

RESEARCH DEGREE: GETTING STARTED

There's a lot to do when you begin a research project or thesis. Here are some tips to help you get ready, get organised and get going!

1. Get ready

Your lecturers expect that:

- you are motivated and have been thinking about what you want to do
- your writing standard is high
- your IT skills are adequate for what you need to do
- you can manage your study more or less independently.



Prepare yourself

- Confirm your goals.
- Start thinking about your topic (see Get Going section). The sooner you decide at least on a rough topic the easier it is to get going.
- Read some past theses or exegeses. Go to the library website or ask your supervisor for these. Look for ideas on what form your thesis or exegesis will take.
- Look at the structure and referencing styles of the journals you are reading. Think about what sections may be useful for your own work.
- Get to know the **library**
 - Look at books and websites on writing a thesis or exegesis.
 - Find out who the liaison librarian is for your subject area. Say hello.
 - Get a CAVAL card from the RMIT library information desk so you can borrow from other university libraries.

Build study networks - You are NOT alone

- **Talk** to friends and family about your study. It may surprise you how interested they are and accommodating they can be!
- Attend any school- or college-based research seminars and meet people.
- Start a **writing group**. It doesn't matter if your topics are very different. You will still have much to share, and can support each other.
- Attend **On Track workshops** (check out the School of Graduate Research website) or visit the RMIT Study and Learning Centre.

Find out about resources and expectations

School:

- Is there a handbook/ style guide?
- Do you have any access to funding/ grants, a study area, a computer, technical support/ photocopying, a pigeon hole, tea and coffee?
- Are you expected to give presentations or attend conferences?

University:

- What is the confirmation process?
- What are the ethics requirements?
- What are the protocols for extension and deferment?

STUDY TIPS

Clarify roles and responsibilities with your supervisor

You will usually have a senior supervisor and one other supervisor to support you in your research and in writing your thesis or exegesis.

Your supervisors should have a strong background in research and in your broad subject area. They should be able to help you stay on track. You can expect your supervisor to:

- meet with you regularly
- give advice on choice of research topic and methodology
- guide you through the research process
- provide constructive criticism of your thesis.

It's important to build a good relationship with your supervisor. When things go wrong it's often the result of:

- poor communication
- different role expectations of each of you.

Five Bs to help in communication

Be clear and direct about what you're asking of your supervisors. Write a list of questions to ask your supervisor or points you would like to discuss.

Be prepared. Know what your supervisor is expecting from you before each meeting and have the background work done.

Be careful. Emails are formal (and public) documents. Be polite and precise. Use full sentences (not abbreviations). Check your grammar and spelling.

Be patient. It may take a few days for a reply to an email or longer for your supervisor to look at your work. Send a polite follow-up after a week.

Be systematic. Keep records of your meetings with your supervisor, and a file with email exchanges or phone-calls noted.

Some possible areas to discuss with your supervisor

This kind of discussion can form the basis of a mutual agreement.

What?

- What is a thesis or exegesis? What form should it take? How long?
- What referencing system should I use?
- What are some good theses in my area to look at?
- What makes an OK thesis into a top class one?
- What proportion should be 'original'?
- What about ownership of any papers produced during and after the supervision?
- What roles will the different supervisors take and what if there is conflicting advice?

When?

- How often should we meet and for how long?
- How long should the stages take and when would be a good completion date? Why?
- Who should initiate meetings and what protocol is there if one of us can't attend?

How much?

- How much input can I expect from my supervisor at proposal stage?
- How much will they contribute to theory e.g. resources, contacts?
- How much feedback can I expect? How often? In what form?
- Can my supervisor help/advice me with English/ writing/ editing?
- Are there personal circumstances you might need to tell your supervisor about?

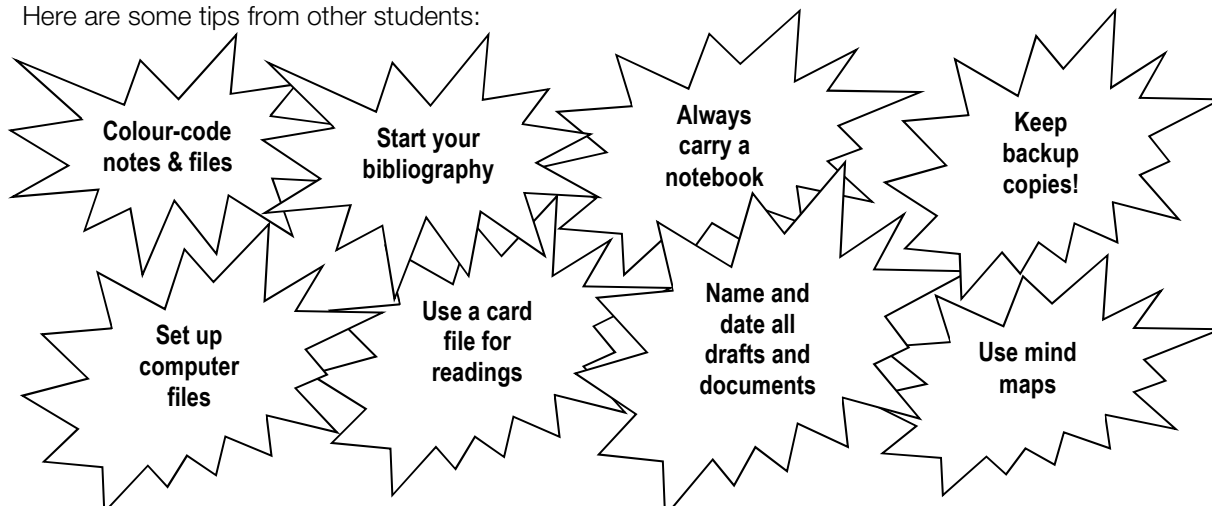
Source: Graham, A. & Grant, B. (1997). *Teaching more students: 8-Managing more postgraduate students*. Oxford: Oxford Centre for Staff Development, Oxford Brookes University.

