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**Reflective Planning Workbook for PhD Students**

This reflective planning workbook is designed to provide you with an overview of PhD project good practice. It includes hints and tips on staying motivated, time management and progress tracking progress when completing a long project. In addition, there are activities to enhance your reflective practice and extension reading to increase your knowledge.

Use this Reflective Planning Workbook to record your thoughts, create actions and reflect on your experiences.

A PhD is a challenging but rewarding endeavour. With the right planning and mindset, you can successfully complete your research and make an original contribution to knowledge.

Good luck!

# Staying Motivated

Completing a PhD is a long and demanding journey that requires continuous motivation. Here are some tips to help you stay motivated:

## 1. Set Clear Goals: Define your research objectives and break them down into smaller, manageable tasks.

Remember to celebrate your achievements along the way.

### Activity

Use these reflective questions to set clear productivity and progress goals.

What do you want to achieve today?

What do you want to achieve this week?

What do you want to achieve this month?

What do you want to achieve this term?

What do you want to achieve this year?

Be specific with this goal, what do you actually want to achieve? Words written? If so, how many? Experiments conducted? If so, which ones?

Set specific date here – Not by February, by 28th February.

**Remember looking after your mental health is not a reward activity. Celebrating writing 500words by going for a walk is not a reward if you know you need that walk to stay mentally fit and healthy.**

## 2. Network for Support: Surround yourself with a supportive network.

Peers, mentors and friends who understand your journey can offer important encouragement.

### Activity

Use these reflective questions to evaluate and build your support network:

Who is in your network?

Who can help and support you?

Who is not in your network who needs to be?

Who is in your network but needs to leave?

Be cautious of ‘Tall Poppy Syndrome’ environments. In some environments being ambitious can be seen negatively. The Tall Poppy Syndrome refers to environments which discourage ambition or self development. Find other proud tall poppies to stand with.

### Consider reading

Zella King: Who is in your personal boardroom for activities to create a thriving growth environment

Nicholas Christakis and James Fowler: Connected: The Surprising Power of Our Social Networks and How They Shape Our Lives to explore the role of social networks and how the behaviour of our friends, our friends' friends, and our friends' friends' friends can impact our own behaviour.

## 3. Maintain Work-Life Balance: Avoid burnout by allocating time for relaxation and self-care.

A balanced lifestyle can boost productivity and motivation.

### Activity

Use these reflective questions to evaluate your work-life balance.

What are your core hours?

What days will you be ‘off duty’?

When will you log-off?

Remember as a PhD researcher you are entitled to holidays. Not all supervisors set good examples when it comes to work-life balance, the same does not need to be true for you.

Follow #TakeBreaksMakeBreakThroughs on X (Twitter)to commit to taking breaks in your research.

### Consider this

At the start of your PhD take up a new hobby. Always dreamed of learning to dance the Argentine Tango? That 6pm lesson on a Wednesday evening (that you have already paid for) will be a big motivation to leave the office or lab on time.

Join a choir, start crocheting, find a gym buddy, volunteer at a local care home – find a reason to live outside of your PhD or else your PhD will become your life and that is not healthy.

## 4. Know your Why: Knowing the real reason why you are completing your PhD can provide motivation during tough times.

### Activity

Write down why you decided to complete a PhD. The real reason. (It’s OK if it’s because you just want to be able to write Dr on forms.) What is YOUR personal why Make sure it is your why not someone else’s (e.g. because it will make my parents happy, or because my boss said it would be good for the team.)

Once you know your why put it somewhere where you can see it – everyday. Next to the bathroom mirror? By the kettle? Set it as your home screen? This means you are reminded everyday why you are doing this project – even when times get tough. Your why might change over time, or you might have an additional whys to add.

### Consider reading

Simon Sinek: Start with Why to help you find your true why.

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| STAYING MOTIVATED: YOUR THOUGHTSCreate 3 actionsReflect on the outcomes of your actions here. |

# Start Right, Write from the Start

Writing is an integral part of the research process and can significantly contribute to your progress. Here are some tips to encourage you to start writing from the very beginning:

## 1. Write Every Day: It doesn’t matter what, just write.

This could be research journal, a blog, a diary, content for chapters, possible papers. Record your thoughts, ideas, and observations.

