

# 3

## Planning a research project and formulating research questions

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### *Chapter outline*

<b>Introduction</b>	72
<b>Get to know what is expected of you by your institution</b>	72
<b>Thinking about your research area</b>	73
<b>Using your supervisor</b>	74
<b>Managing time and resources</b>	76
<b>Formulating suitable research questions</b>	79
<b>Writing your research proposal</b>	84
<b>Preparing for your research</b>	85
<b>Doing your research and analysing your results</b>	86
<b>Checklist</b>	88
<b>Key points</b>	88
<b>Questions for review</b>	88

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## Chapter outline

The goal of this chapter is to provide advice to students on some of the issues that they need to consider if they have to prepare a dissertation based upon a research project. Increasingly, business and management students are required to produce such a dissertation as part of the requirements for their degrees. In addition to needing help with the conduct of research, which will be the aim of the chapters that come later in this book, more specific advice on tactics in doing and writing up research for a dissertation can be useful. It is against this background that this chapter has been written. The chapter explores a wide variety of issues such as:

- advice on timing;
- advice on generating research questions;
- advice on writing to help you produce compelling findings;
- advice on understanding the requirements of a dissertation project;
- advice on what makes a good dissertation.

Chapter 4 will then focus on how to get started with your research project by conducting a literature review.

## Introduction

This chapter provides some advice for readers who might be carrying out a research project of their own. The chapters that follow in Parts Two, Three, and Four of this book will then provide more detailed information about the choices available to you and how to implement them. But, beyond this, how might you go about conducting a small project of your own? We have in mind here the kind of situation that is increasingly common among business and management degree programmes—the requirement

to write a dissertation of between 7,000 and 15,000 words. In particular, we have in mind the needs of undergraduate students, as well as students on postgraduate degree programmes, who will also find some of the observations we make helpful. Also, the advice is really concerned with students conducting projects with a component of empirical research in which they collect new data or perhaps conduct a secondary analysis of existing data.



## Get to know what is expected of you by your institution

Your institution or department will have specific requirements concerning a wide variety of different features that your dissertation should comprise and a range of other matters relating to it. These include such things as: the form of binding; how the dissertation is to be presented; whether or not an abstract is required; how big the page margins should be; the format for referencing; the number of words; perhaps the structure of the dissertation; how much advice you can get from your

supervisor; whether or not a proposal is required; plagiarism; deadlines; how much (if any) financial assistance you can expect; and so on.

The advice here is simple: *follow the requirements, instructions, and information you are given*. If anything in this book conflicts with your institution's guidelines and requirements, ignore this book! We very much hope this is not something that will occur very much, but if it does, keep to the guidelines your institution gives you.



## Thinking about your research area

The chances are that you will be asked to start thinking about what you want to do research on well before you are due to start work on your dissertation. It is worth giving yourself a good deal of time for this. As you are doing your various modules, begin to think about whether there are any topics that might interest you and

that might provide you with a researchable area. This may at times feel like a rather unproductive process in which a number of false starts or changes of direction are made. However, taking the time to explore different avenues at the point of problem identification can prevent difficulties at a much later stage.



### Telling it like it is The importance of starting early

For Lisa, one of the main lessons she learned from her experience of doing a research project was the importance of starting early. 'Time management is definitely a big thing with your dissertation. Starting it early, starting the reading early as well, because the paper trail can take for ages to trace back authors and what they've written in the past. It's really important to start early, I think.' Karen expressed a similar view: 'I started my dissertation very early on. A lot of people didn't start it until they got back to University in September/October time, whereas I'd already started mine in January. I actually finished it a bit early because it was due in at the beginning of May and I finished it for the beginning of April.'

Angharad also said that this was something that she had learned from the experience of doing a research project. 'I'm quite organized so it wasn't too big a deal for me, but I know people have left it to the last minute and they're having a big panic. So getting organized is probably the main thing.'

Tom also felt that one of the main lessons he had learned from doing a research project was the importance of starting early, even though the demands of other taught courses might discourage this. 'It's very tempting when you've got taught modules of the course as well to do to put the project back and back, but you've kind of got to force yourself to get on with it even when it feels difficult and it's good to have some milestones . . . some things to aim for rather than just the end of the project.'

These views were also confirmed by the supervisors we surveyed.



To find out more about these students' research experiences, go to the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book at: [www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/brymanbrm3e/](http://www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/brymanbrm3e/)



### Telling it like it is Why do a research project?

For some students, doing a research project is an optional part of their degree programme or dissertation requirement. In this case, the decision whether or not to do research becomes more personal. For Chris, doing a research project was an opportunity 'to find things out from the horse's mouth' by investigating how things worked in the 'real world' after three years of studying theories of business and management. 'I thought it would be interesting to actually find out what people really think about a subject. When you read these textbooks you read theories, you know, papers, and you get told things in lectures or newspapers or whatever and you think "Right, great. That's interesting and I'm sure that must be right." I mean sometimes I used to question. "Well, I don't agree with that." and I thought "Well, now I've got this really good opportunity to find out things" in an organization.'

For Tom, a research-based dissertation stood apart from dissertations that did not include research. 'Some of my friends for their dissertations took a load of information commented on it and came up with a conclusion and essentially, you know, that's an essay like any other that we've been doing throughout the three years at university, just a bit longer. For me, it was worth putting the extra effort in because it was an entire module. And it was fun. It was enjoyable and I got exposure to people that I wouldn't otherwise have had which has helped me recently in my graduate scheme. And maybe it's just me, but it's nice to question theories that you don't necessarily believe and it's very easy to say "Oh well, I don't believe it, but there we go." The way I [saw] it was: "Well, I don't believe it, so [let's] see if I can find out anything to back that up."'

