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Journal of Qualitative Research in Sports Studies
Volume 4, Issue 1, December 2010

Getting started with qualitative research, a guide for undergraduates: from curiosity to methodology

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ISSN: 1754-2375
ISBN: 978-0-9566270-1-8
JQRSS Article No: 1/7-4-1-2010-PG[18]-040

To cite this article:

Self-archived URL link to this article:
https://www.academia.edu/3715246/Palmer_C._and_Griggs_G._2010_Getting_started_with_qualitative_research_a_guide_for_undergraduates_from_curiosity_to_methodology._Journal_of_Qualitative_Research_in_Sports_Studies_4_1_1-14

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JQRSS Mapping of Articles (2007- to date):
https://www.academia.edu/8827414/Mapping_of_JQRSS_articles_across_Undergraduate_and_Postgraduate_research

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Getting started with qualitative research, a guide for undergraduates: from curiosity to methodology

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Abstract
This paper has been written with the undergraduate novice researcher in mind who may be interested to embark upon an investigation about an aspect of sport or physical education. The advice offered below might complement his or her early contact with qualitative research methods in higher education. The aim of the paper is to guide students to a practical starting point from which some research might be initiated, structured and presented. For any researcher in sport and particularly for those just starting out, it is important not to lose the intrinsic interest to investigate whatever has stirred their curiosity. In fact, it may only be such a growing demand for knowledge and the need for a greater understanding of the data that leads to meaningful engagement with research methodology – an essential area of theory which might have otherwise stifled the initial interest to become a researcher. The paper closes by highlighting that an understanding of methodology can help to open new and exciting avenues to extend and develop an investigation towards deeper critical discussion.

Introduction
Any written advice on getting started with research may be the first thing to be overlooked by an undergraduate student especially if it means spending their time reading literature which may not be as they see it, directly relevant to their project. In this instance, this would be a mistake. This paper discusses how students might recognise what may be a researchable idea for them, and then suggests some practical means within qualitative research to investigate it, i.e. how to get started. Whilst this is not a treatise on research methods, the difficulties for the student of where to look and what to do first are acknowledged. A problem tackled here is that there seems to be little shortage of enthusiasm for sport demonstrated by many students in their general parlance about, say, their favourite football club, but when faced with the idea that they might research an aspect of that world in an academic manner, their enthusiasm may be diluted by the seemingly stringent demands of the new research protocol. The notion of research seems to create confusion, possibly through its formality and some students may feel lost. Therefore, in order to raise
confidence and to become a curious, focused and busy undergraduate researcher some suggestions are offered about where and how to start – and importantly, where that start might relate to the overarching body of knowledge which may inform qualitative research more broadly i.e. comments on the importance of methodology.

There is an interesting anomaly embodied in the challenge of this paper which is that despite there being a vast amount of excellent advice for initiating a project - most research methods books will address this in some way, there is still seemingly a need for a discussion which is sports related and bound to the context of learning in order to open the door upon what we call research. Therefore, this guidance may be helpful to the undergraduate in Sports Studies in that it recognises some of the demands upon them and provides an access route to begin a project or dissertation. Towards the end of the paper there will be some examples of mentored student research which has been published, as well as further reflection upon the research experience from the second author who has been a recent post-graduate researcher, and a student mentor/supervisor for others in his role as lecturer.

Not so much getting started, but getting put off research… long words; …isms and …ologys
What may be ‘the good’ advice about research can often be overlooked because at first glance it lacks context within sport and PE; it is too theoretical and philosophical, too dull and turgid for an eager novice, or it may not fit the student’s early perceptions of what research is. Nevertheless, the area of research methods does bring with it a new vocabulary and it will be up to your tutor to introduce this progressively. Some terms I introduce for new researchers are: field research, field notes and data collection, interview and observation, researcher bias, participant observation, covert and overt, transcription and inferences. These terms tend to lead quickly to the practical doing of research from which some deeper more critical questions about the status of knowledge and the representation of real-life in your data, may develop later on.

