

PhD diary: Where do I begin?

Difficulties in beginning a project may not be a unique problem among writers, says Charlie Pullen, but trialling new ways of learning may help to get the creative juices flowing

Student life



Charlie Pullen

🕒 October 19 2017

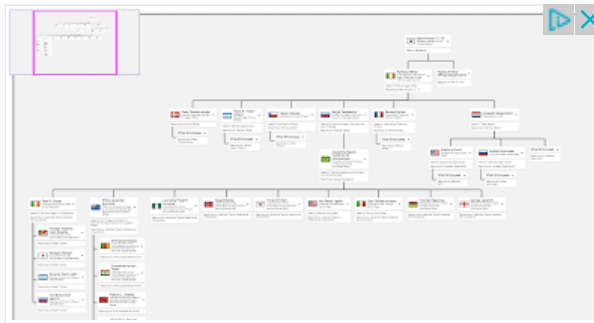


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"And where will you be

This question, which my two supervisors asked me at the beginning of the month, filled me with dread. It's a good question, but I had no idea how to answer it. And instead of trying to decide for myself, I would rather they had told me where they thought I should begin. Where do you start a research project that will last three or four years and will culminate in a thesis of something like 90,000 words?

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Beginning, I must admit, is something I struggle with (as I sit down to write this post, I find myself doing just about anything to avoid typing). However, I am comforted by something Jacqueline Rose, a well-known literary scholar, once said: every time she begins to write, she feels as if this will be the time she cannot do it. Every other time and every other book or article she wrote was different, she said. This time, which is every time she started something new, beginning seemed impossible.

PhD diary: Preparing for a PhD

In my experience as a student, this feeling of defeat from the outset is something I recognise. Not only the anxiety and bewilderment that comes with starting a university course, but continuously in just about every essay and assessment you work on.

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No matter how much I research and prepare, there's always some feeling of being confounded at the start of writing. And if Jacqueline Rose's experience is anything to go by, it would seem that the difficulty of starting doesn't get better with experience or time.

But there are things that I think I can do to try to minimise this difficulty. The

first is to change some of my working and studying habits. We are used to



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hearing teachers and educational consultants say that all of us work in different

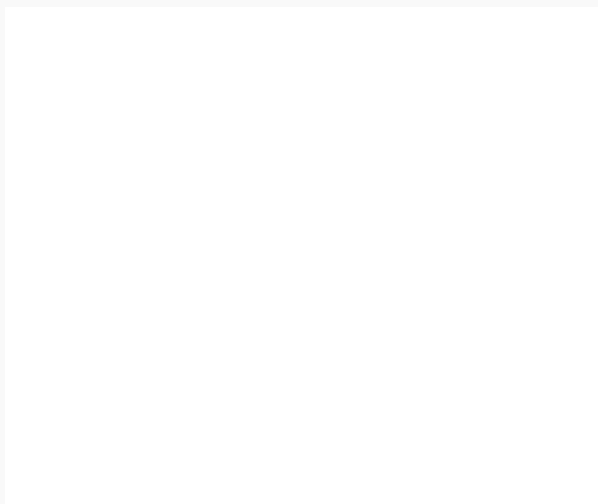
ways and that no way is right or wrong. When it comes down to it, however, I think some ways are clearly better – ie, more productive and healthier than others.

A PhD has a formal phase that you pass into at the end called a write-up. This is the time when you finalise the written product of your research. The name would suggest, and this may make more sense for students in disciplines outside the humanities, that this is when you actually start writing.

In reality, most students will and should be writing all the way through, from the beginning, as they research and investigate their topic. In the case of English, this means that you read and write at the same time.

This is not in my nature: I would sooner read about my topic interminably before eventually trying to write it all up. Yet, I am making a conscious decision to go against this habit, to write as I read from the beginning of my PhD. I obviously haven't invented this way of working, but to me it makes perfect sense: you have plenty of draft material to play with; there is actual work that proves (to yourself) you are making progress; and in writing you can test out ideas and make sense of your research and reading.

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Why study a PhD in English literature?

Writing is a way of experimenting with your research; it doesn't have to be the finished product, but it can often lead you to surprising ways of thinking about your work. This is the second thing I'm trying to do more of – experimenting.

In the first stages I will be pushing myself towards new or unexpected things to explore. I'm aiming to be promiscuous in my research by having a go with lots of different ideas and then dropping most of them later. I want to be open-minded, exploratory and not make any decisions about my research too soon.