Karen explained that doing her research on something that she was genuinely interested in was crucial in maintaining her enthusiasm for the project. 'My manager said "Just make sure that it's something you're interested in, because, if it isn't, then you're not going to get through it and you're going to get disheartened." If it is something you're interested in, you can really enjoy doing the research and it becomes really good for you. You feel like you're really getting something out of it.'

Tom found that doing a research project helped him to feel that he had become a specialist in a particular subject area. 'I did like getting really into a topic and feeling like, you know, "I'm a bit of an expert on this now." You know, I know a lot about this and I've read more than 99 per cent of the population about this now and actually I feel kind of, you know, if anyone's going to have anything sensible to say about call centres it might be me.' Lucie felt that the experience of doing a research project had equipped her with skills that had the potential to be useful in other contexts. As she explained, 'In every job there's some element of research. A lot of my friends have gone into consultancy; you have to do research there. And a lot of my friends have gone into banking and there's a lot of research there as well. So you can apply the skills that you gain from research to everyday life and everyday jobs.'

These views were confirmed by one of the supervisors we questioned, who said: 'A piece of research can be a talking point for a job interview, as it is something the student has done!' Another commented: 'by the end of the research project, students have an awareness of the need for flexible thinking and the ability to adapt in order to make progress'.



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## Using your supervisor

Most institutions that require a dissertation or similar component allocate students to supervisors. Institutions vary quite a lot in what can be expected of supervisors; in other words, they vary in terms of what kinds of and how much assistance supervisors will give to students allocated to them. Equally, students vary a great deal in how frequently they see their supervisors and in their use of them. Our advice here is simple: use your supervisor to the fullest extent that you are allowed and follow the pointers you are given by him or her. Your supervisor will almost certainly be someone who is well versed in the research process and who will be able to provide you with help and feedback at all stages of your research, subject to your institution's strictures in this regard. If your supervisor is critical of your research questions,

your **interview schedule**, drafts of your dissertation, or whatever, try to respond positively. Follow the suggestions that he or she provides, since the criticisms will invariably be accompanied by reasons for the criticisms and suggestions for revision. It is not a personal attack. Supervisors regularly have to go through the same process themselves when they submit an article to a peer-refereed journal, apply for a research grant, or give a conference paper. So respond to criticisms and suggestions positively and be glad that you are being given the opportunity to address deficiencies in your work before it is formally examined.

A further point is that students who get stuck at the start of their dissertations or who get behind with their work sometimes respond to the situation by avoiding

their supervisors. They then get caught up in a vicious circle that results in their work being neglected and perhaps rushed at the end. Try to avoid this situation by

confronting the fact that you are experiencing difficulties in getting going or are getting behind and seek out your supervisor for advice.



## Telling it like it is

### Maintaining a good relationship with your supervisor

The expectations concerning the frequency and format of meetings between students and supervisors vary considerably from one university course to another. Of the supervisors we contacted, the majority met students individually, but some held meetings with a group of dissertation students so that common issues could be shared. Face-to-face meetings were also complemented by email communication, telephone calls, and online discussion groups. The students whom we spoke to had different experiences of their relationship with supervisors. Angharad valued the expertise of her supervisor and his knowledge of the subject. She advised: 'Make sure you use your supervisor, because they know the subject area and they're marking your dissertation, so you might as well draw on their expertise as much as possible.' From her own experience and that of other students, Karen observed differences in the expectations that students had of their supervisors. 'All supervisors are different anyway, but I think that students have different needs as well. My supervisor was really good for me, because he wasn't very prescriptive about what to do and what not to do. He was really good in that sense for me, but he wasn't, I don't think, the right type of tutor for everybody, because he didn't tell me anything, I don't think. He never said that that's wrong or that's right. He just used to ask questions and guide me and that type of thing. He read the plan and he gave that a good mark and then that was it; he didn't actually read any of my dissertation during the supervision process. I think it's really good, because hopefully now when he looks at it, it'll be really fresh for him as well. I was really excited about him reading it, because I thought "I'm really looking forward to seeing what he thinks!"' Karen enjoyed the independence afforded to her by her supervisor but felt this would not have suited all students equally. 'I think that, if a supervisor thinks you are a bit lost, that's when they come in and they say, "Right, well let me have a look at it," or something like that, because they think you need guidance. But the good thing about him was that he recognized I had my own ideas. I think that when they start to read it and give you feedback, it becomes more their work than your work. Whereas the reason I feel so good about my dissertation is because it is all my work and my supervisor hasn't put anything into it.'

Tom, a postgraduate student, saw his relationship with his supervisor as quite different from when he had been an undergraduate. 'When I did my undergraduate dissertation I was such a poor student I actively avoided my supervisor in case he asked me any questions and I hadn't done any reading or anything. This time I was determined I was going to make active use of my supervisor and so I did programme in to meet him at various points. At Birkbeck they're very keen that, when you go and see your supervisor, you don't just go and have a chat. Instead you go with some questions to ask and specific issues to talk about. So having those dates in the diary kind of really forced me to say, "Right, I'll go and see my supervisor and I need to have done A, B, and C before I go." You know, "I need to have done the interviews and done some preliminary data analysis before I go and see him." So that was quite helpful in terms of planning—you know, in spurring me on.' These views were confirmed by several of the supervisors we surveyed who echoed the importance of preparation beforehand by both parties in making supervision meetings successful. One stated: 'I adopt a fairly demanding regime for the production of draft material and require plans for activity between meetings.'