The good advice
The ‘good advice’ is that methodological issues are central to the whole research process. The ological suffix to method alludes to the underlying theory for the ethos of the project, that is, where the research might be positioned in relation to other theories about the human condition and how we make sense of the world, for example, the differences between positivism and interpretivism. The risk is that omitting the ological from method can limit severely the research in its depth and real-life application. That is, for the reader it may be unclear in what sense the researcher might have made sense of his data. A methodological position establishes a philosophical viewpoint from which certain types of method; data analysis and conclusion may be logical - all stemming from this methodological account of
existence. A qualitative methodology might involve terms such as ontology and epistemology, interpretivism, phenomenology, symbolic interactionism and ethnography. Therefore a methodology; a discussion of the theory behind your methods, helps to establish your reasons for selecting and rejecting certain fieldwork strategies and to collect certain types of data. It may also help the reader to understand the context of your conclusion against the broader canvas of other philosophical justifications of research, for example see The Paradigms Debate in Sparkes (1992:9-60) and also Smith (2010:6-20) for a sports specific explanation of research methodologies. Writing a methodology can be difficult and can make better sense in the context of your research data, which leads to the next step in getting started. But… in the assessment of a dissertation or post-graduate thesis, the Methodology could be the first section turned to, if it were present at all? for a demonstration of understanding about underpinning theories for the research to be carried out and made sense of.

But the good advice is boring; let’s crack on with some research
For undergraduates who may be early in their degree programmes, what is being advocated is that we don’t so much ignore the good advice about methodology but rather, put to one side for a short while its philosophical underpinnings for the research process. However, this is in recognition that the idea of getting started will mean that if your research takes off things may quickly grind to a halt without a well formed methodology. A well thought out methodology can permit greater freedom for the researcher to utilise a wider range of data collection strategies in the field. Without it you may be obliged to justify every change of direction in the journey that your data takes you on and the reasons for making such changes may appear vague and arbitrary. But can you get away without a methodology for the time being? The answer is probably yes in the novice stages of research depending upon the learning outcomes for a research task. In support of this it is probably fair to estimate that most undergraduate research, certainly that which is pre-dissertation, may focus upon process; the correct application of some data collection methods, rather than product; making claims in a conclusion to have solved one of the world’s problems in sport and PE.

For many students the pressing issues are time and submission deadlines and also balancing the research task with other assessments at university which brings me to the next series of points which can mystify undergraduate research. Acknowledgement of these points and demystifying them will lead us to some practical advice for getting started in research, see also Buckley (2007) for his tutor reflections on doing an undergraduate dissertation using qualitative research. The concept of the research submission and the concept of being a researcher are seemingly different to that of submitting a normal essay on a normal module. The
very fact that the task is called research, or even science may signify a different undertaking from the norm; a kind of mission, something to be proved or replicated, which may be the start of confusion particularly in terms of the reporting style; language, layout, discussion, conclusion which may be expected by an institution. Not particularly helping the situation is that for many students starting at university there seems to be a deeply engrained notion of what research is and therefore what science is possibly stemming from their school experiences of lab coats, goggles and Bunsen burners. Then there is the ubiquitous reporting format of Title, Apparatus, Methods, Results and Conclusion which may further cement the rigid protocol of what research is from a student’s perspective. Indeed, these may be a reasonable set of ideas for some scientifically inclined researchers in sport in higher education but these people may also, worryingly, overlook the importance of methodology. That is, it is seemingly just as important for them to justify positivism and experimental design in their sport’s research context and by failing to acknowledge a methodology, positivistic or otherwise, may be to deny novice researchers a view that there could be another way of looking at things. Such an alternative view may actually be advantageous for those who wish to investigate socio-cultural aspects of sport and physical education within a qualitative research design. Understanding what research is or discovering what it isn’t, may be the first stumbling block for students to overcome as qualitative social researchers; expanding their understanding of what research can be and persuading them that there is another perspective is a challenge for the pedagogists. The trick may be in understanding that socio-cultural research in higher education is actually closer to the students’ world than something further away from it. But how are we to get there…?

**Being an undergraduate researcher – doing some research**

To be a researcher is not to be a passive onlooker but to be an observer with a purpose. As a qualitative researcher you might regard yourself as being part of the world you are researching, for example, the mere fact of your presence may create an impact upon your data. Your mission is to prioritise what you are observing in relation to your research concept, you cannot just look at everything and those observed and noted phenomena become the data about which you may theorise. Your theorising may take account of your position in that world to make those observations and offer those inferences.

