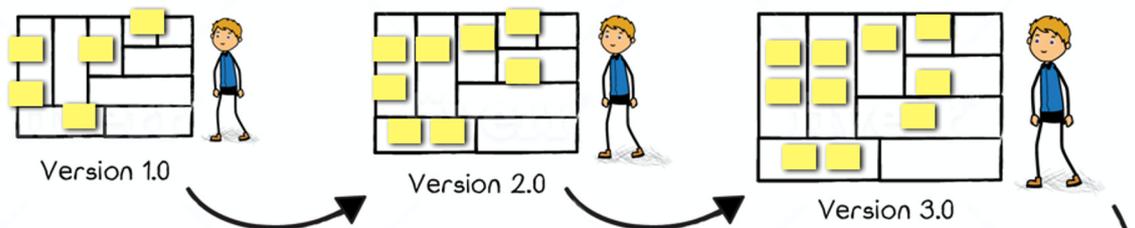
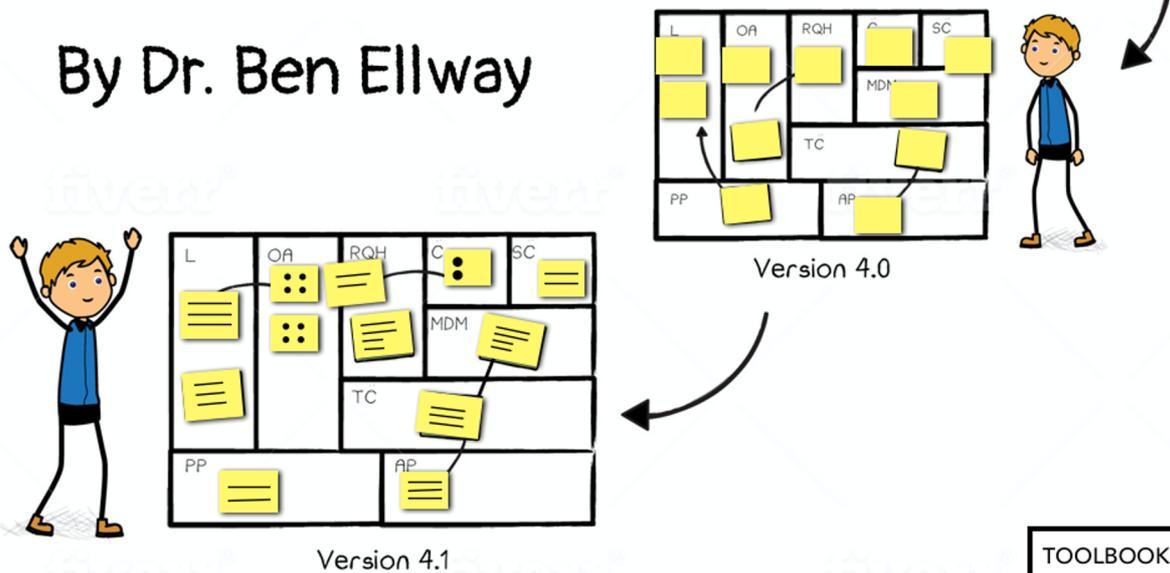


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Making a Positive Start to Your PhD or Professional Doctorate



By Dr. Ben Ellway



www.academic-toolkit.com



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Preface

This is not a Textbook, it's a Toolbook...

This isn't a research textbook. There are plenty of excellent research texts written by far more intelligent and experienced academics than myself. You probably already own a general research text as well as a specialist book about methodology, research design, or methods in your discipline or topic area.

This is a **toolbook**. Think of a toolbook as an instruction manual - it gives you step-by-step guidance on how to use a tool to complete a task or fix a problem. In this toolbook I'll explain how you can use a tool I created - **the research design canvas** - to help you navigate the first year of your doctoral journey (and possibly beyond).

Why I wrote this Toolbook

My own PhD journey was tough. I remember feeling excited to start and looking forward to the intellectual challenges that awaited. But during that first year I quickly realised that the doctoral journey can be filled with confusion, stress, and anxiety.

Since becoming an academic I now appreciate that confusion, wasted time, a lack of progress, and mental pressure leading up to important milestones, are common experiences for many doctoral students. The complexity of academic research and uniqueness of every individual research project mean that the first stage of the doctoral journey is especially difficult.