Lucie emphasized she was expected to be proactive in seeking support from her supervisor rather than expecting him to be constantly checking her progress. 'It wasn't like he would chase me up or anything. It was purely up to me. He was there as much as I wanted to use him. So he wouldn't chase me up and say "have you written your dissertation yet?" or "have you written your literature review yet?" It was purely up to me to go to him.' Another supervisor in our survey talked about the importance of a mature relationship between supervisor and student. 'Doing research and writing a thesis are things that you very much learn by doing. Supervision at higher levels therefore becomes much more guiding and discussing ideas (like working *with* the student) than teaching or

suggesting how to do something (working *for* the student).’ We feel that this is a really helpful distinction for students to make. Students can find these expectations disconcerting at first, but in the long run they tend to pay off.

When asked what makes for a successful supervision meeting, one supervisor replied: ‘the moment when you know the student sparks off a new insight for you . . . or vice versa’. This comment highlights the reciprocal nature of the learning involved in supervision relationships that rely on the commitment of both parties to be successful.



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## Managing time and resources

All research is constrained by time and resources. There is no point in working on research questions and plans that cannot be seen through because of time pressure or because of the costs involved. Two points are relevant here.

1. Work out a timetable—preferably in conjunction with your supervisor—detailing the different stages of your research (including the review of the literature and writing up). This is particularly important if you are a part-time student combining your studies with full-time work. The timetable should specify the different stages and the calendar points at which you should start and finish them. Some stages of the research are likely to be ongoing—for example, searching the literature for new references—but that should not prove an obstacle to developing a timetable.
2. Find out what, if any, resources can be put at your disposal for carrying out your research. For example, will you receive help from your institution with such things as travel costs, photocopying, secretarial

assistance, postage, stationery, and so on? Will the institution be able to loan you hardware such as tape recorders and **transcription** machines if you need to record and transcribe your interviews? Has it got the software you need, such as **SPSS** or a qualitative data analysis package like NVivo? This kind of information will help you to establish how far your research design and methods are financially feasible and practical. The imaginary gym survey used in Chapter 14 is an example of an investigation that would be feasible within the kind of time frame usually allocated to undergraduate and postgraduate dissertations. However, it would require such facilities as: typing up the questionnaire, which nowadays students can usually do for themselves with the help of word-processing programs; photocopying covering letters and questionnaires; postage for sending the questionnaires out and for any follow-up letters to non-respondents; return postage for the questionnaires; and the availability of a quantitative data analysis package like SPSS.



## Telling it like it is Finding time to do a research project

For part-time MBA, undergraduate, and postgraduate students, doing a research project sometimes has to be combined with the intense demands of work and family, which in themselves may constitute more than a full-time job. From our experience of supervising such students, we have observed that they develop many different and creative ways of managing the time pressures associated with doing a dissertation project, but this can often involve an element of personal sacrifice for them. Female MBA students from Warwick Business School interviewed by Bell (2004) described some of the effects of these time pressures—for example, causing them temporarily to give up social activities or family time in order to work on their dissertation at weekends or during holidays. Students also highlighted the importance of partners and other family members in helping to enable them to find time and giving them emotional and practical support in doing their research project.

Students who don't fully take these time pressures into account can sometimes find that they are unable to meet the deadlines for submitting the dissertation and have repeatedly to postpone this final stage of their degree study. One female MBA student working full-time with two young children interviewed by Bell (2004: 69–70) summarized the pressures associated with these conflicting demands. 'My son is growing up really quickly and, yes, people can take him off so I can work on my MBA dissertation, but I'm at work all week and I actually quite like seeing him at the weekend. I'm just conscious that, as the gap between the MBA course and the project gets longer, the project gets harder because you can't remember anything that you've done.'

Tom, a part-time student at Birkbeck, took a different approach, cutting down on his work time to create time for his research project. 'This isn't going to be any help to people that are working full time, but I reduced my hours to work four days a week for the second half of the course so I had a day a week to do my studies; that was a big help . . . A lot of people did extend their studies over a third year because it was just really difficult to fit it all in.' Even so, Tom found the pressures of doing a research project daunting at times. 'It's very easy to feel like it's this huge mountain that you'll never get to the top of and just feel like you can never do. You can never sit down and watch telly or relax because this thing's always there; living with it can be annoying at times; and there are times when you get stuck and it doesn't feel great.'



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## Tips and skills

### Constructing a Gantt chart for your research project

One way of keeping track of your research project is through the use of a Gantt chart. This is a horizontal bar chart that was originally developed as a production control tool in 1917 by Henry L. Gantt, an American engineer and social scientist. Although Gantt charts are more commonly used in project management, they can also help you to plan, coordinate, and track specific tasks in your research project by providing a graphical illustration of your timetable and the key tasks involved in it. Simple Gantt charts may be designed on graph paper or as a table in Microsoft Word. More complex automated versions can be created using project management applications such as Microsoft Project or Excel. The horizontal axis of the chart represents the total time span of the project divided into units such as weeks or months. The vertical axis represents the tasks involved in the project. An example of a Gantt chart for a student research project is provided in Figure 3.1. As Figure 3.1 shows, you would shade the squares on the graph to represent the amount of time you expect to spend on each task. The filled-in squares may overlap, to reflect the fact, for example, that you may continue to review the literature in the same time span as starting to collect your data. As the research project progresses, the chart may be amended to indicate the portions of tasks that have been completed. However, one of the limitations of Gantt charts is that they do not indicate task dependencies, so you cannot tell, for example, how falling behind with your literature review will affect the timing of other tasks in your research project. This is a particular problem for student research projects, where you will almost certainly be working to a fixed and immovable deadline for completion of the dissertation, so falling behind in your timetable will necessarily reduce the amount of time that you have to devote to other stages of the project. A further difficulty with Gantt charts is that, even though they allow for overlaps between different tasks, they do encourage you to see the research process as a linear, sequential activity. This may be inappropriate, particularly for qualitative research projects where many of the tasks are iterative. Such a project might produce a Gantt chart where tasks overlap to such an extent that the graph becomes impossible to follow.

