support your research.
- **Using computers**: getting the available technology to work for you.

• **Managing not to get demoralized when things do not go as planned**: the ups and downs of the research process.

Managing time

> Even if you register only part-time, you should ideally put in some work on your research every day (to an equivalent of two days' solid work a week), if possible in a place where you can leave the work spread out in between times. It really *cannot* be fitted in to odd half days at the weekend. This doesn't mean cutting off your social, domestic life and active life entirely. On the contrary, you need these for balance: to ensure you stay healthy and supported.
>
> (Leonard 2001: 77)

People think about, describe and manage their time in a wide variety of different ways. Box 5.1 outlines a number of different attitudes to time. Do you recognize yourself in any of these statements?

You should find it of help to you in carrying out your research project to have an appreciation of your own attitudes towards, and usage of, time. You need to understand your own ways of managing your time in relation to your energy levels and coping strategies, and to the demands made upon you. You also need to think about the rhythms of your day, week, month and year. For example, some people cannot work in the school holidays because of the demands of childcare, while others see holiday time as a space which is

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Box 5.1 Attitudes to time

- I'm a night owl
- I'm an early bird
- I juggle lots of tasks
- I schedule everything in my diary
- I over-schedule!
- I compartmentalize (e.g. I keep Sundays for the family)
- I slot things in when I can
- There are too few hours in the day
- I sleep fast
- I don't have time to even go to the loo
- I cook the children's dinner and write my essays on the corner of the table
- I have to know I will be uninterrupted
- The less time I've got, the more I get done
- Time for me is really more about energy and motivation

sacrosanct and separate from work (and research). Some people like to keep Sunday free for 'family' activities, while others see it as an ideal time to study.

Think about the demands on your time and your own preferences in relation to how others think about it. In our rushaway world, time is perhaps the most precious commodity. No one ever has enough of it. However, as people living in an industrialized society, we do have a particular view of time. Whereas agricultural societies viewed time as essentially cyclic, bounded by the pattern of seasons and days, industrial societies view it as linear and finite. Yet, we may still have glimpses of eternity.

It is relatively easy to identify a series of pragmatic time management principles. These should be of use to you in managing your research, almost regardless of your attitude towards time and the amount of it you have available. Box 5.2 contains a series of such hints and tips.

Box 5.2 Using time for research

Delegation
Can you delegate certain aspects of your research? For example, making appointments, carrying out interviews, tape transcription, inputting data to the computer, statistical analysis, typing of drafts.

Reading effectively
Train yourself to get through the literature, and to get at the nub of the arguments within it, quicker.

> You will find that Chapter 4, **Reading for research**, contains much useful advice

Chunking
You may be able to divide some of your research tasks up into small chunks which can be tackled whenever you have a little spare time. For example, if you take photocopies of materials you need to read, you could bring these out (e.g. during a train journey) as and when you have time.

Relaxing with a purpose
Make sure all your down-time activities have a clear purpose. You might, for example, be idly looking through a book to gain a sense of what it is about. Or you might use time spent walking the dog or having a bath to give you time to think. Don't think of such time as wasted: one of the keys to doing worthwhile, effective research is to allow yourself plenty of space in which to mull over what you are doing.

You might commit such thoughts to your research diary. See the section on **Keeping your research diary** in Chapter 2.

You may well, however, have other significant demands upon your time in addition to research. Particularly if you are a part-time student, but increasingly also if you are studying full-time, you may have full-time or part-time employment. You may also have family responsibilities, caring for one or more children, and/or looking after elderly or infirm relatives. In such circumstances, carving out the time necessary for research, and doing so consistently week after week, can seem almost impossible.

But don't despair. Clearly, if the other demands on your time are pretty much all-consuming, you would be well advised to defer or suspend your research activities for the time being. There's no point in adding to your stress levels. Universities and employers are usually fairly flexible and understanding in such circumstances, particularly if your position is likely to improve in the foreseeable future.

If the pressures are not that bad, then you need to find ways of managing your time to cope with them as best you can. In your home life, this will probably mean that, for some of the time, your research activities will have to take priority over your family and social activities. Talk it over with those involved and try and get them on-side. Help them to understand how important this is for you, that they will still have priority for much of the time, and that your research will not last forever.