So, I created the research design canvas and wrote this book in the hope of making the first year of your doctoral journey an easier and more enjoyable experience.

How should I read this toolbook?

There are two options - read 'from cover to cover' or 'dip in and dip out'. I recommend doing both.

'From Cover to Cover'

Read the book from start to finish. Read through each chapter to consider how the ideas, advice, and exercises can help you make progress.

'Dip In and Dip Out'

Dip in and out of the book at various points during your first year (and possibly beyond) to keep you on track or get you back on track. Use the book, canvas, and exercises to support you when making key decisions or choices, to develop your literature review, or when you hit a stumbling block, become confused, feel overwhelmed by the complexity of academic research.

Where are you in Your Journey?

Some of you will be in the first few weeks of your doctoral journey. Other readers will have already completed their first semester or term. Some of you will be coming to the end of your first year or preparing for an important milestone. And a few of you will be in your second (or third) year and looking to use the book to get you back on track. If you are further along your journey you might want to dip in and out of the book to identify specific exercises, sections, or chapters of relevance to your personal situation or appropriate for problems you might be encountering.

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A Note For Supervisors and Teachers

The research design canvas is also a tool for academics and supervisors to teach, model, design, and evaluate research. If you supervise doctoral (or masters) students, and / or are responsible for teaching research classes or seminars for your department, faculty, or University, I suggest that you identify exercises from the book that you believe students will benefit from completing.

As a supervisor you can guide students through their first year (and beyond) by asking them to complete the exercises and use these to monitor their progress towards formally assessed milestones. The exercises then become mini-milestones, which are much less daunting and complicated. This will encourage students to be proactive and take ownership of their development and progress. The completed exercises can be a useful way to structure discussion during supervisions, and to help students maintain focus on addressing the questions in the canvas building blocks to design their own project.

If you are responsible for teaching research you can use exercises in the book to use as in-class activities and as formal assessment items in your course, unit, workshop, or seminar. You could introduce or frame topics such as methodology, theory, the literature review, and paradigms by using the canvas and this book to help students appreciate how these can be used and applied in practice within research projects. You could ask students to complete a canvas as the key output from a research workshop, class, or seminar you deliver. If you are teaching an entire course or unit then you can ask students to complete the canvas during the first class as an ice-breaker and orientation, and then again towards the end of the course as a formal assessment item. You could then ask students to write a reflective piece on how their appreciation and understanding of academic research and their topic has improved during your course.

While I believe the exercises in this book will be useful, I'm also aware that you may conceive of your own ideas and ways to use the research design canvas to help your students make tangible progress.

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Chapter 1: Getting Started

In this chapter we are going to acknowledge common feelings, thoughts, and experiences you might encounter in your first year and possibly beyond. Then we'll identify two key challenges every student must tackle and describe the iterative nature of the research process. This will help us to consider the risks and opportunities you face during your first year. Finally, we'll explain how the research design canvas and this book will help you during your first year journey.

Starting Your First Year

Ultimately, during the first twelve months of your doctoral journey (longer if you are studying part-time) you must make sufficient progress to enable you to produce a coherent and compelling research proposal, first year report, or confirmation seminar presentation. Successfully passing one or more these formally assessed milestones will help you to confidently move on to the next stage of your journey equipped with the topic knowledge and understanding of academic research necessary to conduct your research and write a successful Thesis.

You might be thinking, "I've already written and submitted my research proposal to gain acceptance on the doctoral program, why do I need to develop it further?". The research proposal gets you 'in the door' by demonstrating your potential for completing doctoral research. But you wrote it based upon a partial understanding of literature in your topic area and of academic research more generally. You are going to have to expand and elaborate upon the ideas and arguments in your original proposal to produce a more detailed, thoughtful, and robust research proposal or first year report, and possibly a corresponding confirmation seminar presentation to an audience of your peers.

You are probably highly motivated, feeling positive, and eager to start your journey. That's fantastic! But it's important to **be realistic about the experiences, thoughts, and feelings you may encounter during the first twelve months**. If you are just starting out you might not have encountered any of them just yet. If you are further along on your journey, some may already be familiar to you. These are some common first year feelings, thoughts, and experiences.

