

Getting the Most from Your MA – School of Arts Languages & Cultures Postgraduate Taught Programme Induction

As you might expect from the title, the aim of this resource is to help you get the most from your MA. What exactly that means will depend very much on your unique ambitions, experience and skills. It is not possible to provide a single list of things to learn and events to attend and this resource does not attempt to do so.

Through guidance notes and self-analysis tasks you will be encouraged to compile your own list of skills and experiences to gain. How you gain these is also for the individual to decide, though you will be expected to pick from a variety of resources, courses and experiences which the University has to offer.

The primary objective of this resource is to improve your capacity to understand what and how you are learning, and to review, plan and take responsibility for your own learning, helping you to:

- become a more effective, independent and confident self directed learner;
- understand how you learn best and relate that learning to a wider context;
- improve your career management skills (*your career* includes a PhD if appropriate)

What you choose to do with the knowledge and information you gain through this resource is ultimately up to you. The School has no requirement for you to produce details of what training you need or intend to do, but we would highly recommend that you do this for your own purposes. Because, being realistic, just obtaining an MA on its own is not a recipe for personal fulfilment, or interesting employment, or getting funding for a PhD. There are so many things for you to achieve over the next year. Your taught courses and dissertation will certainly be extremely time consuming and challenging. For this reason, a written record of what else you need or would like to do will help you keep *your* bigger picture in mind.

But first you need to figure out what that bigger picture looks like! The first tasks in this resource will help you figure out or firm up your own aims and expectations for the next year (or two) ahead and then it will help you decide how you might get there.

A written record does not need to be a chore or a task in itself; you don't need huge amounts of detail, just simple notes about what you need to do and your reasons why, what you have done, and whether it 'worked' (Did you learn what you needed to? Do you need to do something else?)

This can be particularly important because you will undoubtedly learn new skills through your everyday work on your MA and dissertation. Often, this is the best way to learn, and anything you do learn in a workshop or lecture will need to be applied to your work to have really been learned. Keeping a record of what you have learned helps you to appreciate your progress over the course of your programme and you are better able to sell your new skills to a potential employer, supervisor or funding council. They will all expect specific detail, not vague recollections of 'one time I remember is...'.

Expectations and Motivations – building your 'bigger picture'

Make notes about your answers to each of the questions overleaf. The questions are designed to help you think about why you are doing an MA and what you want to be able to do when you finish it. Unless you choose to share your answers with someone else they are known only to you. Be honest about what you want and why you are doing this – if you acknowledge what you want to achieve you will get a strong sense of accomplishment and satisfaction in working towards it. Over the course of a tough academic programme this can be very motivating.

Establish three key words for each of the following, first on your own – then see if your peers have the same goals, or different. Be quick – work with your instincts!

1. Why are you doing an MA? Why this MA in particular? Why the University of Manchester?
2. What do you expect from the next year (or two for part-time students)?
3. Are there any other ambitions you hope to achieve, besides the MA, during this time?
4. What do you expect from your lecturers, the University and yourself?
5. What obstacles or difficulties do you anticipate during your MA?
6. What are you most looking forward to?
7. Do you know what job you might like to do when you finish your MA? What industry you might work in? What career path you might follow?
8. Do you know what you would like to study for your PhD? Do you intend to apply for funding? Do you know who you would like / would be able to supervise you?
9. What do you want to be able to say about yourself, your abilities and your plans for the future at the end of the MA?

It is quite possible that your answers to a lot of these questions will be vague, or simply 'I don't know'. If you decided to do an MA because you didn't know what else to do or you weren't ready to get a job or stop being a student, answering these questions could be your main aim for the year - and that's fine. If you really don't know what you want to do next or even why you are here, you need to ensure you put yourself in the best position possible to do whatever it is you decide on in the future. The best way to do this is to gain a broad range of skills and experience which will stand you in good stead in any situation – 'transferable skills' in other words. No employer is going to be impressed that you spent another year at University but didn't really get anything extra from it or have any sense of direction.