However, the notion of being an undergraduate researcher typically seems to imply that there should be a collection of something in relation to a research question, which is good, which will solve a genuine problem, which may be not so good. That is, that there may not be that many genuine problems in the world of sport and physical education that an undergraduate student might tackle as part of their formal
education. The boundaries of supervision and ethical constraints may dictate here. Therefore, a yearning to solve a problem as a result of some earlier engrained concept of what research or science is can leave some novice researchers thinking that their efforts have failed because they have not solved a major issue. This may not be the case. A conclusion might therefore be better focused to make critical summative comments about the data they have collected, its limitations and where you might look next in an extension of the project. Usually there will be a third-party; a reader or assessor, who may appreciate that you have come to some kind of conclusion about your data, hence the emphasis upon the act of clear reporting; theorising, reflecting and sharing through writing, about your research, rather than arriving at any earth shattering conclusions that you may or may not make. For the experienced researcher there will be problems with this notion regarding the general thrust of good advice i.e. the absence of a methodology. However, for novices it provides a practical way to get started which will lead, quickly in some cases, to an intrinsic need to explore a methodological understanding about the data they have collected in order to develop the research further.

One strategy (amongst many) for getting started on socio-cultural research in sport and PE

One strategy for getting started is captured in this overview and then developed in more detail in the section below.

Qualitative research using interviews first and then observations:

1. Develop the research idea
Consider who you might interview in relation to the idea, then devise an interview schedule.

2. Data collection
- Phase one: conduct three interviews but transcribe each interview progressively and make inferences – carry out basic analysis of the data. Summarise the transcript noting emergent themes which might influence the next interview.
- Phase two: conduct 3 observations in the field. Construct analytical field notes after each observation.

3. Discuss what you got from the data
As issues emerge from the data new literature may be prompted to develop your ideas. A key concept in qualitative research is that the data leads the study. This first phase of data collection should lead you to realise what the limitations of interview data might be i.e. what the interview could not tell you along with some recognition of researcher bias. On the basis of your data, or rather the gaps in it, you might consider another data collection strategy for looking at the social world of sport/PE in your context, which may be more observations in the field. Data collection and discussion of data are concurrent. New areas of literature may be signalled by these developments.
4. Conclusion
A summative comment upon what your data tells you at the point where you stopped in relation to the research idea. A critical evaluation of methods, limitations and future opportunities may also be offered.

Each stage, above, expanded with more detail...

1. Development of the research idea
In response to a carefully crafted research question collect some data in relation to a topic of interest in sport and PE.

For example: Win or lose what counts as success in coaching sport [or teaching PE] – opinions and aspirations of sports coaches [or teachers]
(Square brackets: delete, mix or include areas/sports as appropriate to interests)

Write, as part of an introduction, some analysis which breaks down the title and discusses the issues in the context of a chosen sport[s]. Winning, losing and success could all mean different things in different activities, at different levels (introductory to elite) to different people (sports coaches to parents or performers) and in different settings (sporting, recreational or educational). Some literature could be reviewed usefully at this early stage to develop the concepts for the researcher and to form a strategy as to how they might conduct initial field research i.e. a proposal.

As far as the lecturer of research methods may be concerned the actual topics of investigation will probably be guided and informed by the personal interests of the student. Consequently the disparate nature of interests within a group of novice researchers generally brings variety to the collective research experience in a group and ownership of the project for the individual. Alternatively, a preset modular research task could be issued or, as with PhD studentships the research can be sponsored by a third party when the researcher would align their interests with the topic being funded. Preset modular research tasks can be useful in combating the feelings of being lost by students when they are faced with a seemingly open ended research request. For example, when the “I don’t know what to research” comments start to arise it may be indicative of when some students may be struggling to overcome an engrained sense of what research or science is as noted above, or may be struggling to realise something valuable in their personal stock of knowledge to investigate, as noted by Elizabeth Smith below. However, the apparent comfort of being led as a novice by a preset task could be short-lived as it may serve to limit ownership and interest in the research which could be a major educational set back for developing expertise and independence as a researcher, particularly if the question, “whose research is it?” is raised.
From experience the better products from teaching research methods to undergraduates seems to have come from embracing the variety of topics which students bring with them and then to visit upon their experiences a new research protocol or set of qualitative lenses for looking at their world and experiences. For example, on a module one year there was a female student who had swum the English Channel at 14 years of age ranging to high jumpers and sprinters, skiers, martial artists and netball coaches and many more – all of whom could take the title above and make it their own in some way. As a result, the research task was personal and at their level and a high degree of ownership of the research question was seen to be developed from this point.