And, finally, I want to be as much of a generalist as possible. A PhD project addresses a specialist and particular branch of a subject, and the person studying it is, or will become, an expert in that field. I don't want my PhD to be the only thing I do or know about, so I'm making an effort to read and watch things that are in no way related to my research.

In the past week, for instance, I've read a novel from a different period than my research, I've gone to see a public lecture by a geographer and I've been to the opera for the first time. I've enjoyed all of them. I'm happy to learn new things, even (or especially) when they're not useful for my PhD.

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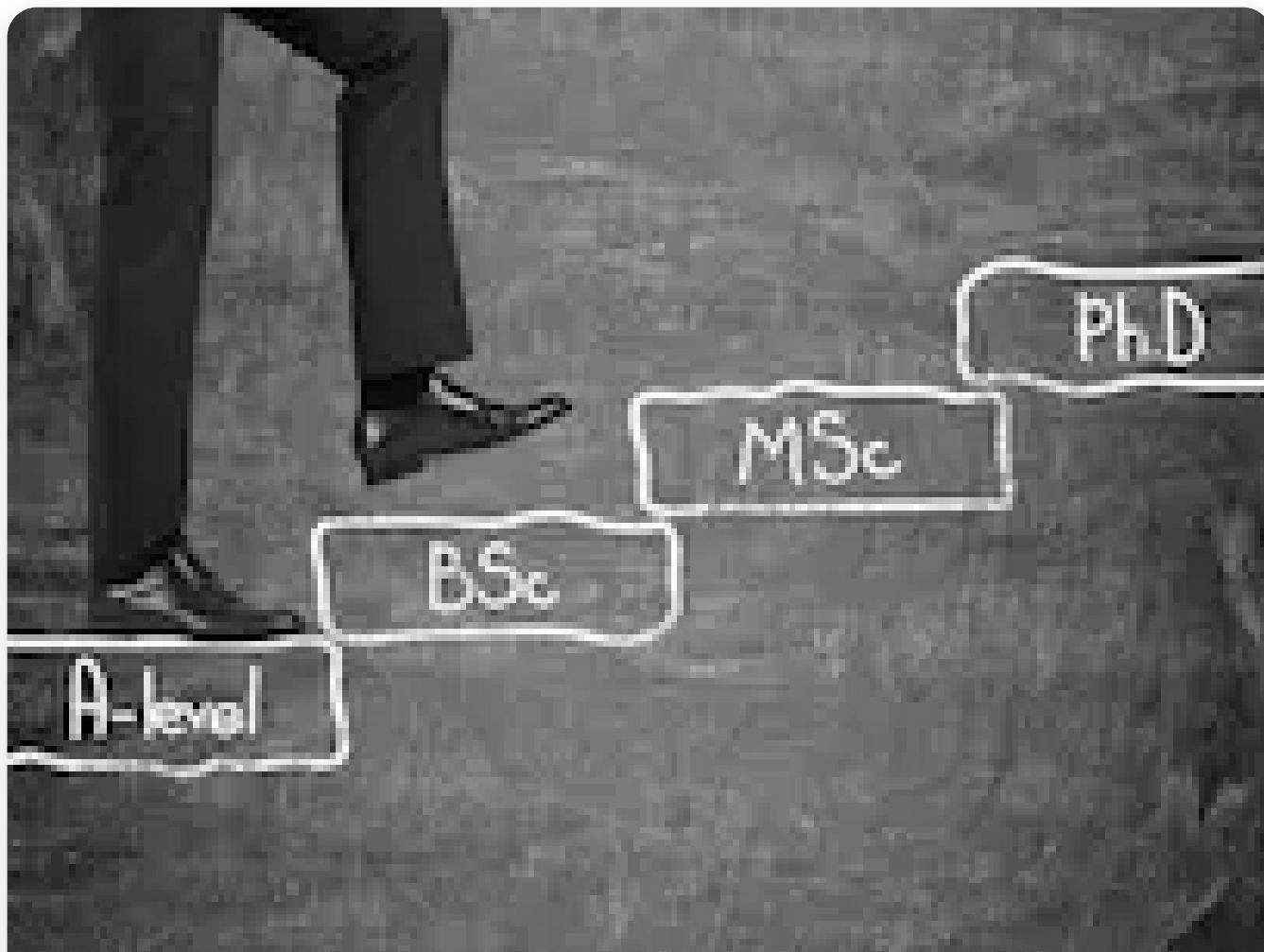
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