In your work life, the key issue is whether you are undertaking this research for and/or with the support of your employer or not. If they are involved, they should be more willing to show some flexibility, though you may need to negotiate this repeatedly (and you may find that the support offered is more in principle than in practice). You may even be in the fortunate position of being able to do at least some of your research in work time: indeed, your research may be focused on your workplace. If your employer is not behind your research – and you may not even wish them to know about it – then your best option might be to make strategic use of your holiday entitlement for research purposes, or even, assuming you can afford it, reduce the number of hours you work.

From the start, however, you will need to be realistic. You cannot undertake a research project and not expect it to impact upon other aspects of your life. At the very least, you can expect to enjoy rather less in the way of sleep and loafing about. You will probably also have less time for dinner parties, sport and holidays. But always remember that research has its own consolations!
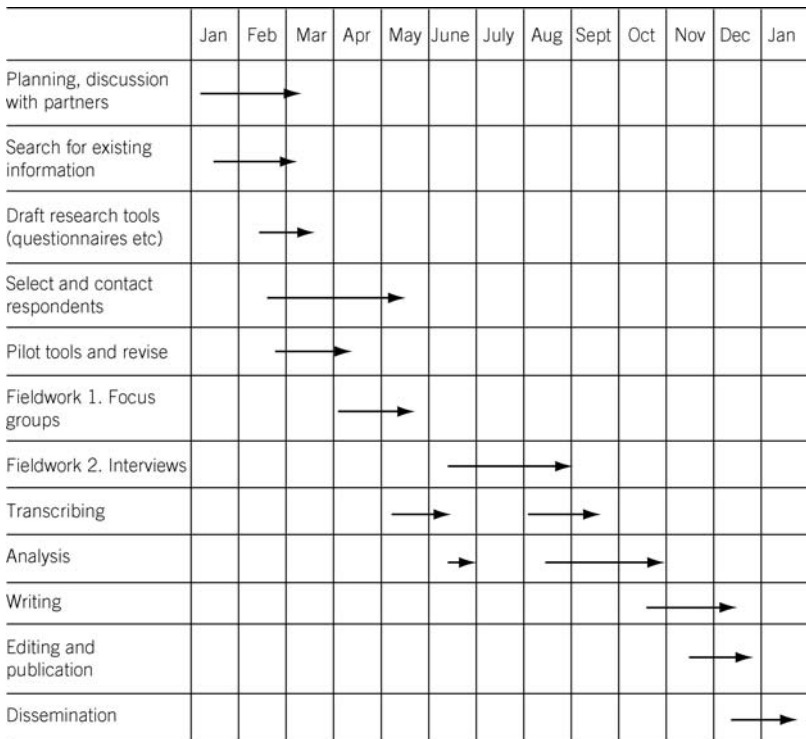
Mapping your project

Once you are clearer about your own preferences and possibilities regarding the usage of time, you should be able to draw up a draft schedule for your research. This will relate the time you have available in which to carry out the research – a given number of hours, days, weeks or perhaps years – to your other responsibilities and commitments. You can then slot in the various research activities you will need to engage in at times when you expect to be both free and in the mood to work on your research.

Just because you have drawn up a schedule, however, this doesn't mean that you have to keep strictly to it. It is difficult, even with experience, to precisely estimate the time which different research activities will take in advance. Some will take longer than expected, while others may need less time. Some will be abandoned, while other unanticipated activities will demand attention. So it is a good idea to allow for some spare time or flexibility in your scheduling. You should also revisit your schedule from time to time, and make revisions, to allow for such changes and to keep yourself on track.

There are a number of ways of scheduling your research time: one diagrammatic approach is illustrated in Box 5.3. Such charts have the disadvantage of suggesting a simplified, rational view of research. They are useful, however, in conveying the overlap or concurrence between the tasks to be carried out, and as a guide to progress. In practice, of course, there will be numerous minor changes to your plans as set out, and perhaps some major ones as well. When you have examined Box 5.3, see if you can draw up your own research schedule, if you have not already done so. Try Exercise 5.1, at the end of this chapter.

