DOING *Your* BUSINESS RESEARCH PROJECT
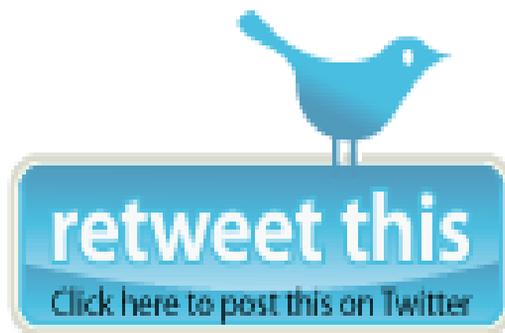
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Introduction

Chapter objectives

By completing the work in this chapter, you should be able to:

- understand the basic nature of research
- appreciate the importance and significance of your research project to you
- relate the research you will do to research undertaken in the real business world
- see a rough outline of the road ahead of you.

Introduction

Of course it's tempting to start work on your project by opening a new Word file, called Project.docx, and typing away. To be honest, that's a bit like jumping into the driving seat of a car for the first time ever and expecting to start driving off on a long journey. It isn't going to work, and pretty rapidly you'd come to the conclusion that driving is an impossible skill to acquire. The normal way to learn to drive would begin with learning something about cars and how they are actually operated through their controls, and some basic roadcraft, all well away from the steering wheel.

In this chapter, you will learn the corresponding background information for writing your project, and start to acquire the skills and competences you will need.

If you are suffering from an almost overwhelming urge to dash off a questionnaire and rush out into the street with it, pressing it onto startled and unsuspecting passers-by, resist it! It's the equivalent of heading out onto the motorway on your first ever trip driving a car.

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Why is the research project important to me?

The chances are that you bought this book because you have no choice over your business project – at most universities you have to do one to get your degree, or at least to get an Honours degree. Of course, business degrees at different universities have different regulations, and for this book to work for you at your university you will need to customise it. So the very first thing for you to do is answer the following straightforward questions. If you are not already sure of the answers, ask your tutor or, better still, check out the module descriptor from your university intranet (Blackboard, Moodle or whatever).

Is the business project compulsory in my degree programme?	YES / NO
Is it essential if I want to get an Honours degree?	YES / NO

Whenever you see the pencil in this book, it means you have to customise – this is what will produce your project for you.

If you answered 'Yes' to either or both questions, it's clear why you will want to pass the project. But is a 'pass' all that you are looking for?

To answer that question with any degree of seriousness, you will need to work out how much the marks for the project count towards your final degree classification. Here there is very great variety across the project modules in different degrees at different universities, so you will need to do some basic calculations to fill in the next part.

Does your final degree classification depend only on your final year marks? (If your answer is 'it depends because our mark is calculated in several different ways', you will need to work through the questions for each way of calculating it. I've assumed below, for simplicity, that your answer is 'yes'.)	YES / NO / IT DEPENDS
How many CATS points make up the full final year?	360
How many CATS points is the business project worth?	
What percentage of the CATS points for the final year's marks are down to the project? (Your last answer divided by 360 and then multiplied by 100.)	

Once you've reached that answer, it should be clear that in all probability the project carries significant weighting in determining your final degree classification. A good project is, for example, enough to pull your classification up to a 2:1 from a 2:2, but, on the other hand, a poor project is enough to drag a potential 2:2 down to a Third. So, it's pretty important, and, given that it's all still to play for, you have some power to improve your classification if you put the effort into it.

Regular modules don't have the same power of affecting your classification, so why is it that the project has this special status? It all comes down to why the project is in your degree programme.

When universities design their degree programmes, they have certain benchmarks, defined by a body called the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, or QAA for short. They are not allowed to just bung any old thing into the syllabus – there are certain basics that must be there to justify the name of the degree, whether it be Business Studies, or Business Administration, or even other degrees with the word 'Management' in their name, such as Sports Management, Events Management or Tourism Management.

