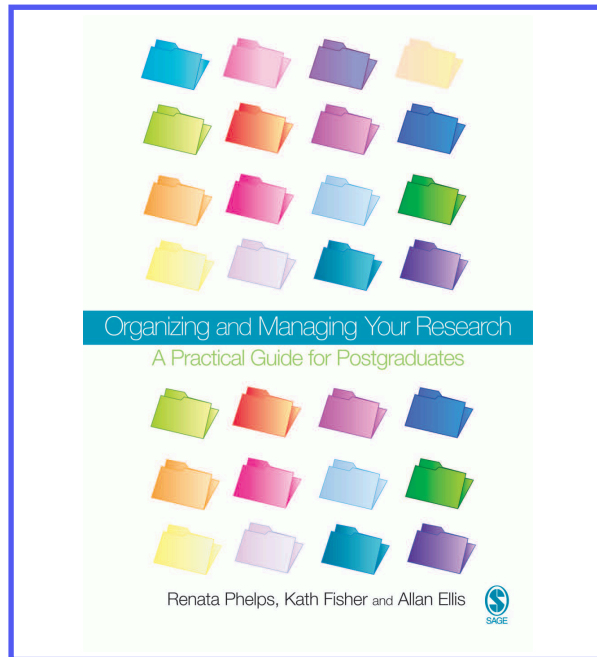




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Foreword

Over the past decade I have witnessed quite radical changes in the landscape of postgraduate and university research in my role as a research leader and administrator. Internationally, research training and research output at the institutional level have become major priorities, retention and completion rates of doctoral candidates are more critical than ever, and advances in information and communication technologies have changed the way that research is being done. It has become imperative to support research students, as well as their supervisors, to work in the most efficient and effective ways possible to produce excellent research.

For these reasons this is a book whose time has come. It is a research book like no other as it steps new researchers and students, as well as career researchers, through the skills they need to conduct their research efficiently. It will also be an invaluable resource for supervisors, who, if they are like me, don't have time to either keep up with the latest technological developments or pass these on to their students. Not only will this be important for experienced supervisors (who will no doubt pick up useful tips for managing their own research projects as well), but academics who are new to supervision will be able to help get their students off on the right foot in their postgraduate research with some confidence. Usually new supervisors and researchers have to pick up tips from their colleagues and learn from painful experience. Reading through this book, it is obvious that many of the tips provided here are a distillation of advice from many experienced researchers, including the authors, advice which is not usually found in a book but rather picked up through corridor conversations or chance meetings at conferences.

Managing and organizing skills are critical to successful research projects and being systematic and organized is an essential way to build research capability and output. However, these skills are usually not systematically or comprehensively addressed as part of research preparation and training programs, which tend to focus more on the methodological and writing aspects of candidature. I can see this book becoming an essential resource for

students and supervisors alike, the book you'll go to when you get a question that relates to the day-to-day practicalities of doing research, whether it's how to organize your files, how to speak to the media or how to manage long documents on your word processor, questions I know I'm not particularly good at answering! Not only that, you can be confident you will be preparing your students for a research career in industry or academia by introducing them to cutting edge research practices that make the most of technological innovation.

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Preface

Why write a book on organizing and managing research? There are so many helpful resources available to students embarking on a research project, why add another to the pile?

The answer comes largely from our own (quite different) experiences as research students, as academic researchers and as supervisors. Each of us worked out how to manage our doctoral projects and subsequent research in our own ways, drawing on other researchers' tips and experiences, our own organizational habits, learning from plenty of bad decisions and wishing we'd known at the beginning what we knew at the end of the process. In supervising our own students, we find that all benefit from, and some definitely need, considerable guidance in the day-to-day managing of their information and research process. Yet this information didn't seem to be available to them in any systematic form. It is often assumed that students already know or will pick up organizational skills and management strategies. We came to the conclusion that a book focusing specifically on this undocumented part of the research process was long overdue.

We don't want to give the impression that we are all meticulously organized in our practices and respond calmly and impeccably at all times to the stresses that beset academic teachers and researchers. We know from experience that the gap between ideal practice and reality can be very wide. No matter how organized we want to (and know how to) be, the realities of day-to-day life and work conspire against all our good intentions. We also know that it is when we start to get too disorganized, when we have a huge build-up of e-mails and piles of paper cluttering the desk, that our productivity diminishes significantly and the stresses of juggling multiple commitments keep compounding. The collaborative process of writing this book while working around our other personal and professional demands, has challenged all our intentions of good organization and management! We have had to continually reflect on our practice and think about how we could or should have done things differently. This is exactly why the book is so important – to learn from others' experiences and mistakes.

Despite the challenges, we found that our varied experiences and preferred ways of working complemented each other very well. Renata's background as a librarian developed her skills in organization. Later, as a research assistant employed to help academics in a university department, she became familiar with the management issues that both beginning and experienced researchers confront on a daily basis. While teaching educational technology to pre-service teachers she worked full time on her PhD, which explored how computer users develop capability. This demanding workload required her to be incredibly efficient in both her work and research practices. She liked technology, but realized she couldn't always afford the best and the greatest and had to learn how to make do with what was available. Many of the useful organizational tips and tricks in this book come from the strategies that Renata developed during this time. Now as a supervisor of research students, she recognizes what students require in terms of organizational and management strategies. The idea for a book like this arose from these understandings and experiences.

