

# plan it

My research  
map from start  
to finish

POSTGRADUATE OFFICE  
NAGRAADSE KANTOOR



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# INTRODUCTION

This planner is brought to you by the Postgraduate Skills Development team in the Postgraduate Office (PGO). It has been designed to help you create a customized project plan for your research degree.

A project plan will turn a seemingly daunting task into a series of attainable steps. Since one can easily drift aimlessly, planning will give you the drive and momentum to complete your research degree on time.

While it is inevitable that you encounter some surprises along the way, planning reduces the chances of things going wrong and minimises the damage when they do.

A project plan, used in conjunction with a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), provides a useful structure for discussions between you and your supervisor.

Whether you work in a highly structured research team or mostly on your own, you remain responsible for finishing your thesis/dissertation on time. The goal is to become an independent scholar, able to design and manage your own research programme. We hope this planner will assist you on your journey in obtaining this goal.

## The Postgraduate Skills Development team



Stellenbosch University Postgraduate Office



[www.sun.ac.za/pgo/pgskills](http://www.sun.ac.za/pgo/pgskills)



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# HOW TO USE THIS PLANNER

This planner lists everything that needs to happen for you to complete your research degree. In the sample calendar provided, all the steps, actions and deadlines have been squeezed into one year, but this is not realistic and is merely an example. Follow the steps below to draw up your own customised plan on the planner, spreading the steps out over as many years as you plan on using to complete your degree. Discuss your draft plan with your supervisor. There might be steps unique to your field. If you make the changes suggested by your supervisor and do everything listed in your customised planner, with much hard work and focus, you should be able to complete your research degree on time.

## Step 1

The first row provides examples of typical **deadlines** in a research degree. Speak to your department or supervisor to ascertain which ones are relevant to your project and what the deadlines are. Record these dates in the top row of your empty planner. This forms the backbone of your plan.

## Step 2

The second row lists the typical **steps** it takes to create a passing thesis/dissertation. Tick off the steps you have completed. Arrange the remaining steps in the second row of your own planner, working backwards from your deadlines established in Step 1. The times and order given here are only illustrative and many steps will in fact overlap. Ask your supervisor for input and adapt to fit your timeframe.

## Step 3

The third row indicates the minimum **skills** required for completing a postgraduate degree. You probably already have many of these skills, in which case, tick them off! Mark the ones you still want to develop and by when, and put them in the third row of your empty planner.

## Step 4

The fourth row is your **plan to develop the skills** identified in Step 3. Consult the Research Support to Utilise section on this page to identify relevant workshops and expertise. Contact the service provider to ascertain dates, and add these to your planner.

# RESEARCH SUPPORT TO UTILISE

When plotting your activities on your planner, it is important to investigate what is available to you and then to incorporate the supports relevant to you into your project plan, like:

## The Postgraduate Research Degree Toolkit



An interactive resource with guides and tips from the beginning stages of considering a research degree, all the way through to writing up (Available on our Postgraduate Skills Development website). Use this toolkit in conjunction with this planner.

Our **Postgraduate Skills Development Programme** hosts a range of workshops (online and face-to-face) for SU postgraduates! Sign up via [www.sun.ac.za/pgo/pgskills](http://www.sun.ac.za/pgo/pgskills).



Several resources are available on our website to assist you too. In addition, find online courses and training videos on the SUNLearn e-learning platform ([learn.sun.ac.za](http://learn.sun.ac.za)) – search for 'Postgraduate Skills' once logged in and self-enrol for the Postgraduate Skills Development Online Training and Courses module.



## Postgraduate Times Newsletter

Check your email inbox for our monthly PGO newsletter for news on upcoming and ad hoc opportunities for SU postgraduates.

## Library and Information Training

Your faculty librarian is an important resource at your disposal. Search for your librarian here: <http://library.sun.ac.za/en-za/AboutUs/ContactUs/Pages/fbs.aspx>

The Library also offers essential free training to support your research. Visit: <http://library.sun.ac.za>.



A high-level research environment available exclusively to Master's and doctoral students, is in the main Library (Stellenbosch).

## Library Research Commons



## Research Methodology Support

Our Skills Development Programme offers a generic 3-day Creating your thesis or dissertation workshop that covers research methodology. Faculties offer specialised courses on methodology - find out from your supervisor or departmental research administrator what your faculty offers. In addition, SU has a number of accredited short courses.