STUDY TIPS

2. Get organised

Set up study systems

You need to have good systems of organisation to manage your reading and note-taking at postgraduate level. Here are some tips from other students:



- **Coloured** files can help you keep track of different themes or sections of your research. Use matching highlighters to pick up themes from your notes.
- Large **mindmaps** (to put on your wall) can help you track your reading and thinking in different areas. You can identify links and areas to develop.
- Carrying the same **notebook** with you wherever you go lets you jot down ideas, take note of resources or swap email addresses with other students. You always know where you've stored that information.
- Setting up **filing systems** is vital. You need an **electronic filing cabinet** as well as a paper one. Don't forget to keep both hard and soft **backup copies**.
- Develop the habit of **naming and dating** everything immediately you start writing. Multiple drafts can get very confusing!
- An **alphabetical card file** (or electronic version) is useful for storing all bibliographical information. These can also be colour coded.
- Start a document with your current **bibliography** that can be constantly updated.

Time and self management

Remember – the people with the least time often get the most done! Efficiency is the key.

Keep three types of timetables:

1. **Semester planner** – Get a wall semester planner from the SLC and note all deadlines, research seminars, workshops you might attend and major personal events for the semester. Plan your study to manage the "heavy" times.
2. **Weekly routine** – build in regular study times each week and try to stick to them. Break the study down into manageable chunks with clear outcomes or goals.
3. **Daily to-do list** – at the end of the day write a list of what you will achieve tomorrow. For example:
 - summarise Yang pp. 45-60
 - download ethics documents
 - map this week's reading

STUDY TIPS

Study in short, intensive blocks, changing tasks regularly

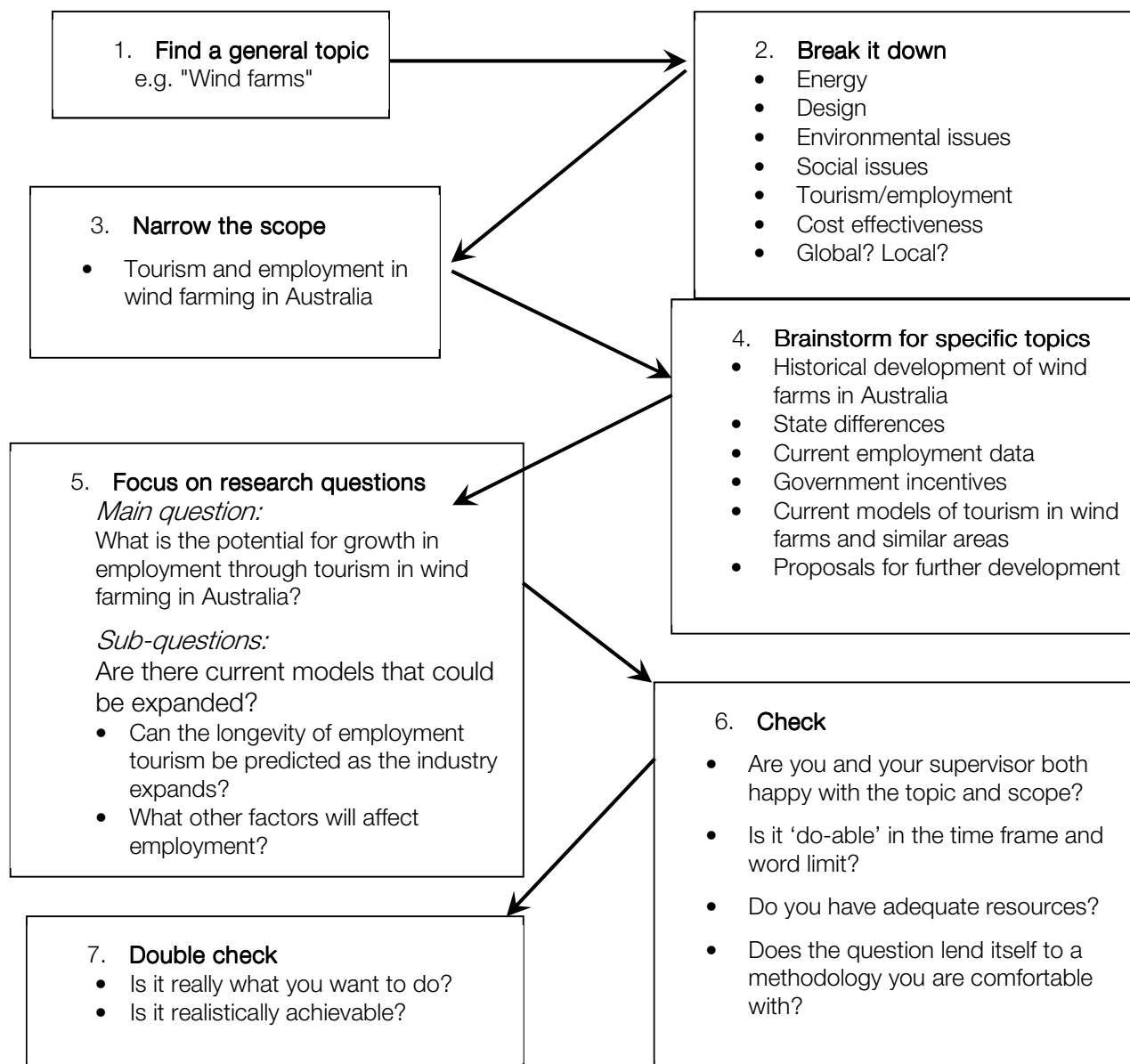
Why? Research indicates that:

