How to Survive…..
Preparing for a Research Degree

A graduate research degree provides a unique opportunity to follow your interest in an area of research, to focus on this for several years and make an important contribution to the development of your chosen research area. The focus is on your capacity for creative, independent research, critical thinking, time and project management, problem-solving and organisational and communication skills. So – how to prepare?

You can prepare by thinking, reading and talking with others about several important elements of graduate research:

- Supervision;
- Choosing a topic;
- Independent research; and
- Preparing a dissertation.

Supervision
Good supervision is about establishing a good working relationship. It is in the student’s best interests to make this relationship as effective as possible:

- Read the University’s guides on graduate research and supervision (http://www.postgraduate.uwa.edu.au/home);
- Talk with a few prospective supervisors about their interests and expectations;
- Talk with current and former students about their experiences;
- Read some literature about research supervision.

Choosing a Topic
Either select a topic you care about or recast an assigned topic in a way that interests you. Ask:

- What am I interested in? Is it something I can be enthusiastic about for three or four years?
- What do I know about this topic?
- What similar topics am I aware of?
- What options do I have for conducting research on this topic?
• What are the questions that need answering? What are the gaps to be filled?

• Can I complete it in the allotted timeframe?

Independent Research

It is important that new research students prepare themselves by thinking about the nature of research as carefully as they think about the subject of the research. Too often, students concentrate on the content of what they are doing at the expense of the process, and realise too late that they don’t really understand what is expected of them.

Some things to think about:

• How will postgraduate research differ from your previous academic experience?

• What skills will you require for successful completion?

• How can you acquire the skills that you do not already have, and improve or develop those that you do have?

• What problems commonly occur during postgraduate research projects and how can you avoid them?

Preparing a Dissertation

A dissertation is much more than a long essay or research report. In the words of Anderson and Poole (1994), “while a topic may be the structure of a particular crystal or the novels of Miles Franklin, a thesis is a statement that says…something about crystals or the novels of Miles Franklin. The distinction is important since in many ways the statement of a thesis determines the approach [taken]…a thesis is an idea or theory that is expressed as a statement, a contention for which evidence is gathered and discussed logically.” Thinking about the thesis should start at the very beginning of the project.

• Read some literature about writing dissertations (the libraries or the web are good places to start)

• Read dissertations in your and other fields to see how previous students have structured theirs (Scholar’s Centre in the Reid Library; http://adt.caul.edu.au/)

• Attend some Learning Skills workshops on research and dissertation writing (http://www.studentservices.uwa.edu.au/information_for/students/learning/workshops)

http://www.studentservices.uwa.edu.au/learning
Email: study.smarter@uwa.edu.au
Ph: (08) 6488 2423
Fax: (08) 6488 1119
Visit Student Services – 2nd Floor Guild Building

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