Getting through your MA... building your professional profile

The MA is not simply a fourth or fifth year of your BA. It is a fundamentally different degree which requires advanced academic and research skills. You should have a good basis on which to build these skills through the work you completed for your BA degree, but you will not be fully equipped now – no matter how high your marks were in the past. If you could be, the MA would not be a higher award than the BA.

Your MA programme is designed to prepare you for working at PhD level but it will certainly prepare you for employment as well. Successful MA students are self-motivated and have advanced analytical, project management and written communication skills – all useful in a business environment. You will also become far more autonomous and proactive, attractive qualities which will set you apart from those with BA degrees applying for the same positions. But *only* if you can sell these skills and prove you know how to use them in practice.

Consider whether you have all the knowledge and skills necessary to complete a PhD now, because even if you don't want one, being ready for one is what you are aiming for academically. The answer is most likely no, and at this stage in your career it should be. It's also quite possible that you don't actually *want* to do a PhD, but if you approach the MA as 'the end of the line', it'll a) really irritate your lecturers (and you don't want to do that, because they're the ones you'll rely on to help you!), and b) undermine the 'bigger picture' skills in intellectual agility that you're trying to acquire here. There is a huge leap to be made between the BA and a PhD and the MA bridges that gap. It also provides you with an opportunity to begin working with professionals in your field on an equal basis. Researchers *enjoy* engaging people in discussion about their work. Take advantage of this for your own purposes – build networks, find supervisors and other advisors, develop your knowledge as much as you can.

The core change between MA and BA is the level of responsibility you have for your own learning. This is probably something you are very experienced in. You have been away from study for a period of time and will have gained useful self-management skills through work or other aspects of your life, and you have actively chosen to be here – possibly even made personal sacrifices to be here – so wish to make the most of the time you have.

When (if) you did your BA, your tutors probably managed you quite extensively. They took registers, they supervised your undergrad dissertation, they gave you reading lists, they had personal tutor meetings with you, and they were with you in class for six or eight hours a week. Much of that will now stop. You will be developing your own reading lists. You may only have two hours of class time a week. When you meet lecturers, they will expect professional meetings: you will have a clear agenda, you will have clear objectives and outcomes, you will have emailed these beforehand, and it is your role to ensure that you manage your lecturers in achieving them.

If you prepare well for meetings with your lecturers, and have a clear idea of what comes out of them, they will respond positively. If you are realistic about your strengths and weaknesses, they will be more respectful of you, and help you more. If you take advantage of opportunities available to improve your essay writing (online and in classes), your lecturers will further support your development. If you have attempted to master the search engines to identify current research, your lecturers will share additional resources with you.

In order to get the most from your MA you need to actively manage the *huge* jump between BA and MA:

1. **The intellectual leap** – without which, you will not get good marks. If you keep working with the same assumptions as at BA level, you can expect marks in the 40s/50s. Make the leap, and you will be pushing into the 60s/70s.

The leap involves exploring horizons, seeing the big picture of your discipline and beyond, being original, pushing boundaries, developing your own ideas and using others'.

2. **The practical leap** – if you approach your essays, weekly reading and research project in the same way that you managed your BA work, your tutors won't have much time for you. You need to think about how you will manage your tutors, rather than how your tutors will manage you. Get this wrong and your marks will suffer across the board.

This involves researching your essays, producing an MA-level research project, bibliographies, quality of writing, IT skills,

3. **The personal leap** – much of what you have to do here will seem obvious, but is difficult to understand in concrete terms. You need to identify specifically what it is about what you are doing that is attractive to an employer or a PhD funding body or supervisor. You need to ensure your English is interesting, mature, direct and grammatical (even if English is your native language). You need to use your time well, and motivate both yourselves and the professionals you'll be working with. You need to make friends and develop a social network in an environment that is not always conducive to it.

Managing your own time, solving your own problems, career development

THE INTELLECTUAL LEAP

Exploring the Horizons of Your Discipline

Any candidate for an MA who does not demonstrate an awareness of the big themes, questions and issues that trouble their *entire* discipline – the really big philosophical, ethical and epistemological dilemmas – will suffer in their marks over the longer term, because they will seem limited, blinkered and 'monomaniacal'. It's too easy to think at the end of an art history, cultural studies or theology bachelor's degree that you've got the big issues covered. If you have, you will be able to answer the following questions thoroughly, without reference to other books/dictionaries.

