What could go wrong?

**Missing your research deadlines?** - Missing a few targets is normal in independent research, as it can be unpredictable. However, if you regularly fail to meet your deadlines, you may need to revise your goals to make them more realistic. Perhaps you are trying to do too much or have lost the focus of your research? Ask yourself - how much time do I have left, and what can I realistically do in that time?

**Struggling to stay motivated?** Sometimes being a postgraduate feels more like a test of endurance than a measure of intelligence! Allowing yourself time off and regular rewards (e.g. seeing friends, a film, sporting activities, or a chocolate bar) will help keep you going and keep your thinking fresh. Have a space at home which is free from your notes and study to be a sanctuary away from research. If you are stuck and bored with your project, talking through what interests you about it with a friend or supervisor is a good way of getting back your enthusiasm.

**Feeling overwhelmed?** Stop what you’re doing, and get yourself a coffee. Then list everything you think you need to do. Mark it up as ‘now’, ‘soon’ and ‘later’, and put the ‘now’ list in order of urgency. Then (and this may seem counter-intuitive) take a day off to give your poor anxious brain a rest and remind yourself that you’re making a new start. Do something nice for yourself, then start on the ‘now’ list the next day.

For more information....

See Time management 1. Getting organised
See Time management 2. Making more hours in the day
See Time management 3. What stops you from managing your time?

See LearnHigher Time Management website:  
http://learnhigher.ac.uk/Students/Time-management.html

For more on this and other aspects of academic study, see our website at www.reading.ac.uk/studyadvice

© Dr Michelle Reid, Dr Angela Taylor, Dr Judy Turner & Dr Kim Shahabudin. University Study Advice team & LearnHigher CETL (Reading).

---

**Time management for postgraduates**

**Postgraduates 1**

This guide for postgraduate students covers developing your current time management practices to cope with the new challenges of postgraduate study. It includes:

- Coping with the volume of work
- Managing more unstructured time
- Project planning for a thesis or dissertation
- Dealing with other challenges

**Coping with the volume of work**

**Taught Masters courses** are often the most intense and demanding of any academic study. The most common time management problem for taught Masters students is falling behind with the volume of work. Below are some ideas for dealing with this.

**Read selectively** - You can’t read everything that’s been written on your subject, but you will be expected to read more widely than you did at undergraduate level. Read to get a basic understanding – then to build on that understanding – then to put it in a wider context.

**Divide your time evenly** – When each assignment contributes to your final mark, it’s easy to think each one must be perfect. But if you spend too much time on one assignment, you may find other work mounts up, and you have too little time to do other things properly.
Work within the scope – If you have 5000 words to use and three weeks to write them in, don’t try to cram in enough research and content for a 10,000 word, six month assignment!

Aim to develop – Don’t be discouraged if your first few assignments come back with lower marks than you expected. Identify what you can improve on and seek advice if appropriate.

It is never too early to start thinking about your dissertation topic. Have a box file to keep all your ideas, notes, and useful articles together.

Managing more unstructured time

Postgraduate research students can feel pressurised by knowing they have a lot to accomplish, but not knowing exactly what to do next. Here are some ideas to help you avoid this.

Set your own deadlines – You may have long term milestones like a transfer report, but it’s the short term monthly or weekly deadlines which keep you going, and you’ll have to set these yourself. While you need to commit to getting things done, don’t be too rigid – unexpected events can ruin good plans, so don’t doom yourself to failure.

Break down your project – Think about the next big stage you have to complete (e.g. data collection) and then the steps you need to get there (design questionnaire, pilot questions, identify sample…etc). Identify what you already know, and where you can find out the information you need to fill the gaps.

Plan for the week / day ahead – Spend some time at the beginning of each week mapping out your tasks for that week. Each evening write down the specific tasks you need to do the following day so you are ready to get going straight away. This saves time deciding what to do next and thwarts the procrastination monster!

Treat it like a job – Research projects tend to spread and consume all your life. Ring-fence time away from studying as this refreshes your mind and makes your thinking more effective. Treat your research like a 9 to 5 job – fix the number of hours you are going to work each week and when you are going to do them.

Keep an ideas book – You will often get your best ideas away from the lab or library. Capture all the good thoughts you have in a notebook and make use of “dead time” (e.g. when waiting or travelling) to do some creative thinking and brainstorming.

Not every day will be a good one! – As with any job, you will have good and bad days. You won’t always be able to tackle hard problems or do deep thinking. The trick is not to feel guilty, but have some more mundane work to do when you aren’t on top form, like sorting your bibliography or organising your data - these all contribute to your thesis.

Project planning for a thesis or dissertation

The key to managing any longer project, like a thesis or dissertation, is keeping an eye on the bigger picture, while also moving towards that ultimate goal step-by-step.

Do long term planning from the start - Although you may not know exactly what your research question is yet, it is still important to do long term planning. It may feel quite vague and unformed to begin with, but it should become sharper as your research progresses.

Identify the main stages in your research and some basic blocks of time for completing them, e.g. doing an extensive literature search; a pilot study; field work; data analysis; writing up. These will be different (and more specific) for each person. Check with your supervisor that your long term plan is realistic.

Keep your long term plan in mind – It is easy to get side-tracked by following up lines of inquiry or research interests. Ask yourself regularly, “How is what I am doing contributing to my overall research purpose?”

Revise your long term plan – As you narrow down your question, you will need to keep returning to your plan to constantly refine it.

Prioritise – In the short term, sort tasks into those that need to be done now, soon, or later. Set your own short term deadlines and make them public so you are more likely to keep to them.