Degrees in business have the following requirements to meet included in the QAA Benchmark Statement for general business and management degrees:

> 3.9 Graduates should be able to demonstrate a range of cognitive and intellectual skills together with techniques specific to business and management. Graduates should also be able to demonstrate relevant personal and interpersonal skills. These include …
>
> – ability to conduct research into business and management issues, either individually or as part of a team for projects/dissertations/presentations. This requires familiarity with and an evaluative approach to a range of business **data**, sources of information and appropriate methodologies, and for such to inform the overall learning process
>
> – self-reflection and criticality including self-awareness, openness and sensitivity to diversity in terms of people, cultures, business and management issues. Also, the skills of learning to learn and developing a continuing appetite for learning; reflective, adaptive and collaborative learning.
>
> (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2007)

Data

Systematically gathered bits of information. 'Data' is actually the plural of 'datum', but most people don't use the word 'datum' any more.

Most universities have retained the project, which complies with this benchmark, in a format that complied with earlier versions, which specifically required a demonstration that students were capable of conducting *sustained, independent* research (my emphasis).

It is the sustained and independent elements that make the project module so different from other modules. All your other modules operate within a standard timeframe of

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either a semester or an academic year. Although the project may officially take place within the confines of your final year, there will probably be either parts of earlier modules, or even entire modules, devoted to preparing you for it. In an ideal world you will have been thinking more and more about how you are going to set about your project before you reach your final year.

This may all seem a bit airy-fairy, but now is the time for a dose of hard reality: that is, the time to think about exactly how far away the dreaded hand-in date is. I know you are avoiding thinking about it, but you do need to seriously think about pacing yourself. The work you put into it is after all supposed to be sustained, and leaving it to the last minute is a sure-fire way of getting a bad mark.

When is the hand-in date? (The answer will be in your module descriptor. If you are currently in your second or even first year, you can, for the moment, work with your best guesstimate based on this year's hand-in date, but remember to update what you have written here when you hit your final year!)

What is the date today?

How many days are there from now until hand-in? (You can use a handy gizmo available at www.timeanddate.com/date/duration.html to do this calculation easily.)

It's very important to keep this ever-diminishing timeframe in mind. To help you do this, there is a natty countdown gizmo which you can personalise at www.timeanddate.com/countdown/create.

By the way, if you've just spent the last twenty minutes on timeanddate.com, seeing how long it is until Christmas, your cat's birthday or when the next leap year day is, you've discovered that very natural but not very helpful phenomenon known as 'displacement activity' – doing something which is an enjoyable way of avoiding doing something of a higher priority. To be honest, displacement activity isn't necessarily all bad. The problem is when it gets out of control. There's no harm in getting into the habit of taking a break from working on your project for five minutes every hour or so. In fact,

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I would recommend it. Just make sure you don't spend fifty-five minutes on displacement activity and five minutes on your project. It's all a matter of the right balance.

Let's turn now to what's in it for you.

What will I get out of it?

The simple and obvious answer is that the project has the potential to get you a better degree classification. Isn't that enough?

Here are some other answers that may convince you to give the project your best shot.

Something to wow them with at a job interview

If you've got a clear idea of the business sector you want to go into when you graduate, and even have a specific company in mind, it may well serve you well to locate your project in that area. Come the interview, you will already have a thorough knowledge which you can impress the interview board with – take your project with you (providing it got a good mark!) and show them the data you gathered, the analysis you conducted and the conclusions you came to. I know of a number of cases where students have walked into their dream job on the back of a strong project which they showed at interview.

Probably the only book you'll ever write

You may find it hard to believe at this stage, but you will get an enormous buzz when you pick up your project after having it bound for handing in. A book! All your own work! It's something you will be proud enough of to give a copy to your parent(s) or guardian as a way of saying thank you for their support through your student days, and they will be immensely proud of you as a result.

A set of transferable micro-skills that will help you in the real world of work

As you will see as we progress through this book, in order to produce your project you will develop a good number of micro-skills related to doing research. In almost any job you will have to do some research, whether it is in developing a business plan or even a strategy, in assessing what your competitors are doing, or market research among your customers. All these micro-skills will be relevant, and by developing them during your project you will be enhancing your employability.