Imagine you've been asked to cover for a first year seminar, and you have to provide a clear assessment in no more than 2-3 lines, to address the following questions. You just need two or three observations for each one!

1. What is epistemology, and what are the big epistemological issues in your discipline?
2. What have been the major methodological innovations in your discipline in the last ten years? How profoundly have they challenged the practice of the discipline? With whom are they associated?
3. Who is coming to your Departmental Research Seminar, and why have they been invited? What's original or important about their work? How much do you think will be 'relevant to you'?

If you can't answer *all* of these questions with authority and confidence, you need to attend your department's main research seminar (where academics from other universities will attend), and your department's postgraduate research seminar. You should also attend any ad hoc reading groups that you see advertised around the place – they're good for networking, making friends, and reading all that complex theory in a supportive, non-critical environment.

If you don't, you'll always be working in blind ignorance of everything that's happening in your discipline beyond your own narrow interest, and this sort of ignorance is highly conspicuous in students' written work.

THE PRACTICAL LEAP

Researching Your Essays and Dissertation

The explosion in academic search engines has meant that the student can access the same – or even better, and more up-to-date – literature on a topic than their lecturers, in many cases. However, to do this, you need to be adept at using the proliferation of search engines and 'research network' building opportunities. You need to start with the JRULM itself, and then go on to the big, universal search engines – 'Google Scholar' and JSTOR.

1. Can you name a minimum of 5 search engines relevant to your discipline or research field relevant to your discipline or research field?
2. Do you know how to use these universal search engines? Could you show a group of first years?
3. Do you understand how to build a 'research network' – what instructions would you give first years about how to design a key word search?
4. If you had to write a definition of plagiarism for the university's regulations, what would it be? (In no more than 2 lines) What penalties would you impose for breaching them? What recommendations would you make to a third-year doing their dissertation to make sure they're not inadvertently caught out?

You need to conduct background research, including consultation of electronic resources, *before* you start asking your tutors about topics, areas of interest, possible reading... etc. Electronic resources provide you with easily accessible ways of beginning and conducting research. Ensure you have used them effectively.

Improving the Quality of Writing in Assessed Work

This is an area most MA students are concerned about and it is difficult to quantify exactly what standard is required without simply quoting the assessment requirements and marking criteria. Attending a study skills training session on writing will get you off to a good start. See www.alc.manchester.ac.uk/graduateschool for details, plus further online resources here <http://www.humanities.manchester.ac.uk/studyskills/essentials/writing/index.html>

Producing an Innovative Research Project

It is likely that the dissertation will be the most useful part of your MA, in terms of preparing you for life after the degree and gaining new skills. It provides you with all kinds of evidence of the qualities

and skills you can offer a potential employer or funding council. As with the rest of your degree, the MA dissertation is fundamentally different from a dissertation you might have done as a BA student. To achieve high marks you must provide an original critical approach to your research, showing analytical powers, insight and critical depth.

If you want yourself and your research project to be taken seriously by your tutors and examiners, you need to be systematic about how you put it together. Take your vague aspirations and ideas ('I think I'd like to write about...I wonder if there's a good topic in... Graphic novels have always been my passion and I wonder if...') and start testing them out in terms of the existing state of affairs, the big issues in the *whole* of your subject, and the expertise in your department.