Box 5.3 Scheduling research using a grid

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan
Planning, discussion with partners	→→→→												
Search for existing information	→→→→												
Draft research tools (questionnaires etc)		→→											
Select and contact respondents			→→→→→→										
Pilot tools and revise			→→→										
Fieldwork 1. Focus groups				→→→									
Fieldwork 2. Interviews						→→→→→							
Transcribing					→→→		→→→→						
Analysis						→→		→→→→→→					
Writing										→→→→			
Editing and publication											→→→		
Dissemination													→→→

(*Source*: Laws et al. 2003: 151)

Piloting

Piloting, or re-assessment without tears, is the process whereby you try out the research techniques and methods which you have in mind, see how well they work in practice, and, if necessary, modify your plans accordingly.

> The idea of 'informal piloting' was discussed in the section on **Focusing** in Chapter 2.

You may think that you know well enough what you are doing, but the value of pilot research cannot be overestimated. Things never work quite the way you envisage, even if you have done them many times before, and they have a nasty habit of turning out very differently from how you expected on occasion. So try a pilot exercise. If you don't, you will probably find that your initial period of data collection turns into a pilot in any case. In a sense, of course, all social research is a pilot exercise.

If you would like to pilot your research, and are not sure of the processes involved, try Exercise 5.2.

Dealing with key figures and institutions

There are a variety of key figures and institutions with which most researchers have to deal at some time or another. In this section, we will consider the issues involved in dealing with the most common of these:

- at the individual level, your supervisor, tutor, mentor or manager;
- at the institutional level, your university, employer or sponsor.

Just how significant these individuals and organizations are will, of course, vary depending on your research project and circumstances. Here we will focus on those that are likely to be of most relevance to you in agreeing, progressing, reviewing and assessing your research.

> The issues involved in dealing with informants and case study institutions are covered in the section on **Access and ethical issues** in Chapter 6.

Key figures

The two individual figures we have identified as being likely to be of most importance to you as a researcher are your supervisor and/or manager. A rough definition of these two roles would be:

- a supervisor has an academic responsibility for guiding and advising you on your research project;
- a manager has a responsibility for directing and overseeing your work in a more general sense.

In your case, you may have either, neither or both of these key figures in your research project. The two roles may even be combined in the same person, though in most circumstances this is probably not advisable.

   If you are doing research for academic credit, you will almost certainly have a supervisor (or supervisors), though their importance to you may vary, depending on your topic, level of study, institutional practices and individual predilections. If you are doing research within your employing or work organization – and you may be doing this for academic credit as well – your manager may be of significance. Their importance will, similarly, vary depending upon a range of factors, including whether you are sponsored by your employer, and whether your employer or manager has determined your research topic.

> The question of what you might expect from your supervisor is considered in the section on **Finding and choosing your supervisor** in Chapter 2.

   You may in practice have a splendid relationship with your supervisor and/or manager, and receive good advice and sufficient support throughout your research work. If so, consider yourself fortunate, and be thankful. Other researchers have to make do with less engaged or over-worked supervisors, mentors or managers. One point to remember is that your supervisor or manager is probably a member of an organization which will have its own expectations regarding both this role and their other duties. You may want to discuss these with them.

   Where your relationship gets off to a good start, it may change to your disadvantage during the course of your research (or vice versa). Or your supervisor or manager may themselves move on, and you will be passed on to somebody else. Box 5.4 details some general lessons about dealing with your supervisor and/or manager.

   How, then, can you, as a relatively inexperienced researcher, go about developing more authority in these relationships and greater responsibility for your own learning needs? If possible, and if you have not already done so, draw up and agree a contract with your supervisor and/or manager. This should set out

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Box 5.4 Handling your supervisor or manager

- Investing too much authority or responsibility in key figures in your research life is likely to lead to disappointment. It is as important to develop your own sense of authority and responsibility.
- In supervisor/researcher and manager/researcher relationships, responsibility is two-way. Just as you may rightly have expectations of your supervisor and/or manager, in terms of support and advice, so may they rightly have expectations of you. These may cover aspects such as scheduling, regularity of work and reporting back.
- Where you are carrying out a research project as part of a group, the situation is inevitably rather more complicated. A whole web of relationships and attendant responsibilities will exist between you, the other members of your group, and your joint supervisor(s) or manager(s). Because of this complexity, it is important to be as clear as possible about the nature of the relationships involved.
- You should ideally aim to be in a position of sharing responsibility for, and authority over, your research. After all, it is you that are doing, and to a large extent managing, the research.
- If you ask for assistance or advice from your manager or supervisor, be prepared to have it refused, and still be able to move forward with your research.