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Remember that it's the micro-skills which will be useful in the real world – you are most unlikely ever to write something similar again, unless you go on to do a Masters degree. What you *will* be asked to write though are shorter, pithier reports in order to brief your boss on something. You will do this a lot better if you have the experience of an undergraduate project behind you.

A more critical way of thinking

This is arguably the most important benefit of doing your project. As you develop your skills of analysis and synthesis, you will begin to think more critically. You will be more critical in assessing 'facts' presented to you, and more inclined to question their validity. In other words you will be more ready to assess whether 'facts' are indeed facts, or simply propaganda. As a result you will have a better and more accurate view of the world around you.

Why do I need to know about it in the first and second years when I only get to do it in the final year?

Again, there is a simple answer, and also a more complex answer.

The simple answer is that you need to prepare for what is going to take up a significant amount of your study time in the final year, working independently, facing difficulties and addressing them yourself. It is much easier if you have been grounded, or grounded yourself by using this book, in what you are expected to do. Starting from scratch when you return to university for the final year is only going to add to your workload in a year when you least need that. By preparing yourself for actually doing the project you can hit the ground running, with a lot of the more reflective tasks, like choosing the topic area for your project, largely behind you. Without this preparation you might waste much of the period before the Christmas break agonising over issues which you could easily have addressed earlier. Wasting time is not something you can afford in the final year!

You might perhaps have wondered why the project is left until the final year. The reasoning is straightforward, and is a result of the different levels of work associated with the three study years of a degree. As you've probably noticed, university is rather different from school. At school, it often seemed that each year was rather like the previous one – you didn't have much sense of progression in what was being asked of you, although you may well have noticed some kind of change when you moved on from GCSEs to A Levels.

Have a look at Table 1.1, which outlines the progression in intellectual demands placed on you in the different years of your degree programme. In the final column you will find an analogy relating to the different jobs you find in medicine. Each of these medical jobs

plays a vital role in medicine, but they are progressively more demanding as you go down the table.

TABLE 1.1   The intellectual demands of a degree programme year by year

Year	Basic requirement	More detailed requirement	Medical analogy
1	Describe	Identify key features of case Identify appropriate theory	Junior nurse
2	Describe + **Analyse**	Level 1 + Apply the theory and produce thorough analysis	Senior lab technician
Final	Describe + Analyse + **Synthesise**	Level 2 + Interpret the analysis and make appropriate recommendations, again using appropriate theoretical frameworks	GP (= 2:2) Surgeon (= 2:1) Specialist (= 1st)

Analyse

In the context of your research project, to analyse is to break down a problem systematically in order to understand it better.

Synthesise

In the context of your research project, to synthesise is to build up answers systematically to research questions once analysis has been conducted.

The medical analogy helps in making clear what the differences in intellectual demands are.

In Year 1, you are like a junior nurse. You learn basic procedures and how to apply them. You learn the outline of why the procedures have been designed that way, but you have little opportunity for making decisions. Work is fairly standardised, and you have little opportunity to explore particular areas that may interest you.

As a 'senior lab technician' in Year 2, you have more responsibility, more skills and the emphasis in your work is on analysing, in this case samples sent to the lab. You have some responsibility, but not full responsibility. You still work in a way that is based on standard procedures, but you need to give some thought to alternative procedures. Your main task is one of analysis, and you write up the results of that analysis. You don't interpret those results however. You can tell me the precise levels of the cholesterol in my blood, for example, but I wouldn't look to you for a diagnosis – I'd want a *doctor* to interpret the results you've produced.

In your second year you are doing mainly the equivalent work of the senior lab technician, but you are also still doing the work of a junior nurse.

In your final year you are more like the qualified doctor or surgeon. You have a lot more responsibility and you have to make decisions constantly. Often these will be based on the results of analysis conducted by the senior lab technician. With your level of education and training you are able to interpret the results and draw conclusions about what is best for the patient, something which a senior lab technician could not do.