Feeling bewildered by the amount of literature you are reading

Writing a lot but struggling to pull the ideas together in a coherent way

Being unable to untangle the web of thoughts running through your mind

Being overwhelmed by the complexity of ideas in journal articles

Juggling your time between your literature review, assignments, preparing for supervisions, attending seminars, and possibly teaching

Failing to fit together all the parts of your project together in a coherent way

Becoming confused with the meaning and complexity of academic terminology

Realising that your literature review doesn't justify why your own research is important or interesting

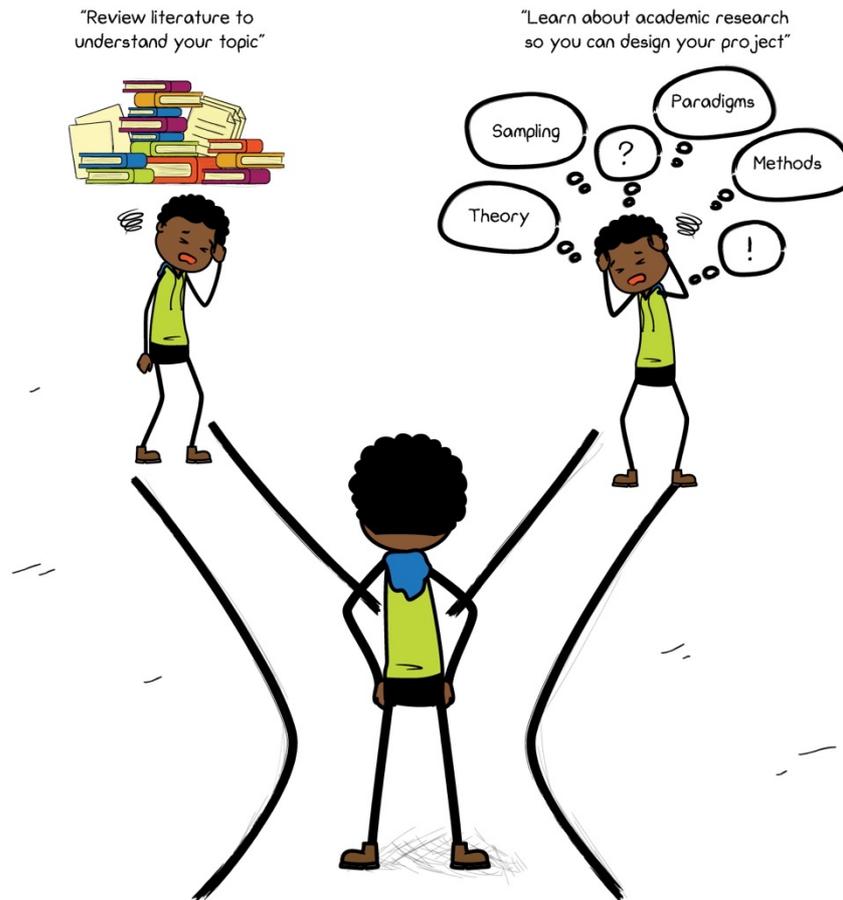
Becoming anxious about your first year report, research proposal, or confirmation seminar presentation

So why are these feelings, thoughts, and experiences so common?

First Year Challenges

The feelings, thoughts, and experiences mentioned above are common because to successfully pass your first year milestones you **must tackle two very difficult challenges**.

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You must tackle the challenge of developing knowledge in your topic area to enable you to effectively review and write about past research to frame and justify your own research.

Developing knowledge of your research topic is a significant challenge because of the amount of reading, analysing, and writing involved in searching for and making sense of existing literature.

You must tackle the challenge of learning about what academic research is and figuring out how to design your own project. Learning about academic research is a significant challenge because it is comprised of multiple components, decisions, and choices which determine the type of research being conducted.