In this first phase of the research towards a proposal for getting underway, the purpose of developing the research idea concurrent with searching relevant literature was not only to demonstrate those academic skills but to devise a well-reasoned interview schedule. The interview schedule; a list of questions, could be adapted progressively from one interview to the next in the light of developing knowledge and discovery. This initial piece of work leading to the first interview could be submitted as a proposal to the lecturer or supervisor detailing who would be interviewed first and what they would be asked in relation to a specified area or topic. The purpose of the proposal is to indicate that you have a well thought out plan to embark upon some field research, that it is ethically sound and that you will not put yourself or others at risk.

2. Data collection
A simple strategy is to conduct three timed interviews of 10-15 minutes max. Three short interviews will give good practice of some field research and develop skills and confidence for working with people and the data they give you. Open and closed questions should be devised to manage the face to face interview but also to elicit from the interviewee a range of opinions and beliefs about winning, losing and success in this case (see Crang and Cook, 2007:66-72 for some good ideas on “asking the right questions”). There should also be a consent form for the researcher and the interviewee to sign assuring confidentiality of the recorded conversation and an indication of how the data will be used – each party should retain a copy (see Miller and Bell, (2002:53-69) for a discussion of ethical dilemmas and considerations for informed consent in research). The interview should then be transcribed verbatim allowing a column for non-verbal communication and another column for analytical notes (initial coding and generation of ideas - see Strauss and Corbin, 1990:57-74) which is to make notes or inferences in relation to utterances from the interviewee. The analytical column is for your critical and evaluative thoughts in response to what was said in relation to your research title/idea. It is therefore useful to keep your inferences (initial coding) in line with the utterances
from the interviewee on the page so it is easier to manage. It is also good practice to summarise your inferences at the end of the transcript and make any other critical observations which may be relevant to the data and the field research experience. In this manner, the data may help to guide the researcher to the next interview engagement or phase of field research activity.

The initial phases of research activity are outlined in the table below. Depending upon your research strategy and supervision guidance, each interview may usefully inform the next. Therefore, in the context of the research title detailed above, avoid using the same schedule for each and every interview and rather, devise a new schedule for each successive interview based upon your learning and experience at that point. Otherwise you may simply elicit similar responses from successive interviews which could limit your data and constrain the possible insight it might yield. You may also find that in addition to your knowledge on a topic that your skills, expertise and confidence to research in the field have developed also. Therefore, you will probably feel limited by the schedule for interview one if applied during interview three. In one sense, you and your data should develop as one and it may be logical to update the means of collecting data in the form of your interview schedule to keep pace with your learning and discoveries.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Explain: research idea/area of curiosity/hunch. Leads to: initial literature review. Informs: initial plan of field research and interview schedule for first interview.</th>
<th>Proposal / supervision approval</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Conduct interview 1 Transcribe, analyse, infer, summarise. Devise schedule for interview 2 New literature may be indicated to develop concepts emerging. Reflect on personal strategy/competence in the field.</td>
<td>Field work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Conduct interview 2 Transcribe, analyse, infer, summarise. Devise schedule for interview 3 New literature may be indicated to develop concepts emerging. Reflect on personal strategy/competence in the field.</td>
<td>Field work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Conduct interview 3 Transcribe, analyse, infer, summarise. New literature may be indicated to develop concepts emerging. Reflect on personal strategy/competence in the field.</td>
<td>Field work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Meta analysis of summaries 1, 2, 3. Introduce new literature as may be directed by discoveries in the data. Develop concepts (or reject them) as appropriate. Revisit data for further examples of trends or subtle language to illustrate your findings and direct your next phase of field research – which may be observations.</td>
<td>Research discussion and presentation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3. Discussion about the data
In relation to some published literature in a relevant area to that which is being researched you should discuss the limitations and contributions of the data towards the research idea. From the first phase of interviews some ideas stemming from the data could be identified which develop the research idea. At this point an indication of what to look for next could be given. To facilitate a range of research of practices it is recommended that following interviews, students engage in a period of observation as their next phase of going into the field. Phenomena they could be observing for may be drawn from their interview data and the inferences made from it. The change in data collection strategy from interviews to observations could be in recognition of what Silverman (2007:9 and pp.37-60) calls “manufactured data”, that is, that interviews and focus groups are somewhat false; they may not be an authentic or believable representation of the everyday world. Consequently, researcher bias, timing and respondent rationalisation (the fact that what people say in an interview may not be a true reflection of what they actually do) could be things which lead you to observe more closely some facets of human interaction in your research context. Issues of overt and covert missions to observe could be discussed critically with the pros and cons of “participant observation” see Hammersley and Atkinson (1995:103-108) as they may relate to your project.