## Figure 3.1

An example of a Gantt chart for a student research project

	Sept.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.
Identify research area								
Formulate research questions								
Formulate research strategy, research design, and select methods								
Write research proposal			15th					
Negotiate access								
Literature review								
Data collection								
Data analysis								
Write first draft								
Write second draft								
Write final draft								
Dissertation due								21st



### Telling it like it is

## When doing a research project doesn't turn out to be a linear process

Tom found that his experience of doing a research project contradicted some of what he had been told to expect. 'People talk about the research process being this linear thing. You review the literature, find your question and identify your methods and, you know, it kind of neatly follows on. I didn't really experience it like that to be perfectly honest.' Our experience in supervising research projects suggests Tom is by no means unusual in this and there is not necessarily anything to feel concerned about—particularly in a qualitative research project like Tom's. Tom also found himself revisiting his research questions throughout the research project. As he explained, 'I found identifying a question that I was able to investigate and that was meaningful was the most difficult bit of my whole project. I kept coming back to that throughout the year I was doing the project refining it, changing it.' The main thing in planning your research project is to be conscious of the deadlines imposed by your university and to be active in setting achievable milestones along the way, so you are less likely to get discouraged and more likely to feel you are making progress.



To find out more about Tom's research experiences, go to the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book at: [www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/brymanbrm3e/](http://www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/brymanbrm3e/)





## Formulating suitable research questions

Many students want to conduct research into areas that are of personal interest to them. This is not a bad thing at all and, as we noted in Chapter 1, many business researchers start from this point as well (see also Lofland and Lofland 1995: 11–14). However, you must move on to develop research questions. This recommendation applies to qualitative research as well as to quantitative research. As we will go on to explain in Chapter 16, qualitative research is more open-ended than quantitative research, and in Chapter 17 we will mention some notable studies that appear not to have been driven by specific research questions. However, very open-ended research is risky and can lead to the collection of too much data and, when it comes to writing up, to confusion about your focus. So, unless your supervisor advises you to the contrary, we would definitely advise you to formulate some research questions, even if they turn out to be somewhat less specific than the kinds we often find in quantitative research. In other words, what is it about your area of interest that you want to know?

Research questions are, therefore, important. No research questions or poorly formulated research questions will lead to poor research. If you do not specify clear research questions, there is a great risk that your research will be unfocused and that you will be unsure about what your research is about and what you are collecting data for. It does not matter how well you design a questionnaire or how skilled an interviewer you are; you must be clear about your research questions. Equally, it does not matter whether your research is for a research contract of £200,000, a doctoral thesis, or a small mini-project. Research questions are crucial because they will:

- guide your literature search;
- guide your decisions about the kind of research design to employ;
- guide your decisions about what data to collect and from whom;
- guide your analysis of your data;
- guide your writing-up of your data;
- stop you from going off in unnecessary directions.

Marx (1997) has suggested a wide range of sources of research questions (see Thinking deeply 3.1) and outlines some of the features that your research questions should exhibit. Figure 3.2 brings out the main steps in developing

research questions. Research questions in quantitative research are sometimes more specific than in qualitative research. Indeed, some qualitative researchers advocate a very open approach with no research questions. This is a very risky approach and can be a recipe for collecting masses of data without a clear sense of what to observe or what to ask your interviewees. There is a growing tendency for qualitative researchers to advocate a somewhat more focused approach to their craft (e.g. Hammersley and Atkinson 1995: 24–9).

We usually start out with a general research area that interests us. It may derive from any of several sources:

- *Personal interest/experience.* As we pointed out in Chapter 1, Bryman's interests in theme parks can be traced back to a visit to Disney World in Orlando in 1991 (a holiday that was somewhat affected by his showing the first signs of chicken pox on the first night), while Bell's interest in 'Investors in People' stems from her involvement in managing the implementation of this quality standard in an NHS trust hospital.
- *Theory.* Someone might be interested in testing aspects of labour process theory or the contingency perspective on organization structure.
- *The research literature.* Studies relating to a research area like the Japanization of work in British industry could be an example of a literature that might stimulate an interest in the nature of shop-floor work in such a context.
- *Puzzles.* How are team and individual empowerment, both of which have been themes in research on quality initiatives, compatible?
- *New developments in organizations.* Examples might include the rise of the Internet or the diffusion of new models of organization—for example, Total Quality Management (TQM), customer service programmes, call centres.
- *Organizational problems.* An example might be how staff in call centres should handle consumer rage when consumers are interrupted by unwanted telephone calls.

As these types of source suggest, in research we often start out with a general research area or research objective that has to be narrowed down so that we can develop a tighter focus out of which research questions can be developed. We can depict the process of generating research questions as a series of steps, as suggested in Figure 3.2.



## Thinking deeply 3.1

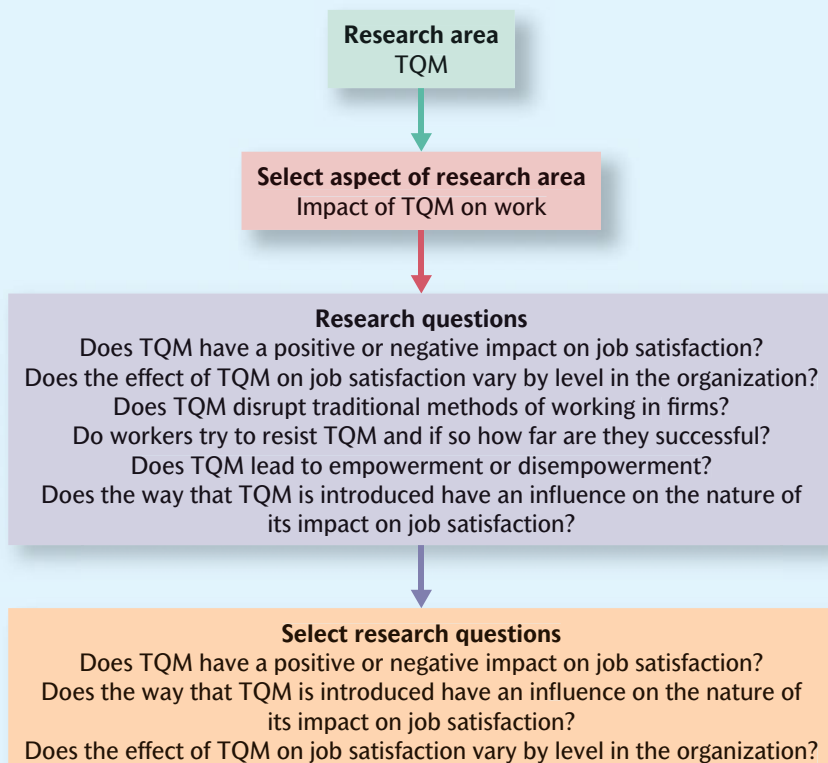
### Marx's sources of research questions