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the tasks involved in managing and progressing your research project, and detail the specific roles and responsibilities of the individuals concerned.

Though such contracts are by no means foolproof, they should give you rather more leverage to influence matters if something goes wrong, and they help to clarify roles and expectations for all involved. Having some kind of contractual agreement, with your research colleagues as well as your supervisor and/or manager, is doubly important if you are carrying out a group research project. Box 5.5 gives some examples of the things a research contract might include.

You might like to try and draft a contract for your own research work, on your own, with your research colleagues, or directly with your manager or supervisor. Try Exercise 5.3.

Research contracts can, of course, have disadvantages as well as advantages. These are summarized in Box 5.6: you may be able to think of others. If your supervisor or manager, or your research colleagues, are unwilling to agree a research contract with you, you should at least be able to talk about your aims, needs and constraints, and how you will work together, with them.

The key message here is to ask yourself what you want from your relationship with your supervisor and/or manager, and do what you can to get it. Open discussions about these issues during your initial meetings. Renegotiate or

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Box 5.5 What a research contract might include

Responsibilities at university level
- maintaining the regulations for postgraduate students;
- admitting students and ensuring that admission standards are maintained;
- checking that departments are monitoring students and dealing with complaints and problems;
- approving recommendations for upgrading students from MPhil to PhD;
- appointing examiners . . .

Responsibilities of supervisors
- to explore fully the student's background at the outset, and identify areas where further training is needed;
- to give guidance on the nature of research and the standard expected, the planning of the research programme, attendance at appropriate courses, literature and sources . . .
- check on the student's progress at regular intervals;
- allocate a reasonable period of time for supervisory sessions;
- deal with urgent problems as soon as possible . . .

Responsibilities of research students
- to tackle the research with a positive commitment, taking full advantage of the resources and facilities offered by the academic environment and in particular contact with the supervisor, other staff and research students;
- to discuss with the supervisor the type of guidance and comment believed to be most helpful, the training which might be required, and agree a schedule of meetings;
- to attend supervision sessions, meetings, seminars, lectures and laboratory sessions as required by the supervisor or head of department . . .

(*Source*: Lancaster University 2005a)

revisit these discussions, and your contract, as necessary, throughout the life of your research project. Keep a record of these discussions, and of your contract, in the file you have opened on the regulations and expectations governing your project.

Health warning: In seeking to negotiate a contract with your supervisor, manager or mentor, be aware of the power relationships and institutional constraints involved.

Box 5.6 Advantages and disadvantages of research contracts

Advantages
1   They can help to specify your respective roles and responsibilities.
2   They can indicate the expectations held by both sides of the relationship, in terms, for example, of meetings or outputs.
3   They can help you to establish an initial working relationship, or to change an existing relationship.

Disadvantages
1   They may become rigid if not reviewed or revisited at intervals.
2   They may commit you to certain things you would rather avoid or keep fluid.

Key institutions

The institutions we have identified as being likely to be of key importance to you in your research are your university or college, if you are carrying out your research project for academic credit, and your employer or sponsor. It may be the case, of course, that only one, or perhaps neither, of these institutions is of significance for you.

   If you are researching, at least in part, for academic credit, you will, as we have stressed already, need to know as much as possible about the rules, facilities and practices of the university or college involved. You will need this information at an early stage, preferably before you even register and start your research project, if you are to manage your research effectively. Similar advice applies in the case of your employer and/or sponsor (who may also have a supervisory role). You should inform yourself as fully as possible about any expectations or conditions which they may set. Box 5.7 contains details of the kinds of issues you will need information on.

   You should adjust your schedule to take account of all of the points covered in Box 5.7, and try and build them into your research contract. Don't forget to add all of this information to the file you have opened on the regulations and expectations governing your project.