To enable you to observe as a researcher as opposed to merely spectating at an event, although to all intents and purposes that is exactly what it might appear like to others, a structure for organising field notes will be needed. I have often recommended a system which operates in three stages per observable event. The first stage is a description of a situation: Observational Notes, the second stage is to theorise about the situation and make inferences: Theoretical Notes, and the third stage is to make some notes about your position as a researcher: Methodological Notes. Basically, instances of what you see are recorded, along with your ideas and inferences in relation to what was noted and then some acknowledgement that as a researcher you are having some impact upon the situation. For example, within a methodological note it could be noted what you can or cannot do, such as; move position, ask questions, interact in some way, or not. Such a note should include the impact upon the data of having to move away or closer for some reason, all of which may be altering your tactic for observing in the field. See Palmer (2010:141-157) for an applied example of making notes in the field in relation to participant observation in a study of Men’s Artistic Gymnastics, and also, McCabe and Palmer (2007) for use of the same note-taking system by an undergraduate in her research on teacher-pupil interaction during PE classes and after school sport.

4. Conclusion
Highlight some findings from the data and in particular some of the weaknesses of
the data and also what the data may not be telling you. This can be a useful means of sign-posting where the development of the research could be. Shipman’s (1988) *The Limitations of Social Research* may also be a good companion for generating such discussion with many controversies cited in relation to education. You might recognise also, aspects of researcher bias and how that may render elements of your data as being an authentic reflection of the lived experience, or not. Discoveries from the data which may have usefully steered the research onto new ground could also be highlighted. The data collection methods used may determine what degree of inference can be made about the findings to date. That is, that the strength of a conclusion may stem directly from what your research activities have revealed. If a bold claim is made from relatively superficial data then the conclusion may be weak.

This brings us back to the omission of a methodology in the research plan. Your data about a situation is more likely to be believable, convincing, credible and authentic if it is varied, questioned and representative of the lived experience you have been researching. Such a position may only stem from a well-formed methodology which might justify ostensibly stark changes in data collection strategy – an ability to alter data collection strategy at a similar pace to that in which your subject may alter settings and interactions could be a good thing. A well-reasoned methodology might also focus upon what can be asked about the data and what it represents in real-life.

**Getting a foothold…**

One key to getting started with research is recognising what qualitative data might look like and then to appreciate that that data may not give you a definitive answer to the research question, if anything it may only generate more questions. If it does generate more questions this is often the sign of a healthy project. The data is all around us but it is not a case of just anything goes. A research idea that seeks out the opinions, aspirations, beliefs and attitudes of people may be a good place to start for the qualitative researcher and if the responses are predominantly verbal they may lead to immediate and tangible data to work with. This could be an initial step in gathering primary data, that is, data gathered first hand by the researcher. Thereafter, when confidence, experience and knowledge has developed, periods of extended field observations may be engaged with to explore the lived experience further which can lead to conceptualising about data in different forms such as through the senses (Sparkes, 2009) which may be one method for deriving new meaning from data in a given context.

For getting started Silverman (2005:150-152) points to a range of secondary data sources which may be collected from “newspapers, libraries or literature as well as to beg and borrow other people’s data to initiate a project”. Some recent writing with
an undergraduate (Panter and Palmer, 2009) did exactly this when three transcripts from the internet were identified; the first on the government’s interests in the 2012 Olympics, the second on drugs scandals and the third on aggression in football from which some common themes emerged, emphasized by the title of the article, *Who are you calling a liar? Questioning the levels of integrity in modern elite sport through an ethical and political agenda*. This proved to be a productive tactic for kick-starting the research process for that student.