However, what makes these challenges so daunting and complex is the fact that **every student starts out as a novice in both their topic knowledge and understanding of academic research, yet must tackle the two challenges simultaneously.**

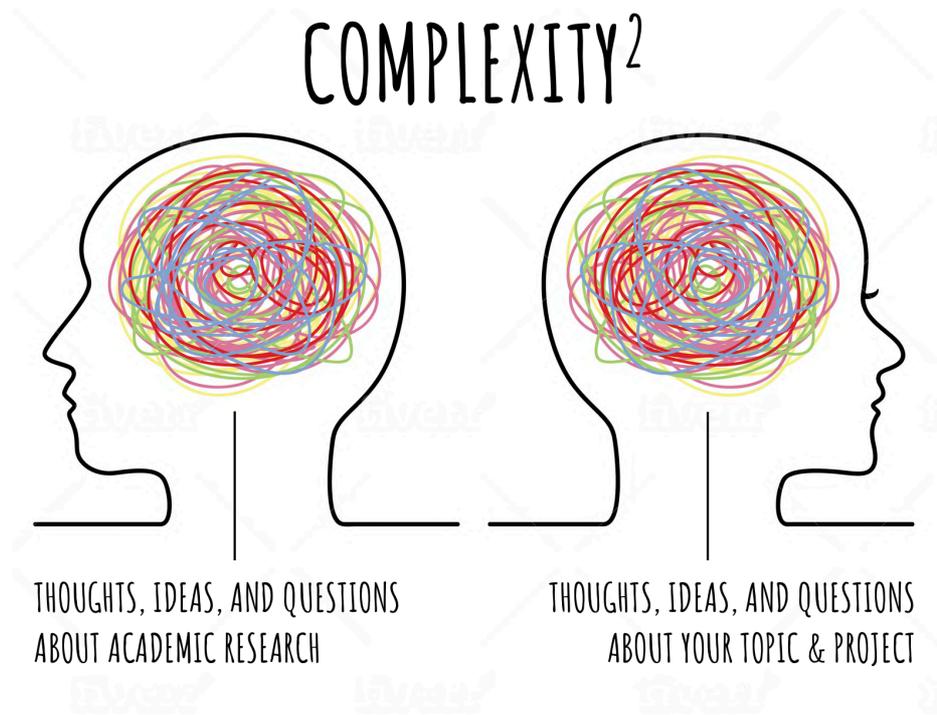
Think about it.

You begin your literature review with an incomplete understanding of academic research. You are essentially a novice when it comes to academic research. So, you must read journal articles, books, and other sources to improve your topic knowledge while your understanding of academic research is still developing. This limited comprehension of academic research including unfamiliarity with new (and often abstract) terminology greatly complicates the process of reading, making sense of, and writing about existing literature.

Similarly, you begin the process of learning about academic research with an incomplete and still developing understanding of your own topic. Again, you are essentially a novice when it comes to your topic area. As you read research texts, take research classes and complete assignments, you'll try

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The fact that you start out as a novice in both areas yet must tackle the two complex challenges simultaneously can become overwhelming. It is complexity squared! At times you might feel that you have thoughts, ideas and questions constantly running through your mind.