Marx (1997) suggests the following as possible sources of research questions:

- Intellectual puzzles and contradictions.
- The existing literature.
- Replication.
- Structures and functions. For example, if you point to a structure such as a type of organization, you can ask questions about the reasons why there are different types and the implications of the differences.
- Opposition. Marx identifies the sensation of feeling that a certain theoretical perspective or notable piece of work is misguided and exploring the reasons for your opposition.
- A social problem. But remember that this is just a source of a research question; you still have to identify business and management research issues in relation to a social problem: 'Gaps between official versions of reality and the facts on the ground' (Marx 1997: 113). An example here is something like Delbridge's (1998) fascinating ethnographic account of company **rhetoric** about Japanized work practices and how they operate in practice.
- The counter-intuitive. For example, when common sense seems to fly in the face of social scientific truths.
- 'Empirical examples that trigger amazement' (Marx 1997: 114). Marx gives, as examples, deviant cases and atypical events.
- New methods and theories. How might they be applied in new settings?
- 'New social and technical developments and social trends' (Marx 1997: 114).
- Personal experience.
- Sponsors and teachers. But do not expect your teachers to provide you with detailed research questions.

## Figure 3.2

### Steps in selecting research questions



The series of stages is meant to suggest that, when developing research questions, the researcher is involved in a process of progressive focusing down, so that we move from a general research area down to specific research questions. In making this movement, we have to recognize the following restrictions:

- Remember that a research question should end with a question mark. If there is no question mark, it is not a research question.
- We cannot answer all the research questions that occur to us. This is not just to do with issues of time and the cost of doing research. It is very much to do with the fact that we must keep a clear focus so that our research questions must relate to each other to form a coherent set of issues.
- We therefore have to select from the possible research questions that we arrive at.
- In making our selection, we should be guided by the principle that the research questions we choose should be related to one another. If they are not, our research will probably lack focus and we may not make as clear a contribution to understanding as would be the case if research questions were connected. Thus, in the example in Figure 3.2, the research questions relating to TQM are closely connected.



## Telling it like it is Finding a research area

Lucie's choice of research subject reflected her personal experience of having been exposed to entrepreneurial discourses while she was a student at university. 'As a student I was being exposed to kind of these enterprise courses. I was bombarded with messages like "Join this course", and I was quite interested in enterprise, so I attended one of these courses as an undergraduate and that's how I became interested in it. Also, a lot of my friends are really interested in enterprise, and a lot of them kind of have started to try and run businesses while at university. So I was interested in what was provoking students to do this.' Lucie's choice of research area illustrates how practical considerations (see Chapter 1) can impact upon choice of research area, since Lucie already had social contact with the kinds of people who might become the focus of her research, in this case university students, and had already had contact with the research setting on which she was intending to base her study. Lucie was thus studying a social group of which she was a member—university students. This is interesting, because it raises particular considerations about the nature of the relationship between the researcher and research subjects, an issue that we will return to in Chapter 16.

Tom's research interest was driven initially by his curiosity about the rise of telephone call centres as a new type of workplace environment. 'I guess that I started by probably not thinking about testing a theory so much—like "How does goal-setting theory affect behaviour in the workplace?" or something. I was more interested in looking at a type of workplace. There had been a lot of stuff in the media about call centres and there were quite a lot of references to call centres in the literature that I'd read in my first term and so that's how my interest evolved.' A further advantage to Tom's choice of research subject stems from its clearly defined parameters. He was attracted to the subject of call centres because it constituted a relatively clearly defined literature that did not go back very far in time. This helped to make it suitable for a student research project. As he explained 'If you type in "call centre" to a database you get a compact set of references and it's quite attractive because call centres have only been in existence for sort of ten years or something, so actually the literature is not that extensive, which makes kind of getting into it a lot easier.'



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Tips and skills 'Criteria for evaluating research questions' gives some suggestions about the kinds of considerations that should be taken into account when developing your own research questions.

Research in focus 3.2 describes some considerations that went into Watson's (1994a, b) exploration of management at ZTC Ryland, a UK-based telecommunications firm.



## Telling it like it is

### Using your supervisor to help develop your research questions

Tom found it was common for students on his course to be too ambitious in forming their research questions. 'We all came up with really big questions like "How does leadership impact on the NHS?" Some huge question like that—you know, not the sort of thing that's very easy to test in a student research project. We were encouraged to knock these ideas around. Most of them were pretty impractical, because they were sort of like five-year research projects needing thousands and thousands of hours to be operationalized, whereas we only had very limited time. So we were encouraged to kind of focus down.'