### Activity

Try morning pages for 1 month and see what you create. Morning pages are 3 brain dump pages. It doesn’t matter what you write just allow a stream-of-consciousness to be written down. Everything that comes to mind, write it down. You don’t have to show these morning pages to anyone. It’s the writers equivalent to a glass of lemon water. It refreshes the system so that you are ready to write proper.

## 2. Become comfortable with ‘Draft’: Don't wait until you have all the data or complete knowledge to start, you can always update the draft.

Start drafting sections like the introduction, literature review and methodology as soon as you have a basic understanding.

### Activity

Use these reflective questions to get more organised with your drafts

How will you organise your chapter/paper drafts?

How will you stay on top of version control - V1, V2? by date?

Think about how your files automatically organise in your filing system. If you save by date YR/MM/DD works better than DD/MM/YY

What will you call each saved each version?

## 3. Revise and Re-write: Revising and refining your work is part of the research process.

What you write in the first year of your PhD is unlikely to make it in to the final thesis. *Remember, even if you end up deleting what you have written, it was not wasted effort. It just means you had to write those words first to get to the good words after.*

### Activity

Ask your supervisor how many papers they have submitted only to have them returned with requests to revise them. You might be surprise at the answer.

### Consider reading

Patrick Dunleavy Authoring a PhD for support on planning, drafting and writing a PhD thesis

Paul J. Silvia, How to write a lot: a practical guide to productive academic writing

## 4. Seek Feedback: Regularly discuss your work with your supervisor(s).

Your supervisors will be able to offer advice and also support you to stay on track. Other members of staff, postdocs and researchers who are further ahead can also give you advice on what constitutes ‘doctoral level’ writing.

### Activity

Use these reflective questions to help request specific feedback from your reviewers.

What type of feedback do you need? (content, style, methods, structure?)

How do you want to receive this feedback? (written/verbal?)

Are you asking for general or specific feedback?

When do you want this feedback (date)?

Give your supervisor or reviewer time to read your work, emailing a chapter the night before a meeting is unlikely to give your supervisor time to give effective or useful feedback.

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| START RIGHT, WRITE FROM THE START: YOUR THOUGHTSCreate 3 actionsReflect on the outcomes of your actions here. |

# Time Management for PhD Students

Effective time management is crucial for a successful PhD. Here's how you can manage your time efficiently:

## 1. Prioritise Tasks: Identify your most important tasks each day and allocate your time accordingly.

### Activity

Use these reflective questions to identify important tasks everyday:

What one thing could I do today that would make the biggest difference to my progress?

Is what I am doing taking me closer towards my PhD goal? (If the answer is no, what do you need to do to make this answer yes?)

What is my absolute minimum for success today?

Breaking a task down in to small, manageable chunks that can be completed gives you a sense of achievement. You can build momentum by starting and finishing tasks in one sitting (e.g. I will concentrate fully on reading this paper from beginning to end). You can also achieve a similar sense of achievement by setting a specific amount of time for a task (e.g. I will concentrate exclusively on reading this paper for 30mins only).

### Consider reading

Brian Tracey: Eat that Frog, for ideas to ensure you prioritise your most important tasks.

## 2. Schedule: Create a daily or weekly schedule that includes dedicated research, writing, and relaxation time.

### Aim for consistency

If you are not a schedule type of person, the act of consistently planning is still important. Setting out what needs to be done and how long things will take can help identify any pinch points. Planning is essential – the plan is irrelevant. Your schedule becomes a living document.

### Activity

Write down all the things you would like to do this week and how long you think it will take to complete them.

Now look at your diary and look at what is actually realistic. You still have to eat and sleep. What about commuting? PhD training? PhD-admin? life-admin? Enjoy leisure time and hobbies? Don’t forget to include time with friends and family.

It is not sustainable to work on your PhD 7am-11pm everyday

## 3. Deactivate the Distractions: Identify common distractions and find ways to minimise them.

Consider using productivity tools and techniques like the Pomodoro Technique.