Sharing responsibility

In the previous section, we encouraged you to take responsibility for your research project by recognizing the roles of key figures and organizations, and establishing your independence from them. It is also important, however, to

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Box 5.7 What you need to know from your institution

From your university or college
In terms of facilities, you should know:

- what resources are available (e.g. libraries, computers, language laboratories, rooms, training), and when they are available;
- what research services are offered (e.g. questionnaire design, data input, tape transcription, statistical advice, writing workshops, language teaching);
- what library services are offered (e.g. data bases, Internet, inter-library loans, photocopying), and on what basis;
- how these facilities are organized at university or departmental level.

You will also need to be aware of both your university's and department's written regulations and their unwritten, informal practices. These might include, for example:

- expectations of supervisors and/or tutors;
- rules about the roles of external supervisors and examiners;
- regulations about the time allowed to complete research, and regarding possible suspension or extension of registration;
- rules about the use of others' materials (e.g. plagiarism);
- training requirements;
- internal and ethical approval procedures;
- pre-publication rules associated with the submission of your thesis.

From your employer or sponsor
- If you are being given some time out or work release, find out if you are getting cover or will be expected to do five days work in four.
- Will your manager accept that every Thursday you are not at work, or will you have to forego your study day when a contract has to be completed or a colleague is off sick?
- Will your employer or sponsor help to buy your books or give you an allowance?
- Will you get access to computing facilities at work for research purposes? If so, find out what's available.
- In what format will they require you to report back (e.g. verbal and/or written presentation)?
- Will you be required to pay back fees and funding if you fail, the research is deemed unsatisfactory, or you leave within a certain period?

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develop inter-dependence with fellow researchers and colleagues. These relationships can greatly strengthen your support network and the value of your research. They may be formal, required or implicit to your project, as in the

case of group research, or where you are under the direction of somebody else. Or they may be informal, and developed in part by you, as in the case of personal links with other researchers or colleagues.

Group research

The advantages and disadvantages of group, as opposed to individual, research have already been discussed in Chapter 2.

> You may like to have a look at the section on **Individual and group research** in Chapter 2.

   In practice, of course, you may have little choice about engaging in group research: it may be a requirement of your work or your degree. You may, in such cases, be given guidance by your supervisor or manager on how to manage the group's dynamics. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that you will need, both individually and as a group, to work out early on your respective roles and tasks.

   Researchers on group dynamics have identified a series of group roles which need to be filled if a group is to work effectively. One such formulation is given in Box 5.8.

Box 5.8 Team roles

[H]aving observed some hundreds of teams at work, I'd like to offer my own list of the team roles – i.e. team-building and maintenance roles, rather than task or individual roles – which are prerequisites for well-functioning teams:

- *Organizer*: Keeps meetings focused and in order, does his or her best to get through the agenda.
- *Encourager*: Brings good-humoured appreciation to proceedings, able to defuse tensions and revive flagging morale.
- *Facilitator*: Ensures that the quieter members of the group are heard and everyone's contribution acknowledged.
- *Recorder*: Keeps a note of decisions (especially decisions as to who will do what before the next meeting), ensures that everyone is aware of them.
- *Time-keeper and progress-chaser*: Keeps an eye on the calendar and ensures that everyone is aware of the 'state of play'.
- *Coordinator*: Sees the 'big picture' (the strategic overview), with an eye for gaps and overlaps, and presents this to the team.
- *Lookout*: Visualizes future scenarios, is alert to issues that may be looming over the horizon, keeps everyone informed.

(Levin 2005: 72–3)

To help you think about the working of your group, you may like to try Exercise 5.4.

Informal relationships

Even if you are not doing research as part of a group, or are not required to do so, you may like to set up a variety of informal relationships with others to help you in developing and progressing your work. Indeed, your employer or university may encourage you to do so, and may have a system of buddies, mentors or peer tutors in place already. Or it may be the case that some of your colleagues, or other researchers, are interested in the work you are doing, and get in touch with you.

How can you establish and make the best use of such informal research relationships? Box 5.9 contains some pertinent suggestions.

The most general advice we would give about developing and using research relationships, of whatever kind, is much the same as that given for managing relations with key individuals or institutions. That is, view the relationship as a bargain which requires the active participation of the parties concerned, a shared understanding of what is going on, and a good deal of give and take.