Karen had a similar experience: 'I used to send my supervisor drafts of my proposal and get his feedback, to check that I was on the right lines. But to be honest, I don't think he ever actually told me anything. He just used to ask me questions, which I think was the best thing for me, because that just sort of got me thinking about it and that was really what I needed at that time. He kind of narrowed me down when I was trying to take on too much, when I was saying: "Well, I think I might do this and I might do that as well." Then he would just sort of ask me questions and get me to narrow it down.'

This experience was echoed by the supervisors we spoke to, who said that it was common for students to be too broad in designing their research questions. One said: 'undergraduate students tend to be unrealistic about what can be achieved and to assume that doing research is easy and not very time consuming. Many choose something which is "fashionable" or "current", often without much apparent initial investigation, only to find later that the topic has limited foundations in the existing literature. Apart from the usual problem of students having a broad question, underpinned by multiple more focused research questions, each of which might be the basis for a more effective proposal, it is striking that many students will not narrow the focus, despite numerous signals that it is necessary. I also notice that very few revisit and refine the research question as they proceed. Another substantial minority of students feel that they have to have both a qualitative and a quantitative aspect to the project, irrespective of the context or the specific research question. The outcome is that the project typically falls "between both stools" and lacks conviction.' While this supervisor's comments might sound a little harsh, they are based on substantial experience of trying to help students to avoid these common pitfalls.



To find out more about Tom's and Karen's research experiences, go to the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book at: [www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/brymanbrm3e/](http://www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/brymanbrm3e/)



## Tips and skills

### Criteria for evaluating research questions

Research questions for a dissertation or project should meet the following criteria:

- *Questions should be clear.* They must be understandable to you and to others.
- *Questions should be researchable.* They should be capable of development into a research design, so that data may be collected in relation to them. This means that extremely abstract terms are unlikely to be suitable.
- *Questions should connect with established theory and research.* This means that there should be a literature on which you can draw to help illuminate how your research questions should be approached. Even if you find a topic that has been scarcely addressed by social scientists, it is unlikely that there will be no relevant literature (for example, on related or parallel topics). Making connections with theory and research will also allow you to show how your research has made a contribution to knowledge and understanding.
- *Questions should be linked to each other.* Unrelated research questions are unlikely to be acceptable, since you should be developing an argument in your dissertation. You will not very readily be able to construct a single argument in connection with unrelated research questions.

- *Questions should have potential for making a contribution to knowledge.* They should at the very least hold out the prospect of being able to make a contribution—however small—to the topic.
- *Questions should be neither too broad nor too narrow.* The research questions should be neither too large (so that you would need a massive grant to study them) nor too small (so that you cannot make a reasonably significant contribution to your area of study).

If you are stuck about how to formulate research questions (or indeed other phases of your research), it is a good idea to look at journal articles or research monographs to see how other researchers have formulated them. Also, look at past dissertations for ideas as well.



## Research in focus 3.2

### Developing research questions

Watson (1994b) gives a very frank account of the process by which he developed his research questions for his participant observation study of ZTC Ryland, 'a plant of three thousand or so employees engaged in developing, making and selling telecommunications products' (Watson 1994a: 4). The fact that the company was involved in several change initiatives at the time made it particularly interesting to Watson. His initial aim, therefore, was to improve understanding of how people doing managerial work 'shape' their own lives and identities in the context of organized work efforts (1994b). He writes that he 'sharpened' this general area of interest somewhat by reflecting on the impact on managers of the emergence of what were then fairly new developments, such as the rise of cultural change programmes and of HRM principles. In developing this set of interests into research questions, Watson was influenced by writers and researchers on managerial work who had been critical of existing knowledge in this area. In particular he notes that these critics recommended: greater attention to the terms managers use to reflect on their work; a greater emphasis on explaining why managers engage in the forms of behaviour that have been uncovered; and a greater appreciation of the way in which managerial behaviour is embedded in organizational arrangements. These reflections on the literature on managerial work gave rise to Watson's research questions and led to an emphasis on: the linguistic categories and rhetorical processes involved in managers' constructions of their work and jobs; explaining patterns of behaviour observed; and exploring the ways in which organizational arrangements have implications for managerial behaviour and indeed are influenced by it.

Watson (1994a, b) has also provided a useful account of the process of 'crafting research', as he puts it. Before embarking on the task of research design and choice of research methods, it is a good idea to ask yourself a series of questions about your research and the findings that you hope to produce. Crafting a research design relies on addressing a series of what, why, and how questions (see Figure 3.3), which eventually result in the production of a set of 'findings' or conclusions. Watson (1994b) sees management research as an intellectual craft that relies on the acquisition of a set of skills, which, when combined imaginatively, result in the production of an artefact.

Watson's figure illustrates how central research questions are to the overall research process and the way in which they are embedded in the many decisions that have to be made during it. In the case of his own research,

Watson found that his research questions were pushing him in the direction of needing to appreciate 'issues of language and meaning'. He goes on to say:

This implies investigative techniques which take one close to individuals, which allow close attention to the way people use language and which enable the researcher to relate closely the individual to the context in which they work. The basic research design shaped to meet these criteria was one of participant observation within the management team of a single organization combined with detailed interviews with a cross-section of that group of managers. (Watson 1994b: S82)

## Figure 3.3

### A 'what, why, and how' framework for crafting research

<p><b>What?</b></p> <p>What puzzles/intrigues me? What do I want to know more about/understand better? What are my key research questions?</p>	<p><b>Why?</b></p> <p>Why will this be of enough interest to others to be published as a thesis, book, paper, guide to practitioners or policy-makers? Can the research be justified as a 'contribution to knowledge'?</p>
<p><b>How—conceptually?</b></p> <p>What models, concepts, and theories can I draw on/develop to answer my research questions? How can these be brought together into a basic conceptual framework to guide my investigation?</p>	<p><b>How—practically?</b></p> <p>What investigative styles and techniques shall I use to apply my conceptual framework (both to gather material and analyse it)? How shall I gain and maintain access to information sources?</p>

Source: Watson (1994b: S80). Reprinted with permission of Wiley Publishing.