### Top Tips to Overcome Procrastination

* Become familiar with focus-mode on your laptop
* Use do not disturb on your phone
* Put time locks on time stealer apps
* Place your phone in another room whilst you are writing/reading
* Trial working in public spaces like the library to feel shared pressure to work
* Work with a ‘study buddy’ for accountability
* Once you have downloaded the paper, turn off the WiFi to avoid the temptation to look at linked references

### Activity

The Pomodoro Technique recommends 25mins work with a 5 min break. Try it and see if that works for you. If not, try to find your optimum length of time before you need a break. It will probably be between 25mins and 55mins.

Harness the power of the Zeigarnik effect to maintain momentum. This psychological phenomenon says you are more likely to remember unfinished tasks. If you take a break before you have completed a task, but before you have lost motivation, you are more like to want to finish that task when returning from a break.

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| TIME MANAGEMENT: YOUR THOUGHTSCreate 3 actionsReflect on the outcomes of your actions here. |

# Checking Progress

Tracking your progress is essential to ensure you're on the right path. Here's how to do it effectively:

## 1. Set Milestones: Break your research project into milestones or phases.

These can include literature review, data collection, analysis, or it could be chapter milestones. Track your progress against these milestones.

### Activity:

Create a Gantt chart to track and review your progress towards the final completed thesis. Add milestones to your Gantt chart to stay on track.

### Activity:

Read 2 or 3 thesis’ from your department to get an idea of the types of formats and structures that are common in your field. Once you have an idea of the structure of your thesis you can start to set project milestones.

### Consider reading

Kate Williams: Planning Your PhD

Nick Graham: Project Management Checklists For Dummies

## 2. Use a Research Journal or Lab Book: Help yourself to identify trends and areas for improvement.

Lab books not just for the science based disciplines. Maintaining a research journal where you record daily or weekly progress, challenges and new ideas can help you to feel more in touch with your research.

### Activity

Try keeping a journal for a week. Write a ‘done list’ at the end of every day. You might notice that having to write something down inspires motivation and productivity.

### Activity

Keep a Failure Reflection list for one week. Write down one thing each day that went wrong but that you can see how you might do differently to get a better result. This will develop your reflective learning skills. Use the What – So What – Now What model to frame your reflections:

**What** went wrong?

**So what** did I learn from this?

**Now what** will I do differently? (So I can improve/avoid this mistake in the future)

### Consider reading

Elizabeth Day: How to Fail: Everything I’ve Ever Learned From Things Going Wrong

## 3. Regular Meetings: Schedule regular meetings with your supervisor/s to discuss your progress.

These meetings, around 1 hr in duration, can provide valuable feedback and accountability.

Your university will have a minimum number required formal supervisory meetings. Talk to your supervisor about your needs and their expectations as these may change over time. Remember a lab meeting or meeting with another student present is not a supervisory meeting.

### Activity

Sit down with your supervisor and ask to schedule the next 4 meetings in their diary. This way you know when you are meeting and you can send your work to them in advance for feedback.

## 4. Researcher Development Activities: Periodically assess your skills and knowledge to demonstrate your progress towards becoming an effective and efficient researcher.

Identify areas where you can improve and seek additional training.

### Activity

Use the Vitae Researcher Development Framework (RDF) to support your career development. The RDF is designed to enhance the skills and competencies of all researchers. You can use it identify the skills you already have and the skills you need to develop.

### Activity

Spend time reviewing the Vitae Researcher Development Framework to demonstrate your progress towards becoming an effective and efficient researcher Consider each of the 4 main domains:

**Knowledge and Intellectual Abilities**, focus on how well you know your subject and your ability to think critical in this area

**Personal Effectiveness**, consider your self-management abilities, resilience levels, and interpersonal skills

**Research Governance and Organisation**, review how you have grown as a project manager, the ethical decisions you have made, and your conduct towards responsible research and innovation

**Engagement, Influence, and Impact**, ask how well you have communicated your research outcomes, your (potential) collaborations, and how you plan to disseminate your research more widely

### Consider reading

[www.vitae.ac.uk/rdf](http://www.vitae.ac.uk/rdf)

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| CHECKING PROGRESS: YOUR THOUGHTSCreate 3 actionsReflect on the outcomes of your actions here. |