Box 5.9 Managing informal relationships

- Find out what seminars, meetings and conferences you can attend, at your own institution and elsewhere. Attend a range of these, making contributions where possible. These will help you network, keep up to date, share anxieties and successes.
- Your university or employer may run a mentoring or 'buddy' system, which will pair you, or put you in touch, with a student or colleague who has more experience and can show you the ropes.
- Get in touch with relevant research or professional organizations in the area in which you are working. These will have their own sets of meetings, will likely be interested in the research you are undertaking, and could provide useful contacts as well as a sounding board for your ideas.
- Talk about your research with interested relatives, neighbours, colleagues and others in your 'communities'. You may be surprised at how useful some of them can be, particularly as research is partly about communicating your ideas and findings.

Using computers

Attitudes to technology

There is a wide range of responses to the idea of using computers in research. Some people are highly competent in the use of information technologies. Others are scared stiff and have long devised personal strategies to avoid their use. Most people probably lie somewhere in between these extremes, having some familiarity with new, and ever changing, technologies through running wordprocessing programs and playing computer games.

Information technologies are now an essential tool for the management of information. We would suggest that having an understanding, and some facility in the use, of computers is a key skill for all researchers in the social sciences. There are three aspects of particular importance:

- You should be able to type reasonably competently. You may be going to get your research report or dissertation typed out by somebody else, but you may have to type letters, drafts, notes and corrections yourself. It is probably also a good discipline to type up your own research: you are, after all, the person who knows most about it, and you can make changes and amendments as you go along.
- You should know of, and be able to access and use, the Internet and the various computer databases of relevance to your field of research. You will almost certainly need to make use of email.
- You should be aware in general terms of the kinds of packages and programmes available for analysing and presenting research data in your subject area. This awareness should extend to knowing how they work, what their requirements are, and what their advantages and disadvantages may be.

You may already be well versed in all of these areas: if so, well done, and please share your knowledge with somebody else! If not, however, you could see your research as giving you an opportunity to develop new skills in this area, skills which are likely to have a wide future application. Alternatively, you may want to do the minimum in this respect, and avoid areas which heighten your insecurities. Whatever your perspective, however, you should find it useful to do a skills and resources check (see Exercise 5.5). The purpose of this is to get you to think about where you want to get to with your research, and how you might use computers as tools to help you get there.

Commonly available facilities

The kinds of technological facilities you are likely to have available, or be able to get access to, can be divided into three groups:

- *Typing and wordprocessing*: beyond basic typing, you may find a wide range of facilities available on your computer, many of which are likely to be of some use to you in carrying out, and particularly in writing up, your research (see Box 5.10).
- *Databases and communications*: an increasing variety of information databases and communications networks are available in libraries, educational and other institutions, and over the web.

See the section in Chapter 4 on **Using the Internet** for examples of databases and search engines.

- *Analytical packages and programmes*: many package programmes are available which can be invaluable to the social science researcher in storing, recording and analysing their data.

Box 5.10 Useful facilities available on wordprocessing software

- *Layout*: You should be able to use a variety of page layouts, typefaces and type sizes to emphasize or get over complex information in an engaging fashion.
- *Spellcheck*: Most wordprocessing packages will check your spelling for you and suggest possible corrections. Note, however, that many are based on American spellings.
- *Word count*: They will also count the number of words you have written, useful if you are working to a limit.
- *Thesaurus*: This will suggest alternative or synonymous terms, to stop you using the same words all of the time.
- *Grammar check*: This will check that your sentences obey the basic rules of grammar.
- *Searching*: Wordprocessing software can search through your text to find particular words or passages. They can do this with other texts as well once they have been inputted.
- *Tabulation*: Wordprocessing software often has special facilities for laying out tables and charts. Most have the ability to box or shade areas of text.
- *Graphs and maps*: Your software may have programmes to produce graphs or maps from your input data. If not, there are special packages available.
- *Contents*: Your software should be able to draft and lay out a contents page for you.
- *Indexing*: If you enter certain labels as, or after, you type, your software will index your work for you.

> See the sections in Chapter 6 on **Interviews** and **Questionnaires** for discussion of the use of the Internet and email in the collection of data.

> See the section in Chapter 7 on **Managing your data** for examples of packages and programmes.