In your final year you are doing mainly the equivalent work of a doctor, but you are still doing the work of both the senior lab technician – you still have to conduct analysis so that you can then conduct synthesis – and the junior nurse – you still have carry out basic procedures in order to set up your analysis.

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Another way to get a sense of this kind of intellectual progression is to consider the three questions a business consultant would seek to answer when investigating a problem in a company:

1. Where did the organisation go wrong?
2. What should they have done?
3. How can they put things right?

It's pretty clear that as you progress through the three study years of your degree programme, the intellectual demands on you increase significantly. Often this is reflected in how your degree classification is calculated – a typical method is to weight the three years thus: first year marks count 0 per cent; second year marks count 30 per cent; final year marks count 70 per cent.

Your project is thus weighted significantly towards your degree classification because it is an intellectually demanding task, requiring description, analysis and synthesis. In many respects *your* project epitomises all that your degree programme has been leading towards, and, with respect to your degree, it has more of your input than the regular modules in the programme.

Suppose that, as the consultant on a vast fee, all you did was answer the first question. The organisation wouldn't find that terribly helpful – it may well be that they know the answer to this particular question already. And, in any case, your answer may just be a statement of the bleeding obvious.

Answering the second question will be a bit more helpful to them, and they maybe haven't worked that out for themselves. It's the third question that they can't answer, and which they are paying you serious money to answer, respecting your awesome consultancy skills, which they lack.

What is research all about?

Imagine this (entirely imaginary!) conversation between my wife and me.

Me: Someone at work said there are some pretty good flights on offer to Barcelona at the moment. Do you fancy a long weekend there?
She: Sound's great. I'll research it on the internet.

Why do you think my blood would boil?

(A clue – my job title is Honorary Research Fellow)

We've reached an important point in your use of this book. Remember what the light bulb means? To save you looking it up, I'll say it again: 'Stop and be prepared to do some work away from the book. This will involve some personal reflection, and you will need to spend some time thinking'. It's only natural to think, 'Oh, sod that for a game of soldiers, I'll just read on. He's bound to tell me the answer.' You're right that I will tell you the answer, but you've failed to grasp the key point about these 'Stop' mini-exercises. They are designed to get you thinking and learning from the process. If you don't put the time in on thinking, you won't learn by simply jumping to reading the answer. It's a little like using a book to help you learn to drive. If the book says, 'Now go and drive for half an hour remembering what you've just read', it would be pretty stupid to ignore that, and just get on with reading the book.

OK, rant over – I'm going to assume that you have spent some time wondering why I got so grumpy in that particular situation. It was because, when she said, 'I'll do some research on the internet', I felt she was misusing the word research.

Write in your personal definition of the word 'research':

I see the key characteristics of research as:

1. Finding out (discovering) something
2. that is unknown
3. to anyone
4. through a logical process
5. of investigation
6. with a reasonable degree of certainty as to the outcome
7. and publishing the results.

If we assume that my wife would publish the results of her research into cheap air fares to Barcelona (to me at least!), which one of the seven characteristics listed above would not fit with her use of the word research?

Time for self-control! Don't read on until you have had a serious stab at the question!

It's the third one – that research is about finding out something that nobody knows. Obviously somebody knows the information – the airline which has put the details on its

Gap (in the body of knowledge)

Something which nobody knows (yet!).

Contribution

In this context, 'contribution' refers to a contribution to the body of knowledge, in other words, a new piece of knowledge (normally quite a small one) which is the outcome of research.

Literature review

A systematic and critical account of academic research which has already been published. See Chapter 6.

Central research question (CRQ)

The one overall question that encapsulates what you are trying to find out by doing your research.

Methodology

The systematic overall design of your research.

website. Some excellent journalism, for example, is concerned with 'exposing' illegal, unethical or downright immoral practices. Important though investigative journalism is, it isn't strictly research because somebody already knows what's going on – the person(s) the journalist is trying to expose.

The fundamental research process begins by identifying a **gap** in the body of knowledge and proceeding systematically to fill that gap with a **contribution** to the body of knowledge.

