

## Independent Working

An undergraduate summer research project is a great opportunity to sample the life of a full-time researcher. While the freedom to structure your own days and develop your own ideas is exciting, some students might find the shift to independent working difficult. There's no need to fear – follow the advice below and you'll be organised, motivated, and protected from unforeseen technical emergencies.

### **1. Before you begin: choose a system**

As your research progresses, you're going to accumulate a lot of words. Words will be scribbled into textbook margins and jotted on post-it notes. Your laptop will be bursting with words. So the best thing to do, at the start of a project, is to create a system to keep track of them.

The simplest way is to create an **online master file**. That may sound very high-tech, but it's actually quite simple. Just keep every document you produce in one large 'Master' folder. Sound obvious? It is – but that doesn't mean it's easy. Keeping everything in one place takes discipline, and it's easy, after the end of a long day, to quickly dump a document on your desktop and shut your laptop. Try to avoid this by clearing your desktop and shutting down all your applications at the end of each day, and writing up all your notes at the end of each week. This way, you'll be forcing yourself to regularly file away your work.

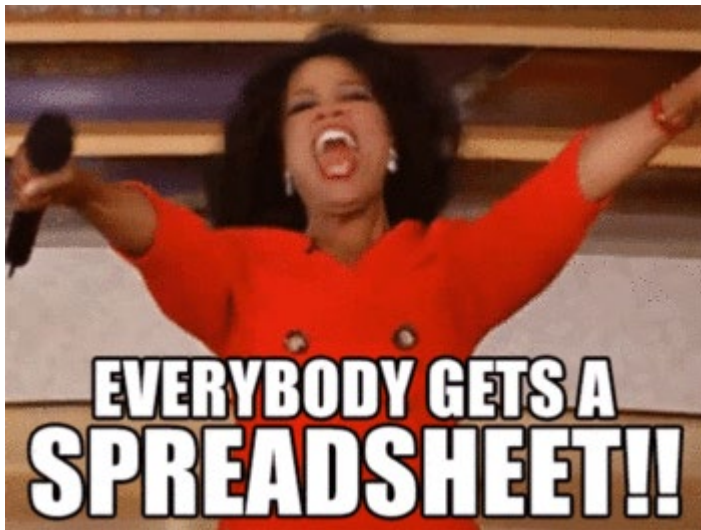
If you get into the habit of doing this now, you'll thank yourself for it later: if your folders are tidy and well organised, you'll find it easier to think through and conceptualise your work. If you've got notes and documents scattered all over the place, you might find it more difficult to build up a coherent image of your research.

### **2. Have a back-up plan**

Once you've created your master folder, the next step is to back it up. At this point in the history of our civilization, there is **no excuse** for not backing up your work. With the perils of institutional IT now universally acknowledged, a host of technical solutions have emerged to keep your work safe. [Dropbox](#) and [Google Docs](#) are both free, and useful for storing papers and longer documents. [Trello](#) and [Evernote](#) are great for compiling lists and storing notes. External hard drives are inexpensive, and most of us have at least two USB sticks (or 'memory sticks' as my mum calls them, no doubt ironically) lingering in a drawer somewhere.

### **3. Start a referencing database**

Essential. Right from the start of your project, make a bibliographical note of every text you use. Whilst there are [several online apps](#) you can use for compiling this database, a simple spreadsheet will suffice.



*Never underestimate the power of Excel.*

#### **4. Prioritising your workload**

It's important to take the time to prioritise your workload. Making lists is key here. If you're juggling five different research tasks, as well as trying to remember to do your washing and feed your cat, things can easily become stressful and overwhelming.

A key technique is to divide your tasks based on urgency (i.e. things that need to be done now, things that need to be done soon, and things that can wait a while). Break each task down into smaller steps – this will help you make a clearer estimate of how long each task will take to complete. It'll also be more rewarding: as you'll see yourself quickly completing each step, you'll clearly see the progress you're making.

Once you've broken down your tasks, plan your week accordingly. Prioritise urgent work. When possible, try to rotate your activities: spending the whole day reading won't help your concentration (or your posture) but rotating between tasks keep things fresh.

Finally, be realistic about what you can achieve. It's easy to confuse quantity over quality, but if you drive yourself too hard, your work will suffer. You'll produce your best work if you take care of yourself and keep your mind and body well rested.

#### **5. Consider your workspace**

One perk of independent research is the ability to work where you like. It's worth thinking, however, about the effect your environment might have on your work. Are you

more liable to be distracted at home? Are there any attention-hungry cats around? Attention-hungry housemates? Would the atmosphere of a library help you enter work-mode? Some people find it beneficial to use several different workspaces each day – for example, spending the morning at home, when their attention is sharpest, and moving to the library in the afternoon, taking advantage of the calm and silence when their powers of concentration start to flag.



*Would this cat distract you?*

Wherever you choose to work, it's important that it's somewhere you can take regular breaks to stand up and stretch, giving your back, and your eyes, a break. If possible, try not to work more than 30 minutes without taking a five-minute break, and don't feel guilty about taking an hour or two to yourself if you're feeling strained or tired. Often doing something completely different, especially if it is something that you enjoy, will leave you feeling refreshed and ready to work again. Be kind to yourself, and you'll feel the benefits.