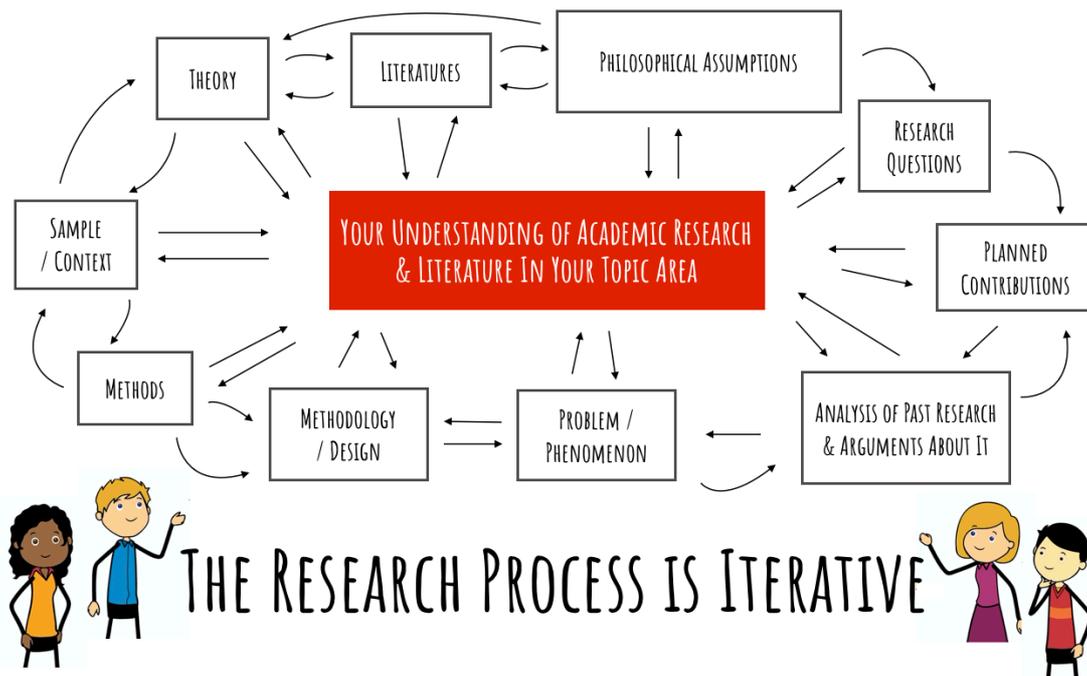
An Iterative Research Process

A linear research process comprised of a sequence of distinct steps would greatly simplify the challenges of learning about your topic and academic research at the same time. You would simply commence and complete step one, then do the same with step two, and so on, until you reach the end of the process. Unfortunately, **research is not a linear process!**



The Research Process Is Not Linear

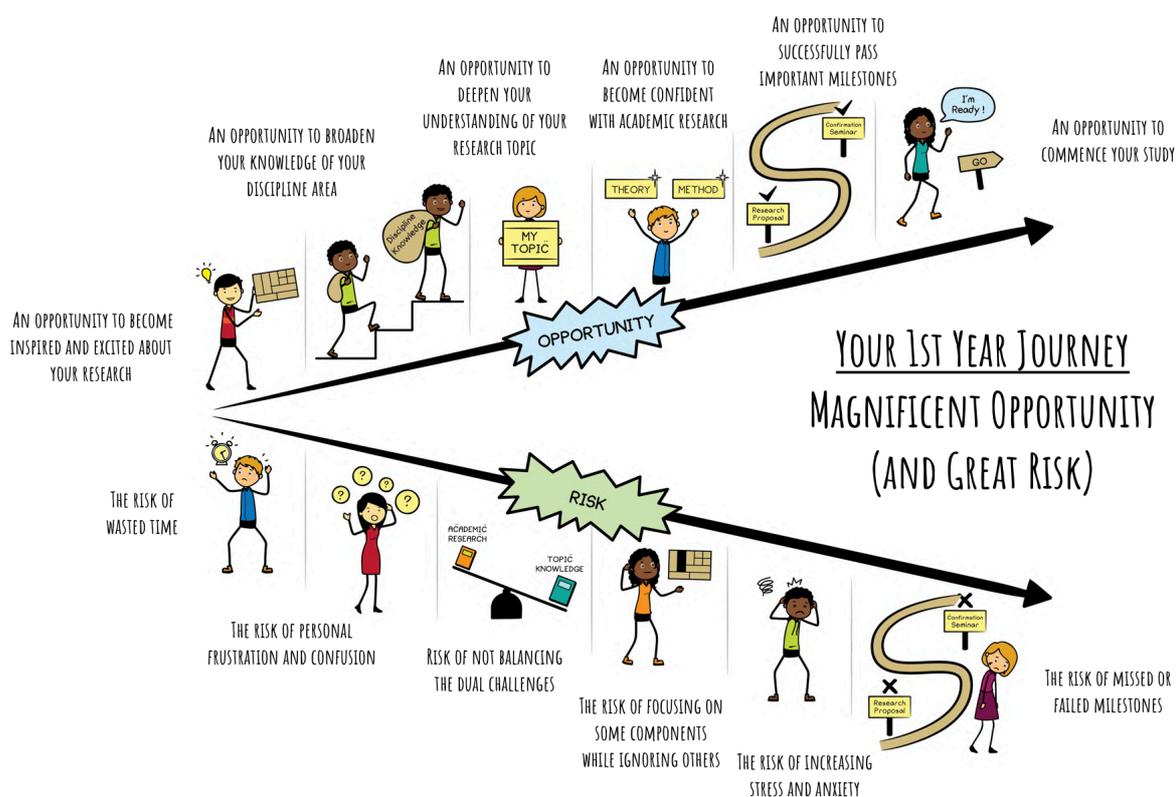
This is the first chapter of *Making a Positive Start to Your PhD or Professional Doctorate*. Read the full book now by clicking on your country for your local Amazon store: [USA](#), [UK](#), [Germany](#), [France](#), [Spain](#), [Italy](#), [Norway](#), [Japan](#), [India](#), [Canada](#), [Brazil](#), [Mexico](#), [Australia](#). **Research is an iterative process** involving ongoing moves back and forth between the individual components of your project to improve them and also to connect them together to form a coherent whole. Another reason why the research process is iterative is because decisions in the components of your project are often interdependent - what you do in one area will influence or impact upon what you do in another area. As you begin the iterative research process as a novice, you'll have to continuously move back and forth between the evolving parts of your project to improve your understanding of them. This is akin to continuously juggling the moving parts of your project as they evolve as well as figuring how they fit together.