Actually, it does sound a bit scary, doesn't it? I need to point out two things:

- The body of knowledge is more riddled with holes than a Swiss cheese.
- For an undergraduate research project, it's only a tiny hole that you are being asked to identify and then fill.

It's worth considering what a famous thinker, Sir Eric Ashby (1961), once said about research in British universities. He described it as 'crawl[ing] along the frontiers of knowledge with a hand-lens'. A 'hand-lens' is just an old-fashioned word for 'magnifying glass', by the way.

Let's go back a sec to the seven characteristics of research given above, and look at the fourth one, 'through a logical process', a bit more.

At the heart of your project will be the following process:

TABLE 1.2   The logical process of conducting your project

1. Identifying a gap in knowledge	This you will achieve by something called a **literature review**.
2. Asking an appropriate **central research question**	If this a poor or inappropriate question, you will be destined to produce a bad answer. If it's a good question, you will be able to answer it by designing an appropriate research **methodology**.
3. Gathering data	This you will achieve either by fieldwork or deskwork.
4. Systematically and logically answering the central research question	This you will achieve by analysis and synthesis of the data.

In the real world, that is, outside universities, people often use the word 'research' to cover the two data- or information-gathering stages of the process – **fieldwork**, which means gathering primary data in the real world through questionnaires, interviews, etc., and **deskwork**, that is, gathering secondary data from cyberspace and/or bashing away at the computer either number-crunching or writing up your work. This is misleading, as research is a larger process than merely fieldwork or deskwork. Fieldwork and deskwork are vital to the research process, but are only a part of it.

One clear point to get hold of right at this early stage is that research is about asking and answering a question. That's definitely something that you are entirely familiar with, but what's different this time is that you have to come up with the question yourself. Your actual question is therefore is vital. A bad question will inevitably lead you to a bad answer, and hence a failed project. A good question, on the other hand, means that a good answer is possible (but not guaranteed).

There is a second clear point to get hold of, especially at this early stage. Doing a project has a lot of uncertainty attached to it. Things may go wrong, but if you've planned your project well, the risks are minimised, and you will already have a Plan B in place to fall back on.

What happens if it all starts to go pear shaped?

Before we get on to what to do if things go pear shaped, we need to think about how things might go wrong and why they might go wrong.

Let's start by considering how doing research is a bit like a sleepwalker trying to find their way home. Bear with me on this!

It would be great if the research process was like leaving your front door and walking in a straight line to the first corner in the road. In one sense it is – it has a clear start and a clear finish. But it's the 'straight line' bit that's the problem.

The research process is indeed a directed process, towards a clear goal, but you will sometimes find yourself accidentally going off at a tangent, and sometimes down a dead end. We will see shortly that there are a number of steps to the research process, and occasionally you may have to go back a step and rethink your next step, a bit like the sleepwalker. They know where home is, but are a bit confused about getting there. Sometimes they go down a cul de sac; sometimes they inadvertently walk round the block and get back to where they were twenty minutes before, but at least they now know which is the wrong way ahead.

Unlike the sleepwalker, you can prepare for problems by having contingency, or fall-back, plans. What you need to be good at is identifying potential problems. Many of these may well be spotted by your project supervisor – when that happens, take heed rather than bury your head in the sand.

I remember a student who wanted to research the very specific travel sector of immigrants and their descendants wanting to return on holiday to a particular country in Africa. This sounded to me to be an interesting and worthwhile topic. Certainly there was a distinct *gap in knowledge*, but I was worried about how she was proposing to gather her data. She said she had two friends who were travel agents specialising in this very small market, and she was sure they would give her the names and addresses of their customers so she could then send them questionnaires and/or interview them.

Deskwork

Conducting the gathering of secondary data. This can be conducted either at a desk in the office, using internet resources, or in a library, using good old books and journals. In contrast, we also speak of 'fieldwork' (see below) for data that we have to go out and gather in a live working environment.

Fieldwork

The gathering of primary data. This cannot be achieved by sitting in your office space or in a library, so to gather primary data you have to go out 'into the field', meaning into the organisation(s) you are researching.

