

Book Review



How to do your Research Project: A Guide for Students in Education and Applied Social Sciences

By **Gary Thomas**

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Reviewed by **Katy Highet**

There is certainly no shortage of books offering advice to students on how to approach a research project. For those taking their first steps into research, the selection can be rather overwhelming, and the books themselves often rather dry. Gary Thomas' *How To Do Your Research Project* is a breath of fresh air, bringing clarity and humour without condescension, making the book an informative and – importantly – enjoyable read.

The theme of *story* runs throughout, as Thomas reinforces the importance of a narrative thread in research projects, something that often falls to the wayside when research is approached as a series of parts. In this vein, the book itself spins a clear thread across the chapters, meaning that while it is certainly possible to consult individual sections as needed, I would recommend reading it in its entirety. Chapter 1 (Your introduction: starting points) breaks down the somewhat daunting initial stages of the research project, pre-empting common queries from students, and encouraging the reader to approach the project armed with the right questions and, in chapter 2 (Project management), the right organizational tools. Chapters 3 and 4 tackle the literature review and research questions respectively, in a way that is concise yet thorough, addressing choice and quality of sources, the 'story' of the literature review, and critical awareness.

Of particular note is chapter 5 (Deciding on an approach: methodology and research design), which provides a great introduction to theory in research. From a discussion of positivist and interpretivist paradigms, to a brief overview of the 'ologies' – epistemology and ontology – this chapter encourages students to question *how* they are building and interpreting their research, something which is vital but often overlooked, possibly because, as Thomas correctly writes, such terms "strike fear into the hearts of many students" (p. 84). Chapter 6 (The design frame) provides an overview of various frames of research, with an emphasis on the importance of selecting methods that suit the purpose of the project. It is followed by a slightly short seventh chapter (Practical matters), which includes ethical and logistical considerations.

Chapter 8 (The right tools for the job) discusses data collection in a rather refreshing manner. One of the great aspects of the book is the refusal to divide itself into qualitative and quantitative camps, and instead present the range of 'tools' available across the spectrum. In doing so, Thomas encourages students to always bear in mind their research question and aims, and select the right tools for their own design path, regardless of the 'camp' they sit in. Chapter 9 (How to analyse the information you gather) is a helpful introduction to data analysis, although the reader is prompted to consult other texts for further reading. The book closes with a final chapter on writing the conclusion, which also includes general writing and proofreading tips, as well as guidance on writing the abstract, complete with examples from Thomas' own PhD.

As will hopefully be evident, I enjoyed reading this, which was not something I expected from a skills textbook. Thomas is clear in his aim from the beginning: to help students understand not only research methods – as is often the focus of skills-based books – but also the research process. He does this with both coherence and wit throughout, and provides concrete examples to illustrate his explanations. He neither patronizes the reader nor over-assumes knowledge, making the book accessible and even comforting. Starting a dissertation, be it at undergraduate or postgraduate level, can be a stressful and worrisome task and, in certain situations, students can feel apprehensive about asking questions they perceive to be basic, but which are integral to ensuring a successful project. I know this because I was that student a few years ago. I worried that I was the only one unable to figure out where to begin such a seemingly gargantuan task. Ultimately, I worked it out, but I'm sure that I would have saved a lot of time and worry if I had had this book. Now that I'm in the position of helping other students with their research projects, I'll be recommending that they all begin here.

How To Do Your Research Project is certainly not the only research skills book that students will need, nor does it claim to be (the annotated bibliography at the end of each chapter points the reader in helpful directions). It is, however, a strong place to start. Rather than panicking about everything they *don't* know, reading this book will leave students confident and well equipped to learn more. And isn't that the mission of every great teacher?