First Year Opportunities & Risks

The inherent complexity arising from the iterative nature of the research process and fact that you must tackle the dual challenges simultaneously creates a number of risks. However, tackling these first year challenges also involves a number of great opportunities. While a year might seem like a long time, by the second year you'll probably realise just how quickly your first year flew by! It's therefore crucial that you use your first year to embrace opportunities and avoid risks, including the risk of wasted time.

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Your first year involves a number of magnificent opportunities

- An opportunity to become **inspired and excited** about academic research
- An opportunity to **broaden your knowledge** of your discipline or area of research
- An opportunity to **deepen your understanding** of your research topic
- An opportunity to **become confident with academic research**
- An opportunity to **successfully pass important milestones**
- An opportunity to **commence your study**

But there is also great risk in the first year

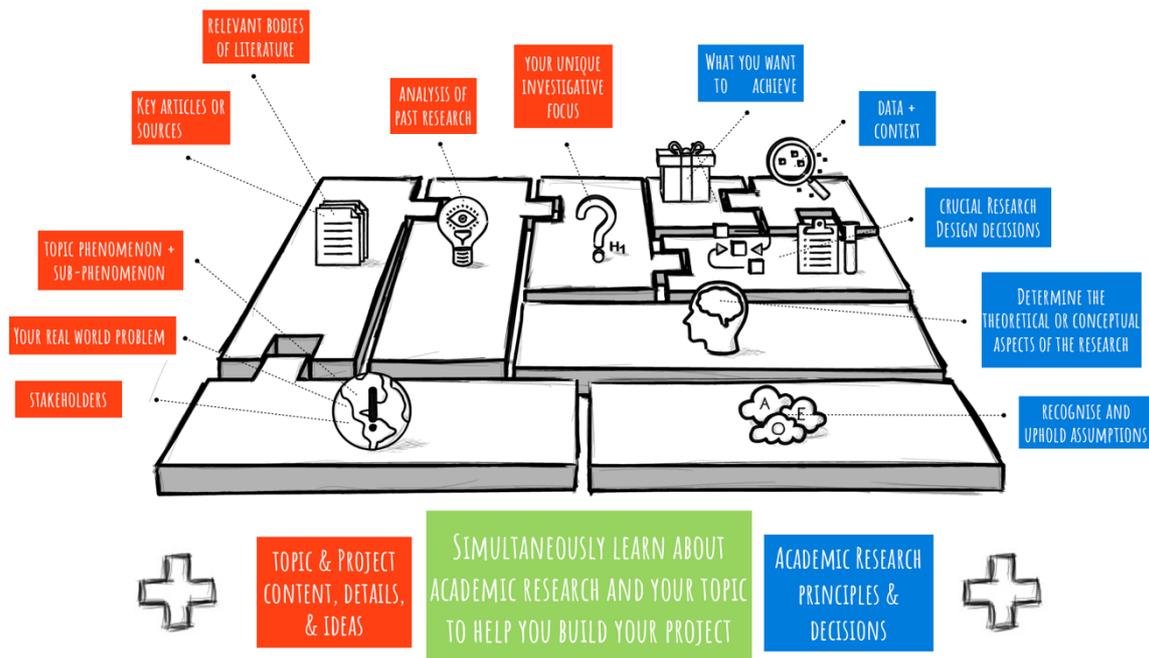
- The risk of **wasted time**
- The risk of personal **frustration and confusion**
- The risk of **not balancing** the dual challenges
- The risk of **focusing on some components while ignoring others**
- The risk of increasing **stress and anxiety**
- The risk of **missed or failed milestones**