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Now this seemed pretty unlikely to happen to me, not least because it would almost certainly involve her friends breaching the Data Protection Act. Would they risk breaking the law and jeopardising their business for the sake of her project? I thought not; she was convinced they would. About a fortnight before she was due to hand in her project she came to see me, and was very upset to admit that she had finally given up twisting her friends' arms to break the law, and in fact it was now too late to make contact with sufficient numbers of eligible people to interview. If she'd had a Plan B ready, she might just have recovered it.

If I had a pound for every time one of my Sports Management students had announced they were going to interview the twenty chairmen of the Premier League clubs, I could easily afford a Championship ticket. It's never going to happen because they will not speak to respected journalists, let alone students. Similarly, if I'd had a pound for every time a Tourism Management student had said that they planned to use questionnaires at a local airport, failing to realise that they would be detained by security the minute they did, I would be afloat in pies and Bovril at all those Championship games.

What I'm driving at is the possibility that the vast majority of problems can be foreseen with a little bit of thought, and a little bit of discussion with your supervisor. The minute such a risk is recognised, you should develop at least the outline of a Plan B. Above all, you need to think to think about when the problem might arise, and what the implications of this would be for your Plan B.

Research should also be thought of as an **iterative** process. I see you reaching for the dictionary, so let me explain. An iterative process is one which consists of seeking better and better approximations to a perfect solution. Figure 1.1 below gives a clear and simple example of an iterative process.

Iterative

An iterative process is one which reaches its intended goal through repetition, typically by finding better and better approximations. See Figure 1.1.

Guess the number – an iterative process

Suppose you ask someone to think of a number between 1 and 50, and then you try to find out what that number is by asking Yes/No questions.

A scatter-gun approach would be to ask questions like 'Is it 43? Is it 6? Is it 32?' And so on. You might strike lucky early on, but on average it will take you 25 goes to get the right answer.

An iterative approach would be as follows. Let's assume the number is 17. The questioning would go like this:

Is the number more than 25? No.
Is the number between 1 and 12 inclusive? No.
Is the number between 13and 19 inclusive? Yes.
Is the number between 13 and 16 inclusive? No.
Is the number either 17 or 18? Yes.
Is the number 17? Yes.

FIGURE 1.1   Example of an iterative process

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Using this iterative approach, each time refining your view by getting a better approximation, you can find out the number in six questions, which is definitely a better approach than the scatter-gun one. In a few cases the scatter-gun approach will work better, but those will be when Lady Luck is definitely on your side. The iterative approach is a design which in general reduces the risk of you having to go on and on asking questions. To put it another way, by adopting an iterative approach you have designed a strategy that reduces the risk of having to carry on asking questions for too long.

Overall the message is: reduce risk by good research design, anticipate the 'unexpected' and make sure you already have a fall-back strategy prepared in outline. Research very rarely falls out neatly according to your first plan. Accept the fact that changes in your original plan are likely to be forced upon you. Don't be thrown into a state of panic by this – be prepared!

How will I be able to tell if my project is any good?

That may seem at first sight to be a strange question at this point, when you haven't even started to write your project. But remember, we have just learned that good design will lead to a more effective research process, and hence to a better project.

If you know at the start how it is going to be judged at the end, you can build in a kind of quality control as you go along. The checklist below shows the kind of quality control system that will be applied by the lecturers marking your project once you have completed it. Not all of it will immediately make sense to you, so keep coming back to it as a check-list as you get deeper and deeper into working on your project.

✓ Some questions that markers will be asking

Introduction

Is the context well explained?

Is it clear why the research is worthwhile?

Literature review

Have you clearly identified a gap in knowledge?

Have you read widely enough?

(Continued)

Aims

In the context of your research project, an aim is a middle-level member of the research design hierarchy. Aims are derived from the central research question, and lead on to research objectives. See page 75.

Objectives

In this context, 'research objective' as opposed to 'personal objective'. The lowest and most specific layer of the research design hierarchy, research objectives are derived from aims. See page 75.