In other words, the way in which Watson's research questions were framed profoundly influenced both his research design (a case study) and his research methods (participant observation and semi-structured interviewing). Decisions about research questions are therefore crucial to how research is designed and how data are collected. You are advised not to begin thinking about your research methods until you have established what your research questions are. Some people do prefer to use particular methods and frame their research questions in terms of those preferences (Bryman 2007c); that is not regarded as a good practice (P. White 2009).

One final point to make is that a research question is not the same as a hypothesis. A hypothesis is a specific type of research question. It is an informed speculation, which is set up to be tested, about the possible relationship between two or more variables. Hypotheses are not as common in quantitative research as is sometimes supposed and in qualitative research they are typically avoided, other than as speculations that arise in the course of fieldwork.

If you are still stuck about how to formulate research questions (or indeed about other phases of your research), it is always a good idea to look at journal articles or research monographs to see how other researchers have formulated them. Also, look at past dissertations for ideas as well.



## Writing your research proposal

You may be required as part of your dissertation to write a short proposal or plan outlining what your research project will be about and how you intend to go about it. This is a useful way of preparing for your research, and it will encourage you to think about many of the issues that are covered in the next section. In addition to outlining the

research design and methods that you intend to use, the topic area in which your study is going to be located, and the research questions that you intend to address, the proposal will ask you to demonstrate some knowledge of the literature in your chosen field—for example, by identifying several key authors or important research

studies. This information may be used as the basis for allocating a supervisor who is knowledgeable in your area of research interest. The proposal is also a useful basis for discussion of your research project with your supervisor, and, if it includes a timetable for the project, this can provide a basis for planning regular meetings with your supervisor to review your progress. Developing a timetable can be very important in making you think about aspects of the overall research process such as the different stages of your research and their timing and in giving you a series of ongoing goals to aim for. Even if you are not required to produce a research proposal, it is worthwhile constructing a timetable for your research and asking your supervisor to look at it, so that you can assess how (un)realistic your goals are and whether you are allowing enough time for each of the components of the research process.

When writing a research proposal, there are a number of issues that you will probably need to cover:

- What is your research topic or, alternatively, what are your research objectives?
- Why is your research topic (or why are those research objectives) important?
- What is your research question or what are your research questions?
- What does the literature have to say about your research topic/objectives and research question(s)?
- How are you going to go about collecting data relevant to your research question(s)? In other words, what research methods are you intending to use?
- Why are the research methods/sources you have selected the appropriate ones for your research question?
- What resources will you need to conduct your research (for example, postage, travel costs, software) and how will those resources be funded?
- What is your timetable for the different stages of the project?
- What problems do you anticipate in doing the research (for example, access to organizations)?
- What are the possible ethical problems associated with your research?
- How will you analyse your data?

Writing a proposal is, therefore, useful in getting you started on your research project and encouraging you to set realistic objectives for your research project. However, the important thing to remember about the research proposal is that it is a working document and the ideas that you set out in it can be refined and developed as your research progresses. But it is also important to bear in mind that, if you keep changing your mind about your area of research interest and research design, you will be using up valuable time needed to complete the dissertation within the deadline.



## Telling it like it is The importance of planning

Karen found one of the things she had learned from the experience of doing a research project was the importance of planning. 'For our dissertation we actually had to do a proposal and submit it and get that approved by our dissertation tutor before we started the actual writing. I think that's really important for them to check that you're on the right lines and just to clarify for you because I think when you first start you think "Oh, it's such a lot of pages or a lot of words" and you have the desire to do so much, but then once you start writing you realize that it's much better to be a lot more focused and then you can go a lot deeper into things. So I think having that plan right at the beginning is really important.'



To find out more about Karen's research experiences, go to the Online Resource Centre that accompanies this book at: [www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/brymanbrm3e/](http://www.oxfordtextbooks.co.uk/orc/brymanbrm3e/)



## Preparing for your research

Do not begin your data collection until you have identified your research questions reasonably clearly and conducted

your literature review. Decide on your data collection methods with these research questions at the forefront of

your thinking. If you do not do this, there is the risk that your results will not allow you to illuminate the research questions. If at all possible, conduct a small pilot study to determine how well your research methods work.

You will also need to think about access and sampling issues. If your research requires you to gain access to or the cooperation of one or more closed settings such as an organization, you need to confirm at the earliest opportunity that you have the necessary permission to conduct your work. You also need to consider how you will go about gaining access to people. These issues lead you into sampling considerations, such as the following:

- Who do you need to study in order to investigate your research questions?
- How easily can you gain access to a **sampling frame**?
- What kind of sampling strategy will you employ (for example, probability sampling, quota sampling, **theoretical sampling**, convenience sampling)?
- Can you justify your choice of sampling method?

Also, at this stage, if you are using a case study design, you will almost certainly need to find out more about the organization that you intend to investigate. What is its financial position? Has it been in the news recently? Where

are its premises? What market conditions does it face? There are a wide variety of sources available on the Web that can provide this kind of background information to inform your research. Company accounts are available through Companies House and some free company information is available from:

[www.companieshouse.gov.uk](http://www.companieshouse.gov.uk) (accessed 23 July 2010)

In addition, the largest multinational corporations often make their annual report and accounts available through their homepages. Although this is for them primarily a marketing exercise, you can often obtain the full text, as it appears in hard copy free of charge. The best way to find these pages is by using a search engine and entering the full company name as a phrase.