These opportunities and risks are essentially two sides of the same coin. Obviously, you would prefer to be inspired and excited by your research, to deepen your knowledge of your topic and broaden your understanding of your discipline, and to confidently prepare for and successfully pass first year milestones so that you can progress to your next year. You would prefer *not* to waste time, not to have gaps in your knowledge of academic research or your topic, not to become frustrated or confused, not to feel anxious or experience stress, and you certainly want to avoid missing or even failing milestones as these prevent you from continuing your doctoral journey.

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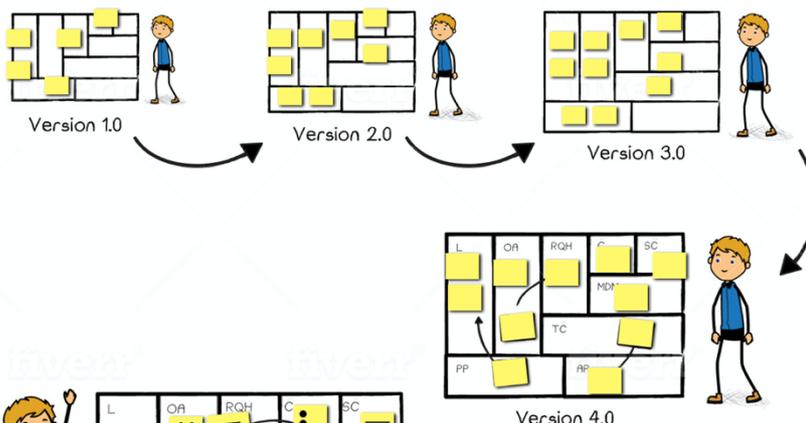
Simultaneously Learn About Academic Research And Your Topic (To Build Your Project)

First of all, the research design canvas brings together key decisions involved in designing academic research with your own unique project details, phenomena, and ideas. By placing content about research decisions, and topic and project specific details, alongside each other, you'll be able to learn about academic research and your topic at the same time. This single page visual summary will allow you to get a much quicker handle on what research is about, and appreciate how a new idea, progress, or decision in one area of the canvas will influence or impact upon content and decisions in other building blocks.



Navigate The Iterative Research Process

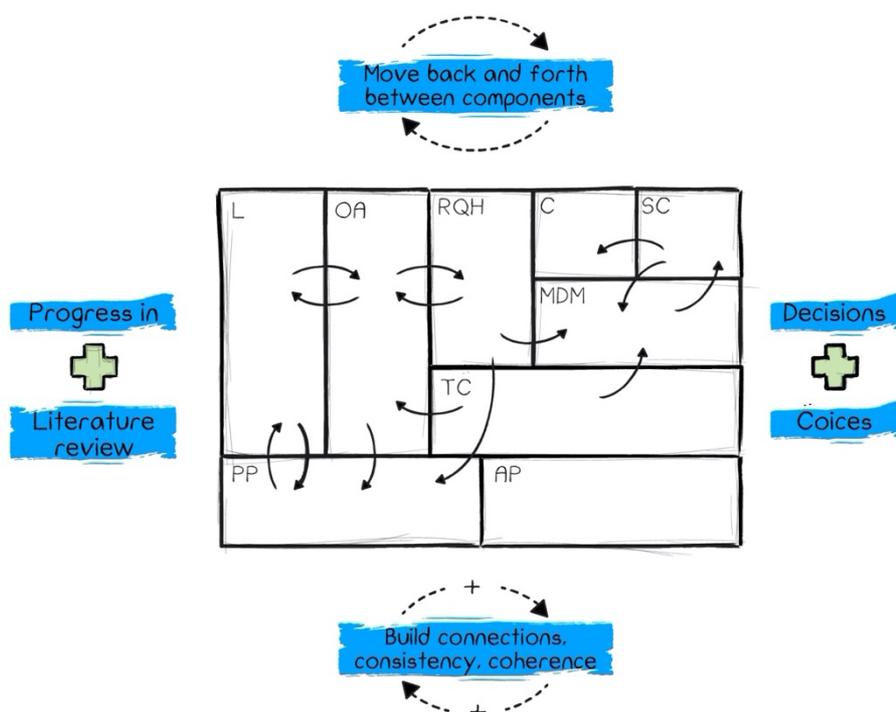
Third, the canvas gives you a permanent visual space and birds-eye view of your research, so that you can work on the individual parts to make progress in different areas but always have a big picture perspective on how they connect together. By updating the visual summary of your research on the canvas with new ideas and details, you'll gradually be able to produce a more complete picture of your project. With each iteration, you'll begin to see how progress in one area leads to clarification in another, which will gradually improve your overall understanding of your research.