If you do not intend to use a computer yourself

You may have decided, for very good reasons, that you do not have the time, resources or desire to develop your own information technology skills. It is possible, though not very likely, that they have no great relevance to your research topic. Yet you are still likely to need to make use of some facilities, even if it only in getting your research report or dissertation typed up.

   Here are some points to bear in mind if you are in this position:

- Do you need to ask someone to input data? If so, when will they be available?
- Do you need a typist? If so, you might think about identifying one and booking them now.
- Is your computer compatible with the printer you intend to use? It will be less stressful to sort this out earlier on in your research.
- Will you need to provide equipment, or upgrade existing equipment? Check out the possibilities and costs now.
- If you are not doing the work yourself, remember to allow sufficient time for checking the work of others, and for making necessary revisions.

> **Health warning**: You don't want your information technology skills to control the practice or outcomes of your research in unforeseen ways because you can't get the technology to work for you. Think ahead!

Managing not to get demoralized when things do not go as planned

Even in the most carefully managed research project, things do not always go quite as planned. Most changes are likely to be fairly trivial in nature, and are not recognized as such. Yet, when they are recognized, the things that went wrong can seem to mount up and assume an unwarranted importance. They

Box 5.11 Twenty things that can go wrong

1   You run out of time
2   Access is refused by a key institution or individual
3   A key contact in an organization you are studying leaves
4   You discover that someone has already done your research
5   You loose your job
6   Your response rate is very low
7   Your manager or supervisor interferes with your plans
8   You fall ill
9   You change your job, making access to the site of your research difficult
10 You split up with your partner
11 You loose the citation for a key reference
12 You find that you have too much data to analyse, or too little
13 Your tape recorder doesn't work, or runs out of batteries
14 You run out of money
15 You cannot find key references in your library
16 You are absolutely fed up with your project
17 The dog eats your draft, and then dies
18 You have written too much, or too little
19 Your computer crashes
20 The margins on your text are not the right size for binding

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Box 5.12 Reponses to adversity

- Remind yourself that the purpose of carrying out a research project, particularly as a novice researcher, may be as much about developing your understanding of the research process, and/or the use of particular research methods, as about exploring substantive issues.
- Remember that it may be just as valid, and possibly a lot more helpful to other researchers, to write up your research in terms of, for example, the problems of gaining access to a particular group, or of getting an adequate response from that group once access has been gained.
- Make it part of your business in writing up to reflect upon your research strategy, explore what went wrong and why, and include recommendations for doing it better 'next time'.
- View research as being about the skills you have learnt and developed on the way. As we have said already, few research projects are truly groundbreaking, or shocking in their conclusions. Part of doing research is about appreciating what is involved, and where it may be leading you.
- If you have time and resources you may, of course, choose to re-direct your research strategy when you are stymied in one direction. This is very common, not an admission of failure.
- Welcome to the club! All is not lost.

Box 5.13 Researchers coping with problems and changes

Tofi, a MA student trying to complete a case study of industrial training during the early summer, found that access was agreed just as the factory's holiday fortnight began. He had to re-design his strategy to lay less emphasis on original data, while focusing more on the methodological issues. Having done so, he then received an invitation to talk to a shop stewards' meeting, just three days before his thesis was due for submission. He decided to go to the meeting to learn more about his subject, but not to write up his thesis on the assumption that he could use data from that meeting.

Whilst I had expected my interviews with the women to be upsetting (for them and for me), I had been much more complacent about my interviews with health professionals, and this was not always justified. During an interview with a practice nurse about domestic violence, I was taken by surprise when she became distressed. Rather than recounting her professional dealings with domestic violence as I had expected, my interview prompted her to recall her personal experiences of attempting to deal with domestic violence within her own family network. I learned a powerful lesson from this interview: you cannot always predict who will get distressed and who will not. Researchers need to be prepared for a whole range of emotional responses from a whole range of research participants.
(Hallowell et al. 2005: 17)

Jim finished writing his report on a laptop computer that he was able to borrow to take on holiday with him. He finished it in time to experiment with the layout and make each page look professional. He returned with two days left to print and bind the report, only to find that his printer was not set up to print from the package he had used. He did not want to panic, so decided to spend some money. He contacted an office business which had experience of solving such problems. And they did!