- we remember best what we did first and last – so decreasing the gap between these times increases memory
- it's better to **focus intensively** for a short time than to half-heartedly work on
- your brain also gets a kick-start when you change topics, so it's more efficient

3. Get going!**Narrow your topic**

Most students come to a research degree with a general topic. However, you need to scope this topic so that it's 'do-able' within the boundaries of your research. Breaking your broad topic area down is a useful way to find your research questions. The earlier you do this, the faster the real project gets underway.

Here are some guidelines, with an example:



STUDY TIPS

Select reference material

Select reference material **carefully**. Each source needs to be evaluated for your research topic in terms of its accuracy, authority, objectivity, currency and to ensure you have coverage.

Accuracy

How reliable and free from error is the information?
Are there editors and fact checkers?

Authority

What are the author's qualifications for writing on the subject?
How reputable is the publisher?

Objectivity

Is the information presented with a minimum of bias?
To what extent is the information trying to sway the opinion of the reader?

Currency

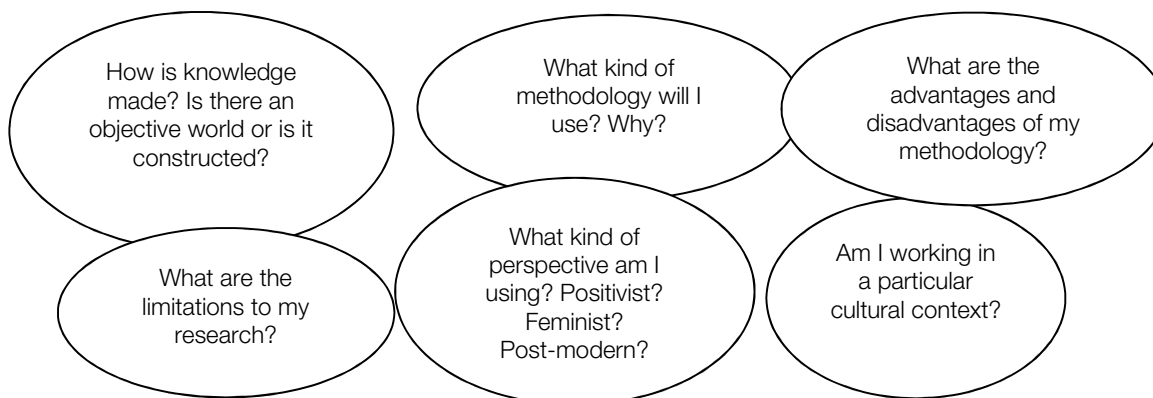
Is the content up to date?
Is the publication date clearly marked?

Coverage

What topics are included in the work?
Are topics explored in depth?

Frame your research

In some disciplines or fields of study (particularly the social sciences and education) you will need to think about the **context** of your research. This includes questions such as:

**Some final thoughts**

- Plan your research and your writing. Break larger tasks down into mini-tasks to get them done.
- Keep records of everything: meetings with your supervisors; literature you've read; administration forms; etc.
- Learn to read more efficiently (RMIT Learning Lab or come to the SLC)
- Carry an ideas notebook with you at all times. Wonderful connections between elements in your research will come to you at the most inopportune times.
- Keep the momentum going. **Remember – it's always later than you think!**