See: [www.shortcourses.sun.ac.za](http://www.shortcourses.sun.ac.za) and the African Doctoral Academy: [www.sun.ac.za/ada](http://www.sun.ac.za/ada)



## Writing Workshops and Consultations

The Writing Lab offers workshops and free academic writing consultations. Consultation sessions can be arranged to take place via Skype or MS Teams. See: <http://www0.sun.ac.za/languagecentre>.

### The Writing Lab



### Editing Support

Editors check layout, language and references. Professional editing is expensive, so rather wait until your final draft has been approved by your supervisor. Follow your department's guidelines on editing. Book your editor long in advance and leave at least two weeks before submission for the editor to do a good job. See [www.sun.ac.za/pgo/pgskills](http://www.sun.ac.za/pgo/pgskills) for more on how to find editors.

### Information Technology Online Survey Support

If required, consult: <http://infoteg.sun.ac.za/advsup/surveys.htm>.



### Statistical Support

If required, make an appointment with a qualified statistician at the Centre for Statistical Consultation (CSC): <https://www.sun.ac.za/english/research-innovation/csc>, during the planning phase, not only when it is time to do data analysis.

### Central Analytical Facilities



Complex scientific analytical multi-user research equipment  
<http://www.sun.ac.za/english/faculty/science/CAF>



### ATLAS.ti for qualitative data

Qualitative research analysis training is available at: <https://atlasti.com/>



### Enhancing Postgraduate Environments (EPE) website

A South African contextualized research-related resources designed to support postgraduates and their supervisors. Visit this valuable open access site to enrich your research journey: [www.postgradenvironments.com](http://www.postgradenvironments.com)



## PHASE ONE STARTING OUT

During this phase, you should create a project plan with the help of your supervisor. Ascertain key deadlines, research steps, as well as the support and resources you will need. Build your research report as you go along; do not leave writing to the end.

## PHASE TWO MID-TERM GOALS

This phase of the project can be daunting. As the project unfolds, you may have to update your plans and review your expectations. Whatever happens, keep your supervisor informed. Remember your work-life balance, and your reasons for embarking on a research degree.

## PHASE THREE FINAL COUNTDOWN

This phase is about consolidating your results and writing your research report. You will need to stay very focused on answering the research question. Know when to stop: your postgraduate research is only a beginning and not your life's work.

## PHASE FOUR YOUR FUTURE

Decide if you want to carry on with a further degree, get work experience in industry or start a career in academia. Carefully consider the timing, costs and benefits of each option. Celebrate your achievement once you have passed your degree!

The time spans allocated are purely illustrative and steps are generic. Customise with the guidance of your supervisor.