Part of the eventual emphasis on teachers was also due to the corresponding lack of data in other areas. I soon found, for example, that it would not be possible to write very much on curriculum development within public schools because, although I had interviewed several textbook writers and others heavily involved, each case was idiosyncratic and thus would have been impossible to write about without identifying individuals involved and thus the research schools. My major problem, however, was that I had great difficulty in gaining useful information from pupils.
(Walford 2001: 76)

can be very disheartening and de-motivating. It would be difficult to find an honest researcher who had not made significant mistakes. You are going to make mistakes. Box 5.11 (page 148) offers, for your amusement and enlightenment, a list of 20 things that can go wrong.

How can you overcome such difficulties and get beyond them? Perhaps the golden rule is to remember that research is a process of learning. Just as we learn by our mistakes, at least in part, so changes in plans are an essential part of research. It might even be said that research without such mistakes or changes is not real research, and is unlikely to tell us much that we do not already know. Research is really about getting misdirected, recognizing this as such, understanding why it happened, then revising our strategy and moving on.

In Box 5.12 (page 148) you will find some possible, more positive responses to the kinds of dilemmas you may face in managing your research project. Box 5.13 (page 149) then gives some real-life examples of how social science researchers coped with problems or changes in their plans.

Summary

Having read this chapter, you should:

- be better equipped to manage your time to carry out the activities necessary for your research project;
- understand how you might go about ordering your relationships with the key figures and institutions for your research;
- be more aware of how you might use wordprocessors and computers more effectively for your research;
- be more confident that you can make changes to, or mistakes in, your research plans, without being a bad researcher.

Exercises

5.1 Make a list of all the key things (or milestones) you have to do in order to successfully complete your research project. Note where these have to be done in a particular order, or depend upon each other. Assign realistic deadlines for each milestone you need to reach. Set all of this information out as a grid, table or some other kind of schedule.

5.2 Complete two or three practice interviews, observations or questionnaires, or whatever technique or combination of techniques you were

planning to use. Analyse the results. Note how long the data collection and its analysis took, and how well your techniques worked. Do you need to revise your plans or techniques?

5.3 Draft a contract for your research project, specifying the duties and responsibilities of all of those involved. Relate the items you have identified to your schedule. Discuss the contract and its scheduling with your supervisor and/or manager.

5.4 List all of the members of your research group. Through discussion, identify each member's skills, motivations and preferences. Negotiate how you are going to collectively undertake the project. Note aspects or areas in which you seem to be relatively weak, and think about how you will cope with this.

5.5 Note down all of the computing facilities and software you have access to. How useful might these be to you in your research, and which do you plan to make use of? If you don't know how, or are insufficiently skilled, to use some of these facilities, how might you develop your abilities?

Further reading

In this section, we list a selection of books that are of particular relevance to the topics discussed in this chapter, together with an indication of their contents.

Delamont, S., Atkinson, P. and Parry, O. (2004) *Supervising the PhD: A Guide to Success*, 2nd edn. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
  A practical guide for novice and experienced supervisors.

Delamont, S., Atkinson, P. and Parry, O. (2000) *The Doctoral Experience: Success and Failure in Graduate School*. London: Falmer Press.
  An empirical study of the experiences of research students and their supervisors in a range of disciplines. Discusses how students cope with uncertainty and frustration, how research groups can act as socializing environments, and how supervisors handle the tensions between student autonomy and their academic responsibilities.

Levin, P. (2005) *Successful Teamwork! For Undergraduates and Taught Postgraduates Working on Group Projects*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
  Highly practical guide to making the best out of team projects.

Orna, E. with Stevens, G. (1995) *Managing Information for Research*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
  Written for first-time researchers, this text looks at issues such as managing time and information, producing the written text and dealing with the emotions associated with research.

Phillips, E. and Pugh, D. (2005) *How to get a PhD: A Handbook for Students and Their Supervisors*, 4th edn. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
  Best-selling guide to the whole process of doing a PhD, from motivation and application through to supervision and examination.
Stablein, R. and Frost, P. (eds) (2004) *Renewing Research Practice*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
  In this collection prominent North American scholars in the fields of management and organizational studies provide accounts of overcoming difficulties in their research projects and careers.