(Continued)

Have you identified the theory areas that are relevant? Are they the most relevant?

Have you noted any limits on applying particular frameworks?

Central research question

Is there a central research question that has driven your work? Has it been clearly stated?

Is it answerable by research?

Aims and objectives

Have the **aims** and **objectives** been clearly stated?

Have they been used to help develop your project?

Have they been referred to as you have written up your project?

Methodology

Have you used an appropriate approach to answer your central research question?

Have you justified your choice of approach? Have you justified not using other approaches?

Have you correctly recognised how specific or how general the outcomes of your research will be?

Have you correctly recognised what the relevant issues and concepts are?

Analysis

Have you been rigorous in your analysis? Does your argument flow logically from data to conclusions?

Is your reasoning clear, straightforward and correct?

Have you made appropriate comparisons?

Conclusions

Are your conclusions appropriate? More specifically, do they relate to your stated aims and objective*s*? Do they answer your central research question?

Have you made appropriate recommendations?

Have you realised the implications of your research?

Have you acknowledged any limitations?

Project presentation

Have you acknowledged the sources of the frameworks?

Have you referenced all sources in the text?

Have you used a consistent and adequate referencing system?

Is your report well structured and in a natural order?

Is the abstract accurate?

Are the spelling and grammar acceptable?

Overall

Is there a strong logical flow?

Do the chapters hang together well as a whole?

Are the chapters well linked?

Are your conclusions convincing?

Is there a jointly authored journal article here which could be produced?

If you use the questions above honestly in the last weeks before you hand your project in, you should not only be able to tell with a reasonable degree of accuracy whether you are going to pass or fail, but you should also get some idea of the grade you are going to get.

You are probably going to have access in your intranet site for the project module to a guide on the grades that are awarded. I've given an example of this below as Table 1.3.

What is the message that underlies these guidelines? You can find themes which are repeated at the different levels. In this case they are:

- structure and design of the project
- the internal logic of following a hierarchy of central research question, aims and objectives
- the power of the analysis and synthesis
- whether or not there is 'added value'
- the quality of your communication skills.

You may find these in your university's guidelines on the grading of projects, and you may find other themes, for example, evidence of how widely you have read in academic journals.

TABLE 1.3   Example of grade criteria

First 70–100	The project is well structured and communicated. It has an overall and consistent logic that makes the conclusions compelling. Excellent with respect to 'value added' through competent research. For a mark of 80+ the project should be of sufficient standard to have the potential to make a contribution to the wider academic world.
Two-one (upper second) 60–69	Each element for the project has been well designed and executed. Overall, however, the result is somewhat disjointed. Clear evidence of independent inquiry and critical judgement in selecting, ordering, analysing and synthesising. Confidence may be placed in the conclusions. High on 'value added'.
Two-two (lower second) 50–59	Aims and objectives set out. Some appropriate theory plus an attempt at analysis and with basic linkage between theory and analysis. Conclusions are consistent with the evidence presented but are not compelling. Some 'value added'.
Third 40–49	Makes only a basic attempt to answer a central research question. Lacks focus and only a weak attempt at analysis. Limited 'value added'.
Marginal fail 35–39	Fails to ask and/or answer a central research question. Essentially descriptive work showing only limited understanding and application of ideas. No 'value added'. Tending towards being an extended essay. No evidence that relevant subject knowledge has been understood.
Poor fail 0–34	Poorly organised superficial description with virtually no understanding or analysis of the issues involved. No attempt at synthesis. No evidence of having understood the research process. An extended essay rather than an evidence-based research output.

Print off your university's equivalent of Table 1.3 above. Go through it carefully and identify the themes, or, to put it another way, what Captain Subtext is saying. Write your list of themes here:

That's covered the assessment of how good your project is that you can do yourself. But there is one other source of assessment that you should take seriously: your project supervisor. The quality of his/her assessment of how well your project is shaping up depends on how well they know what you are doing and planning. It's clear that you should:

- meet your project supervisor regularly
- be open and honest about the state of your project
- listen to their advice
- take that advice on board.