Sample

	Month 1	Month 2	Month 3	Month 4	Month 5	Month 6	Month 7	Month 8	Month 9	Month 10	Month 11	Month 12
Deadlines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Contact supervisor – discuss expectations and sign an agreement/MoU</li> <li>Ascertain submission deadlines for proposal, for ethical approval (if required) and for thesis/dissertation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Contact faculty librarian</li> <li>Show draft project plan to supervisor</li> </ul>			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Submit to Ethics Committee</li> <li>Hand in proposal</li> </ul>				<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Submit final draft to supervisor</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Submit thesis/dissertation for editing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Submit thesis/dissertation for examination</li> <li>Celebrate your achievement!</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Load thesis/dissertation onto SunScholar; have it printed (optional)</li> <li>Apply for PhD/job</li> </ul>
Research Steps	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Decide on a topic</li> <li>Do preliminary research</li> <li>Identify a research problem</li> <li>Finalise hypothesis or research question</li> <li>Start detailed secondary research</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Continue detailed secondary research</li> <li>Plan your research project</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Continue detailed secondary research</li> <li>Decide rough structure of thesis/dissertation</li> <li>Write Chapter 1 (Background info and research problem)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Continue detailed secondary research</li> <li>Organise secondary research notes</li> <li>Write Chapter 2 (Literature review)</li> <li>Develop research design</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Develop research design</li> <li>Write Chapter 3 (Research design)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Start data collection once ethics approval is granted*</li> <li>Update methods chapter</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Collect data*</li> <li>Update methods chapter</li> <li>Continue literature review</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Finalise chapter structures</li> <li>Write body chapters</li> <li>Write conclusion</li> <li>Finalise introduction</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Deal with abstracts, appendices</li> <li>Update bibliography</li> <li>Mark your own thesis/dissertation</li> <li>Edit final draft</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Incorporate supervisor's comments</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identify career goals</li> <li>Create a CV</li> <li>Establish:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Your motivation for doing a PhD</li> <li>The value it will have for your career</li> <li>The time it (really) takes</li> <li>Time per week you need to set aside</li> <li>All costs involved and sources of funding</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Compare your expectations with reality by talking to:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Potential supervisors from research fields you are interested in</li> <li>Your family, friends and employer. Will they support you? How?</li> <li>The Postgraduate Office</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Skills Needed	<p><b>How to:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Choose a research topic</li> <li>Choose a supervisor</li> <li>Improve literature search strategy</li> <li>Find and use relevant databases</li> <li>Use Mendeley</li> <li>Formulate a research question or hypothesis</li> </ul> <p><b>Understand:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The research process</li> </ul>	<p><b>How to:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Project manage your research</li> <li>Improve literature search strategy</li> <li>Find and use relevant databases</li> <li>Use Mendeley</li> </ul> <p><b>Understand:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The structure of the thesis/dissertation/proposal</li> </ul>	<p><b>How to:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Write scientifically/in a scholarly or academic way</li> <li>Write a proposal</li> </ul> <p><b>Understand:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The logic of the thesis/dissertation/proposal</li> </ul>	<p><b>How to:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Organise your information</li> <li>Create a template for your thesis/dissertation in word processing software (e.g. MSWord)</li> </ul> <p><b>Understand:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ethical considerations</li> <li>The procedure for getting ethics approval</li> </ul>	<p><b>How to:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Choose appropriate research methods for your research question</li> <li>Choose appropriate research instruments</li> </ul>	<p><b>How to:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Collect data for easy statistical analysis</li> <li>Use relevant research methods/instruments</li> <li>Manage the supervisory relationship</li> </ul>	<p><b>How to:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Collect data for easy statistical analysis</li> <li>Capture data using software (e.g. Excel)</li> <li>Analyse data</li> </ul>	<p><b>How to:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Refine your academic writing</li> <li>Structure a thesis/dissertation</li> </ul>	<p><b>How to:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Edit your thesis/dissertation</li> <li>Mark your own thesis/dissertation</li> </ul>	<p><b>How to:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Find an editor</li> </ul>	<p><b>How to:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Decide whether to do a PhD</li> <li>Identify career goals</li> <li>Create a CV</li> <li>Conduct a job interview</li> </ul>	<p><b>How to:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Find funding for your research</li> </ul>

\*Note: ethics approval can take up to two months or more!

\*Note: data collection, like many of the steps listed, will most likely take longer than indicated here.

## OTHER USEFUL PROJECT MANAGEMENT TOOLS

This digital copy style of planner may not be for you, you need to work out what type of 'tool' will get you through. Other viable options are drawing up a **Gantt chart** to plot your project via a bar chart, or using electronic tools such as free web-based Gantt generators like <http://www.tomsplanner.com>. If you're not keen on a Gantt chart you could plan your project on a **regular calendar**, or on an e-version calendar such as Microsoft Outlook's calendar or Mac's iCalendar.

## YOUR SUPERVISOR

Although there are many services at SU to help you complete your research degree on time, your supervisor remains the main guide and authority on your postgraduate journey.

**Tip 1:** Incorporate the discussion of your Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) into your first few discussions with your supervisor (if not initiated by your supervisor). The MoU, which is compulsory to sign, gives structure to your project management – it will form an outline covering when and how you hope to achieve your target and clarify certain expectations in the process. Your department should have their own MoU template. See an example of an MoU under the 'Resources' tab on [www.sun.ac.za/pgo/pgskills](http://www.sun.ac.za/pgo/pgskills).

**Tip 2:** Use the information provided in this planner to inform your discussions with your supervisor. Your supervisor will welcome you showing the initiative. Although, even in a structured research environment you should manage your own effort and contribution, it is still both wise and respectful to get your supervisor's input. Most of the skills and steps discussed in this planner are generic, for discipline-specific skills and steps, your supervisor will guide and advise you.

Deadlines

Month _____	Month _____	Month _____	Month _____	Month _____	Month _____	Month _____	Month _____	Month _____	Month _____	Month _____	Month _____

Research Steps

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Skills Needed

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Support

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VIEWAROUND



	Month _____	Month _____	Month _____	Month _____	Month _____	Month _____	Month _____	Month _____	Month _____	Month _____	Month _____
Deadlines											
Research Steps											
Skills Needed											
Support											

YEAR TWO