Newspapers such as the *Financial Times* are also accessible on the Web, although there are some limitations on the amount of information that you can obtain free of charge. Newslink is a collection of links to countries and then to newspapers all over the world. It can be found at: [www.newslink.org](http://www.newslink.org) (accessed 23 July 2010)

Also, while preparing for your data collection, you should consider whether there are any possible ethical problems associated with your research methods or your approach to contacting people (see Chapter 5).



## Doing your research and analysing your results

Since this is what the bulk of this book will be about, it is not necessary at this point to go into this in detail, but here are some useful reminders of practicalities.

- Keep good records of what you do. A research **diary** can be helpful, but there are several other things to bear in mind. For example, if you are doing a survey by **postal questionnaire**, keep good records of who has replied, so that you know who should be sent reminders. If participant observation is a component of your research, remember to keep good field notes and not to rely on your memory.
- Make sure that you are thoroughly familiar with any hardware you are using in collecting your data, such as tape recorders for interviewing, and check that it is in good working order (for example, that the batteries are not flat or close to being flat).
- Do not wait until all your data have been collected to begin coding. This recommendation applies to both quantitative and qualitative research. If you are conducting a questionnaire survey, begin coding your data and entering them into SPSS or whatever package you are using after you have put together a reasonably sized batch of completed questionnaires. In the case of qualitative data, such as interview transcripts, the same point applies, and, indeed, it is a specific recommendation of the proponents of grounded theory that data collection and analysis should be intertwined.
- Remember that the transcription of tapes with recorded interviews takes a long time. Allow at least six hours' transcription for every one hour of recorded interview talk, at least in the early stages of transcription.
- Become familiar with any data analysis packages as soon as possible. This familiarity will help you to establish whether or not you definitely need them and will ensure that you do not need to learn everything about them at the very time you need to use them for your analysis.
- Do not at any time take risks with your personal safety (see Tips and skills 'Safety in research' on page 87).





## Tips and skills

### Safety in research

You must bear in mind that, even though the majority of business research carries a low risk of personal harm to the researcher, there are occasions when doing research places you in potentially dangerous situations. You should avoid taking personal risks at all costs and you should resist any attempts to place yourself in situations where personal harm is a possibility. Just as you should ensure that no harm comes to research participants (as prescribed in the discussion of ethical principles in Chapter 5), individuals involved in directing others' research should not place students and researchers in situations in which they might come to harm. Equally, lone researchers should avoid such situations. There are also situations in which there is no obvious reason to think that a situation may be dangerous, but the researcher is faced with a sudden outburst of abuse or threatening behaviour. This can arise when people react relatively unpredictably to an interview question or to being observed. If there are signs that such behaviour is imminent (for example, through body language), begin a withdrawal from the research situation.

R. M. Lee (2004) draws an important distinction between two kinds of danger in fieldwork: ambient and situational. The former refers to situations that are avoidable and in which danger is an ingredient of the context. Situational danger occurs 'when the researcher's presence or activities evoke aggression, hostility or violence from those in the setting' (R. M. Lee 2004: 1285). While problems surrounding safety may be easier to anticipate in the case of ambient danger, they are less easy to foresee in connection with situational danger.



## Telling it like it is

### Listen to the advice of your supervisor, but make your own choices

We asked the supervisors we surveyed to tell us what the most important advice they gave to students at the start of their research project was. Here's what they told us!

- Choose a topic that interests *you*.
- Ask yourself whether you can answer the research question.
- Read a lot, read thoroughly and appropriately (this includes articles in refereed journals).
- Identify your strengths, weaknesses, interests, and personal development opportunities and take them into account in designing the project.
- Don't pre-commit to one idea, approach, research design, data source, and so on, to the exclusion of other possibilities.
- Use opportunities to talk to others in your own field and other fields about your proposed research and assess its importance, characteristics, and possible relationship to what others are doing.
- Research something that is likely to be interesting to others: either practitioners or researchers (or both).
- Start writing early. Build in a cushion round the deadline; analysis takes much longer than you think. This is where 'added value' can be gained.
- Remember that this is not your life work or a bid for a Nobel Prize.
- Listen to my advice, but make your own choices.



## Checklist

### Planning a research project

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- Do you know what the requirements for your dissertation are, as set out by your university or department?
- Have you made contact with your supervisor?
- Have you left enough time for planning, doing, and writing up your research project?
- Do you have a clear timetable for your research project with clearly identifiable milestones for the achievement of specific tasks?
- Have you got sufficient financial and practical resources (for example, money to enable travel to research site, tape recorder) to enable you to carry out your research project?
- Have you formulated some research questions and discussed these with your supervisor?
- Are the research questions you have identified able to be answered through your research project?
- Do you have the access that you require in order to carry out your research?
- Are you familiar with the data analysis software that you will be using to analyse your data?



## Key points

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- Follow the dissertation guidelines provided by your institution.
- Thinking about your research subject can be time-consuming, so allow plenty of time for this aspect of the dissertation process.
- Use your supervisor to the fullest extent allowed and follow the advice offered by him or her.
- Plan your time carefully and be realistic about what you can achieve in the time available.
- Formulate some research questions to express what it is about your area of interest that you want to know.
- Writing a research proposal is a good way of getting started on your research project and encouraging you to set realistic objectives.
- Consider access and sampling issues at an early stage and consider testing your research methods by conducting a pilot study.
- Keep good records of what you do in your research as you go along and don't wait until all of your data have been collected before you start coding.



## Questions for review

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### *Managing time and resources*

- What are the main advantages/disadvantages associated with using a Gantt chart to plan your research?

**Formulating suitable research questions**

- What are the main sources of research questions?
- What are the main steps involved in developing research questions?
- What criteria can be used to evaluate research questions?

**Writing your research proposal**

- What is the purpose of the research proposal and how can it be useful?

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*Visit the interactive Research Guide that accompanies this book to complete an exercise in Planning a Research Project and Formulating Research Questions.*

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