**Reflections on early research experiences: deciding on the topic**

Ultimately you will have to decide what topic is the best one for you to research. This process can take quite some time so it is best to start thinking about it as early as possible. The main pitfalls to avoid are not choosing to research the first idea that comes into your head and secondly not turning up to a tutor’s office with no idea of what to do – from experience, both invariably lead to disaster!

Lynch (2010) indicates that choosing which path to follow has an empowering freedom on one hand but can feel like a daunting void on the other and so advocates early engagement with both writing down all ideas and having people (peers, tutors etc) with whom you can talk these through. But where to start?

Saunders *et al.* (2000) recommends a number of sources to help you get ideas:

- **Existing literature** – Read books and journals in your subject area.
- **Social concerns** – Identify the key problems in your subject area.
- **Popular Issues** – What areas in your subject keep arising in recent journals, newspapers or on the internet.
- **Your own personal characteristics** – What are your strengths? What career path are you following?
- **Brainstorming** – Have a creative time either alone or with others writing down ideas
- **Tutors** – Tutors have their own areas of interest and expertise.

Further to this Veal (1997) advocates considering choosing what appears to be a well trodden area or an existing study and changing a key aspect such as conducting the work in a different location or using an alternative methodology. Once some working ideas have been arrived at keep reading and collecting relevant sources. For academic study, books, journals and possibly newspapers provide the mainstay of what could be used but at this early stage may open to a very wide range of sources. The key ultimately is not what you look at but what you do with the information. Something on a topical website may stimulate your creative thoughts to look at related literature, but it should also be reasonable for you judge that the original website may not be a credible academic source that should end up in your reference list. When you feel you have a few key ideas and are able to articulate these, find a
time to explain your thoughts to your tutor and bring all your notes and documents with you. It is likely after this appointment that you will have a research idea to follow or at least a clearer idea about what may and may not work.

Of vital importance at this point is deciding upon an area that you are happy with – and this cannot be stressed enough. All too often undergraduate conversations are filled with stories of how they end up doing something they are not interested in. Given the length of time even small scale research takes (such as a dissertation) if it is not interesting to you when you start it will be arduous the entire way through because even projects people love at the start they can become tired of by the end. I once heard this explained by a former tutor as a parallel to choosing a partner whom you wish to date. That is, that when engaging in a relationship with research it is not so easy to break up from because you still have to live with it even when you cease to see its appeal!

Negotiating this successfully is a balance between (student) researcher and tutor who need to be able to speak freely and listen carefully in equal measure and from their collective experience find the ‘X factor’ – the thing that really excites the researcher. A recent case in point can be seen in Smith and Griggs (2010). In tutorials Elizabeth Smith, as a conscientious student, always arrived well-read with notepad in hand but when faced with a dissertation could not see the wood for the trees. She had taken advice to read and read and read but in this instance it just generated more and more possible ideas. Elizabeth had become exasperated with the process at this early stage and had resigned herself to the fact that she had no single idea that was better than another, so was at a point where she was just going to pick one. That tutorial had planned to finish early because of Elizabeth’s work commitments and when questioned, Elizabeth explained the work she did – and then she lit up! Elizabeth worked with children with a range of Special Educational Needs and on this occasion explained at length how she and her colleagues were engaging the children in a programme of Rebound Therapy. It never dawned on her (or her tutor) until that conversation that it might be an area to be researched but the article produced from the completed dissertation indicates that it clearly was.

**In closing... make a start...**
The next step is to make a start – and that start may be to observe and think like a researcher in the world rather than as a spectator watching the world go by. You should intend to research something that you are interested in and which will sustain your interest throughout the year if it is a dissertation. A good tactic in the early stages would be to establish an angle on a topic that elicits from you a deeper level of questioning and critical thought rather than merely describing superficial or obvious information. A reasonably well-formed research idea will give you some
confidence to embark upon a project and then enjoy the commitment and the learning experience all the more. If this project is an assessed dissertation then there may be rewards derived from independent study which may lead on to higher levels of engagement, or conversely, there may be consequences for a lack of planning. Either way getting started with research can be both an exciting but daunting prospect and it is hoped that this paper has provided some useful thoughts as to how you might go about it.

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