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SUPERVISING A BIG RESEARCH PROJECT TO FINISH WELL AND ON TIME: THREE FRAMEWORK RULES

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The ideal is helping people to finish a big project (a book, a thesis) not only well – that goes without saying – but also within a specified time.¹ Why bother about that latter point? Mainly because people don't have unlimited years and funds to produce their great work. Plus: the discipline of mental time-management is valuable in itself. When all's said and done, *there's nothing like a real deadline*.

So first framework rule: check that the researcher/writer really, really, really wants to complete the project. (Not just wants the qualification at the end of it). What's needed is a burning desire to sustain the researcher throughout the four years it takes to research, write and present to publishable standard an original study of c.100,000 words. Ability, aptitude for the specific subject, and a good supervisor, are certainly needed. But more still is required. Motivation is crucial.

¹ What follows is based upon my experience as a supervisor, formally in the University of London, and informally among friends and acquaintances seeking advice on finishing.



How burning should the burning desire be? Maybe not a total conflagration from the very start. But a genuine self-tended spark that can gain strength as things proceed. Finishing a big project is a long slog. There are moments of euphoria but also risks of boredom, isolation, exasperation, wrong turns, discouragement and even burn-out. The finicky finishing processes, which involve checking and checking again, down to every last dot and comma, can also drive people mad. In fact, the very last stages are highly educational. Each iteration produces a visible improvement, sometimes a major leap forward. Completing a big project is a wonderful experience. But it takes a burning desire to get there.

A second framework rule follows logically. Check continually that the scale of the project matches the allotted time for completion. That's a necessity which I've learned from hard experience. Keeping a firm check on research/time commitments is vital for all parties. There are a few people with time to spare who do truly want a life-time project. That's fine; but they can't expect a life-time supervisor.

Checking the project's scale/timetable entails regular consultation between supervisor and researcher, on at least a quarterly basis. Above all, it's vital that all

parties stay realistic. It's too easy to kid oneself – and others. The worst thing (I'm prone to doing this myself) is to say airily: 'Oh, it's nearly finished'. Take stock realistically and, as needed, reconfigure either the timetable or the overall plan or both. If the project is being undertaken for a University research degree, there will also be a Departmental or Faculty review process. Make that a serious hurdle. If things are going well, then surmounting it will fuel the fires positively. But, if there are serious problems, then it's best for all concerned to realise that and to redirect the researcher's energies elsewhere. It's hard at the time; but much better than protracting the agony and taking further years to fail.

Thirdly, organise a system of negotiated deadlines. These are all-important. The researcher should never be left drifting without a clear time framework in which to operate. Each project is sub-divided into stages, each undertaken to a specific deadline. At that point, the researcher submits a written report, completed to a high standard of technical presentation, complete with finished footnotes. These are in effect proto-chapters, which are then 'banked' as components of the finished project, for further polishing/amending at the very end. Generally, these detailed reports will include: Survey of Contextual Issues/Arguments; Overview of Secondary Works; Review of Original Sources and Source Critique; Methodology; Research Chapters; and Conclusion. Whatever the sequence, the researcher should always be 'writing through', not just 'writing up' at the end.²

Setting the interim deadlines is a matter for negotiation between supervisor and researcher. It's the researcher's responsibility to 'own' the timetable. If it proves unrealistic in practice, then he/she should always take the initiative to contact the supervisor and renegotiate. Things should never be allowed to drift into the limbo of the 'great work', constantly discussed and constantly postponed.³

² See 'Writing Through', companion BLOG no. 60 (forthcoming Dec. 2015).

³ A literary warning comes from Dr Casaubon in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871/2).

For my part, I imagine setting a force-field around everyone I supervise, willing them on and letting them know that they are not alone. It also helps to keep researchers in contact with their peers, via seminars and special meetings, so that they get and give mutual support. Nonetheless, the researcher is the individual toiler in the archives or library or museum or (these days) at the screen-face. Part of the process is learning to estimate realistically the time required for the various stages – and the art of reconfiguring the plan flexibly as things progress.

Undertaking a large-scale project has been defined as moving a mountain of shifting sand with a tea-spoon. Each particular move seems futile in face of the whole. But the pathway unfolds by working through the stages systematically, by researching/writing to flexibly negotiated deadlines throughout – and by thinking hard about both the mountain and the pathway. So original knowledge is germinated and translated into high-quality publishable material. Completion then achieves the mind-blowing intellectual combustion that was from the start desired.