## **6. Be prepared: the right words sometimes come at the wrong time**

You might find that sometimes, words and ideas just won't come when you want them to. You might be trying your hardest to have an idea, groaning with the effort of all that thought, and... nothing! So you stop working and get in the shower, and suddenly the idea pops into your head fully-formed, as if you somehow shampooed it out of your head. Like lightning, inspiration strikes at random times, and doesn't stay around very long. If it comes while you're running along the seafront, or driving home for the weekend, make a plan to capture it: a voice-activated Siri app on an iPhone could be useful, or even just carrying a good old-fashioned notebook and pencil.

## **7. Help yourself focus**

It's no secret that the age of the smart phone hasn't exactly helped [our attention span](#) or [increased our happiness](#). Even Simon Cowell has [ditched his mobile](#) (admittedly, he's rich enough to have a team of people organise his life for him). It's pleasingly ironic, then, that new technologies have appeared to help us fight the negative consequences of smart phones, many of which you can access **through your phone**.

New apps such as [Flipd](#) are designed to help students stay focused by removing all the distracting apps from your smartphone for a chosen period of time. Even if you turn Flipd off, the apps won't re-appear until the designated period of time is up. Another productivity app, [Moment](#), tracks your device usage and provides data on how much time you've spent on your phone, and what you've been doing during that time. Users can then set daily usage limits, and Moment will send you a barrage of annoying notifications if you exceed these limits. It's a good way to bring an intentionality and awareness to your smartphone usage.



*The smartphone: the great monster of our age*

It's not all about phones. Web browsing also has its fair share of pitfalls, and who amongst us hasn't fallen into a YouTube void at one point? Luckily, there are also [a whole variety of online apps](#) designed to help you combat distractions and keep yourself focussed. Use these apps to get yourselves into good habits, and then ditch them.

## **8. Take care of yourself**

Food is vital to a successful existence because, quite obviously, if we don't have food, we cease to exist. To function as best as we can, however, [we require the right kind of food and a good amount of hydration](#). When we fuel our bodies, we also fuel our brain (whole grains, spinach and nuts are ideal foods for boosting your concentration). As well as getting the quality of your food right, it's important to think about quantity: eat the

right amount of the types of foods that make you feel full, and you won't be distracted in the library by the rumblings of your stomach. Along with getting enough food, it's important to stay hydrated; you can aid your concentration by drinking 1.5 to 2 litres of fluid per day.

Stuck for food ideas? Check out [BBC goodfood](#) for quick, cheap and (sometimes) healthy student recipe ideas. [The Telegraph](#) and [Tesco](#) also have useful student/budget recipe sections. If you're useless in the kitchen but still concerned about your nutrition, you might want to consider a quick and easy meal replacement such as [HUEL](#), a nutritionally complete vegan powder that mixes into a thick shake. Packed with goodness, it contains all the proteins, carbs, and fats you need, plus at least 100% of the European Union's "Daily Recommended Amounts" of all 26 essential vitamins and minerals. If you're too busy to cook but you don't want to keep relying on croissants, it's a great (and relatively inexpensive) way to nourish your body and brain on the move.



*Spinach: the reason why Bluto never outsmarted Popeye.*

As well as being well fed, our bodies need a little bit of regular maintenance. Whether you're into Murakami-esque multi-marathons, or a gentle Kantian strolls, it's important to counteract the effects of the frequently sedentary lifestyle of the researcher. The NHS recommends that students aim for 150 minutes of exercise a week, and [they've got plenty of ideas](#) about how this can be done. One particularly good suggestion is cycling or walking instead of taking public transport. Just by making this easy shift, you'll be adding more exercise into your day, saving the environment, and also saving money. Exercise doesn't only benefit the body, [it's good for the mind, too](#). Exercise facilitates the circulation of several biological elements that make us sharper and smarter, driving blood (and thus oxygen) to the brain and releasing other beneficial hormones such as serotonin, dopamine and norepinephrine, making us not only smarter but happier. If you're researching on campus over summer, consider getting a [Sussex Sport membership](#) to make use of the excellent facilities on offer (especially in summer, when campus is quieter).

Once you've enjoyed a day of premium productivity, you'll be ready to hit the sack. For optimum performance, the brain needs 7-9 hours of sleep; turning off your phone, avoiding screens, and giving yourself enough time to wind down will all help you to get a good night's rest.

## **9. Remember where you are**

One final tip: there might be times when your research doesn't turn out the way you had hoped or planned. This does not mean your project is a failure. Rather, this is part of the process of doing research, and it is important that you recognise this. Acknowledging the limitations of your design and critically reflecting on them is a crucial skill for a professional researcher; often your reflections on what did not work so well can form a very valuable part of your final reports and summaries.

More importantly, it's important to recognise that you're in the enviable position of being able to do research, even if it's research that's not going so well. Undergraduate research schemes such as ours are incredibly competitive – just getting to where you are now requires talent and skill. You're where you are because you're a hard worker, and a minor hiccup isn't going to stop you doing what you set out to achieve.