Your supervisor needs to know what progress you have and haven't made, so it is a good idea to send them by email whatever you have written a few days before each meeting. They will give better feedback if they have had a chance to read through your work before you meet rather than comment on a wad of paper you have just shoved across their desk.

How relevant is this project to working in the real world?

Before looking at the real world, there are a number of possibilities in the university world you might want to think about.

It's not unknown for a really good undergraduate business project to be worked up with your supervisor into a co-authored journal article for publication. I've done it myself, although on very few occasions, so be realistic – it *could* happen, but the chances are stacked against this happening.

If you are even vaguely thinking of going on to do a Masters degree, you will need to have a good first degree under your belt, which makes writing a good project especially important. On a Masters degree programme you will have to produce a dissertation, which is similar to the project you are doing now on an undergraduate programme, but on an extended scale. It will be of a greater length than the project, and you will be expected to analyse and synthesise more deeply. So, all the research skills and competences which you will develop for your project will set you up well for writing your Masters dissertation. In fact, most Masters courses include a module on much the same subjects that we are covering here!

Let's now turn briefly away from the world of academia and what Tom Lehrer (1990), an American satirist, once described in a song as 'ivy-covered professors in ivy-covered halls' to the real world of gainful employment and jobs.

If you leave university after your Bachelors degree, you will probably never again write anything as long and complex as your project. In twenty years working in the private sector, I was never called upon to write a research report that could be compared to a project. If such a report was needed, for example, market research into a possible new product, it was outsourced to a market research company. On the other hand, I often had

to research particular subjects, such as the state of competition in the business sector which I was working in, and write similar reports to a project. Normally they were in a different format to the rigid structure required for a project, but I was only able to write them because of the research skills and competences I had developed, which were almost the same as those you are developing here. In a nutshell, you will find the skills and competences developed now very useful in the real world – they will give you a chance to impress your boss – but you are unlikely to write a report which has the feel of an undergraduate research project.

One particular difference you will find is with what is called the abstract in your project, which in the real world becomes an executive summary. With your project, it is the whole project that is read and considered, but in the real world, most people who read the executive summary will then only dip into the relevant bits of the report you have produced. The skill of writing effective executive summaries is thus slightly different from that of writing an abstract for your project, and you will have to adapt accordingly. Now is not the time to worry about that though!

To finish off the work in this section, it's time for you to try the first of the exercises designed to develop your research skills and competences (on the next page).

Chapter conclusion

Let's just pause and take stock of where we have reached.
  We have worked on:

- the importance of the project to you
- what you will get out of doing a good project
- how the project fits into the three-year Bachelor programme
- what research is
- coping with the difficulties that will come up while doing your project
- making sure, as you go along, that you are writing a project that will be successful
- a quick look at how the project will be of relevance after you graduate and go into the real world of business.

Before we move on to the next section, which is about actually beginning your research, it's time to jot down your first thoughts about the topic you are choosing to research. This is not an undertaking that can be taken lightly.

My first thoughts on my choice of topic:

- Industry sector and geographical area, or specific company

  e.g. Japanese car manufacture in Britain, bed and breakfast businesses in Tiverton, Virgin Trains, Manchester United Football Club

- Business function

  e.g. marketing, finance, human resource management, strategy

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These really should be just your first thoughts. Once you have them, you are in a good position to have your first meeting with your supervisor. Your supervisor may spot some obvious pitfalls which will help shape your second thoughts. For example, if a student came to me with any of the first thoughts in the box above, I would advise against a project on Manchester United. Why? Well, it has already been widely researched and so it would be difficult to find a gap in knowledge. Also there are likely to be problems of access – they are flooded with requests for access from business research projects and not particularly cooperative because of these numbers. Virgin, on the other hand, are much more student friendly, and provide a 'student project pack' on their website. The downside of this is that many students have been there before you, and it will be difficult to find a gap in knowledge.

Have you completed all the exercises and write-in boxes in Section 1? If you haven't, you should do so before you move on to Section 2, where you will be 'Beginning your Research'.