- Begin researching your topic idea – your basic research as described above... research networks, University Library holdings, what's already out there, key issues, theoretical approaches, big names, methodological controversies
- Are there any ethical issues in your research? Will you be dealing with vulnerable people? People who are still alive? Topics that lend themselves to present-day political controversy?
- Have preliminary ideas in the following areas as these will form the basis of discussions with lecturers and inform your Research Outline:
 - Decide which of the following need to be done - and set about doing them! Set up the question to be answered; the problem to be solved; the issue at stake; the misunderstanding that needs to be corrected; the gap in the scholarship that needs to be filled; the importance of understanding the small thing you've studied to understanding a bigger issue; the competing historical theses which need to be 'refereed'; the hypothesis that needs to be proved accurate and which you agree with; the hypothesis that needs to be proved problematic or unreliable, and which needs to be revised or discarded; the personal reasons you have for tackling this; your own argument... and explain what your case study or subject of investigation will be.
 - Explain how others have tried to do what you are doing, where they have succeeded and where they have failed. You need to begin forming your own opinions and ideas in order to make an original contribution to knowledge through your dissertation.
- Are there any practical research skills you will need that are not covered in your course units? For example, you may wish to conduct interviews, use specialised archives or use texts in a foreign language.
- Are there any specific IT skills required for the project in terms of statistics, or organising data about artefacts?
- Who is a specialist in this area in your department? Is there expert supervision available?

You need to have done all these things *before* you start approaching people for advice and supervision. The project is *yours* and must be driven by *your* ideas.

Research Design

A successful research project begins with effective research design. Your work, and therefore you, will not be taken seriously if your research methods and the way you approach your work is not robust and well conceived. All MA students are required to complete a successful research outline before they are permitted to continue to the full research project – the School needs to be certain (for your sake) that your project is appropriate and you are capable of undertaking the work involved. A successful BA dissertation is not sufficient preparation for the MA dissertation. We highly recommend that you undertake training to prepare you for writing the research outline *and* discuss your potential project with appropriate academics in your discipline (following preliminary research as described above).

The research design training will also help you develop more general skills in team working, oral communication, decision making and project management. This may be the only chance for group work you have during your MA. It will also give you an excellent basis on which to put your own research outline together and give your project a kick-start.

THE PERSONAL LEAP

Imagine you are applying for a job, or filling out a funding application form for a PhD. Look at the following question, and highlight the areas that you would 'advertise' about yourself:

1. What are you going to get out of the MA *in addition* to the qualification? You will gain advanced academic and research skills by applying yourself effectively to the process of gaining an MA but *what else* are you going to get? What other skills are you going to develop? What skills do you need to develop to achieve your ambitions?
2. Putting the intellectual challenges to one side, where do you think you're most likely to encounter difficulties or stress in the project you've undertaken? Think well outside the classroom...

Being successful as an MA student and an effective researcher involves more than study:

- You should develop professional networks, at least inside the School if not outside it at this stage. Even if you don't want to do a PhD, this will be useful for your MA and will demonstrate that you can build relationships and operate effectively in a professional environment. If you do are thinking about doing a PhD remember that universities and funding bodies look for individuals who can offer more than research skills, however brilliant your research proposal is.
- As a PhD student you would be required to give papers and engage the wider research community in your work and you in theirs. You aren't expected to do this now but you should be able to show that you are capable of doing this, and have begun gaining the necessary skills, and that you understand why it is important. If you are thinking of a PhD begin networking at conferences and seminars. Choose which you attend carefully if your time is limited. Set objectives before you attend – who do you want to speak to? If you don't know, make finding out who you should be speaking to the priority. Are there any current PhD students working on an area closely related to your interests or the theories you want to examine? Make an effort to meet them. Simply meeting other students from across the School is a useful exercise – find out what goes on in your discipline and the School and get involved. This will also be useful for gaining an insight into what doing a PhD is really like; find out what PhD students do day to day, what the process feels like and whether you think it is something you would enjoy.
- Project management skills are essential to completing a high quality research project and are also highly sought after across all employment sectors.
- Presenting in public is essential for many careers and you will be required to present your work during your MA. The more practice you get, the better you will be.
- Can you explain your MA *concisely* to other researchers and potential employers: can you articulate the particular skills, knowledge, experience and intelligence you have to offer?
- All employers, academic institutions included, aim to employ individuals with well developed interpersonal, leadership and team working skills. Do you have these? Can you demonstrate and evidence them?
- You need to ensure your written *and* spoken English is interesting, mature, direct and grammatical – even native English speakers.
- Everyone needs time away from their work. What other things will you do? Socialise with friends (this is certainly important)? Exercise? Hobbies? Volunteering?