Kath has a background in social science teaching, primarily in the fields of group processes, communication, economics, politics and sociology. She did her PhD part-time as a mature-aged distance student with two growing children and found that the only way she could manage was to set up peer support groups with other research students. Now, as a supervisor and mentor, Kath helps students develop collaborative networks to support their research. Kath's insight into the emotional needs of research students, combined with her facilitation skills and a good editorial hand, complement Renata's and Allan's organizational and technical skills.

Allan did his PhD in geochemistry in the era before advanced computer technology. His writing and management tools were a manual typewriter and a card index file for his references. His recollections of literature searching include wandering along library stacks looking for lost journals. Allan has been using computers since the days of punch cards and mainframes, developing an interest in the Web from its inception. He continues to have a pivotal role in organizing national and international Web conferences (<http://ausweb.scu.edu.au> and <http://www.iw3c2.org>). Allan specializes in the use of educational technology in adult education, and he supervised Renata's PhD. His technical knowledge and experience in PhD supervision have been essential in contributing to the book's substance and detail.

The book is much more than a cobbled-together accumulation of what we have learnt through bitter experience. We have had to do a lot of research ourselves and systematically explore and document what is available and how others use different technologies and strategies in their research. Our research included a survey of postgraduate students across Australian universities, asking them about their experiences and needs in relation to organizing and managing their research (Phelps et al. 2006). We also talked to a number of experienced researchers and supervisors nationally and internationally.

Of course, experienced researchers and supervisors have known about the importance of these skills and strategies for years. In fact, the inspiration for this book came from the following quote in Sternberg's 1981 classic, *How to Complete and Survive a Doctoral Dissertation*¹:

The key to completing a dissertation is not brilliance or even inspiration, but organization. Indeed, many a long-term [postgraduate research student] is overloaded with brilliant insights which keep him darting in various noncumulative directions; the definitive quality of brilliance is a short, illumination that quickly burns out. This is precisely not what the [postgraduate research student] needs. What he does need is a master plan in the form of some kind of filing system which keeps him on the right track(s), helps him evaluate his progress on various dissertation fronts, keeps him on keel, "flash-freezes" occasional "brilliant" insights so that they can be reconsidered within the framework of the total plan.

Our intention in this book is to assist you to appreciate the value that good organizational skills and strategies can offer as you go on the mysterious, creative, challenging and wondrous journey that research can be. We will be your tour guides, helping you map out your adventure, giving you some advice on what to pack, pointing out the attractions you might want to visit and suggesting some productive and efficient routes to take. Like any traveling experience, though, it will ultimately be up to you to make the most of the journey. Which brings us to a story that arose during our own journey of researching this book.

Brad is an early career academic researcher we know who is incredibly well organized and who also eagerly embraces technology. He is continually looking for new opportunities that technology might open up and exploring new hardware and software to support him to achieve his personal and professional goals, from qualitative data analysis software to pen scanners, digital music composition to palmtops. The following is a tale (with a moral), told to us by Brad, which may prompt reflection from you on your own research process.

...All the gadgets and software programs are, in effect, only as smart as the stuff that you put in. They can help you access your previous thoughts in a faster, more systematic and rigorous way, but only if you have put them in there in the first place. They cannot have the thoughts for you.

An illustration of this comes with the singularly most useful technological innovation I found during my candidature, and one that I use still. I was in my literature review, and there were too many concepts, and the computer screen was too small for all my mind maps, because I wanted to see the whole mess all at once. I really wanted a huge whiteboard, but whiteboards can be over \$800 for 2 × 3 metres, and I was wanting one 2 or 3 times this size. So, I went to the newsagent, bought 10 sheets of the stiffest white cardboard they had, and a whole bunch of good quality contact. I spent the night in front of the telly covering them. Then presto, I had a 6 × 3 metre whiteboard for under 25 bucks! I am still using the

same bits of cardboard 3 years later. The whiteboard markers just rub off, and it is completely portable. A white board this size has allowed me to see all the arguments and lines of logic in the whole thesis, book, article all at once. It's like Google Earth for academic argument! Once I get this picture, then it goes into NUD*IST and the other technological 'Tupperware' containers. With all the expensive toys I lust after, this has still been the thing that lets me be most productive, in terms of generating original material.

I can tell whether the technology I am using is any good or not because after a small start-up learning curve on its technical (how to drive) aspects, it then fades into the background, (or even better becomes invisible), and I am just left with me and my thoughts again ... it's a Zen thing... If I find that I am being pulled out of me to re-engage with the technology all the time, then this is a good reason for me to ditch it, and I have had to do this on a couple of occasions.

Whether you are someone like Brad who is an “early adopter,” keen to embrace change with enthusiasm and try out innovations as they become available; or whether you are more cautious, a “late adopter,” who waits until technology is well established, we hope that this book will stimulate you to move closer to the edge of your comfort zone and be more curious and adventurous in your research travels. More importantly, we trust that as you travel down the road towards completion of your research degree or other research projects, the guidance we offer allows you to stride confidently towards your research goals.

Note

- 1 Sternberg 1981, p. 57.

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