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Make Progress Towards First Year Milestones

Fourth, using the canvas will help you progress towards your first year milestones by enabling you to create relevant, clear, and focused content for your research proposal, first year report, or research seminar presentation. The targeted building block questions will enable you to describe and justify key decisions in your project. The canvas will help you to connect these decisions and choices together so that you produce a consistent and coherent summary of your research project. So, you can use the canvas to guide, structure, revise, and strengthen your first year report, research proposal, or confirmation seminar presentation.



Adopting a Systematic Approach to the First Year

Finally, the canvas will help you to adopt a systematic approach to your first year journey. Faced with the dual challenges, inherent complexity, and an iterative process, a systematic approach to the first year is imperative. To help you adopt a systematic approach to your first year, you'll **complete nine exercises for your project using the canvas**:

Research Orientation

Traffic Light Self-Assessment

Identifying A Starting Point & Iterative Pathway

Planning My Iterative Journey

Creating My First Canvas

Overcoming First Year Pitfalls & Perils

An Evolving Visual Project Summary

Supporting The Literature Review

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Creating A Compelling Proposal, Report, or Presentation

You'll take the first step in making a systematic start to your first year (or in getting you back on track if you have become stuck or confused) by completing a **Research Orientation**. Your research orientation will involve familiarising yourself with key questions and choices by noting your initial thoughts, ideas, and impressions of the canvas building blocks.

The second exercise, **Traffic Light Self-Assessment**, is ideal to complete during your first week, month, or semester, to identify aspects of research you are familiar or comfortable with, to acknowledge new terminology or decisions you hadn't thought about, and to note down any feelings or questions. This exercise is equally useful to complete at almost any stage of your journey - when you want to determine where you are at, to consolidate your progress, and to plot the next steps of your journey.

Identifying A Starting Point & Iterative Pathway is important regardless of whether you are in the early stages of your first year or much further ahead because this will help you determine (or remind you of) the initial motivation for your research and what you originally hoped to contribute. Identifying your starting point is crucial because it may influence what steps you take next, and made shape the overall direction of your project and nature of your research.

Planning My Iterative Journey will show you how to use a Monthly Planner tool to organise your time and structure your learning around key tasks or questions. You can plan your work on individual building blocks or key connections between them, so that you are conscious of what resources you are using, what activities you are involved in, and how you are using time, which should help you to build positive working habits. As you progress through your first year and beyond, you'll be able to visualise the progress you have made in improving your understanding in various areas.

Creating My First Canvas will produce a complete summary of your project to date, with key decisions in relation to fundamental components of academic research, progress made in your literature review, framing and justification for your project, and tentative or more definite choices about methods and data to be used. This is especially useful for identifying key ideas and information from work-in-progress chapters, documents, and writing, and bringing them together in a single space to improve the connections between various components.

Another important part of ensuring that you have a positive first year experience is acknowledging challenges and possible dangers associated with the different parts of your project. **Overcoming First Year Pitfalls and Perils** enables you to adopt a proactive approach to recognising stumbling blocks that you might encounter in relation to various parts of your project. These are particularly important to identify and avoid when preparing your proposal report, or presentation, or even when you are at the write up stage and preparing for your viva.

In the final chapter you'll complete three further exercises to help you make further progress towards your first year milestone(s) by strengthening your proposal, report, or presentation. First, you'll learn how to use the canvas as a personalised and dynamic learning artefact, which will enable you to create **An Evolving Visual Project Summary**. Second, you'll learn how to use the canvas for the purpose of **Supporting The Literature Review**, so that you complete a focused search for and analysis of past research, which will enable you to write clearly about existing literature in relation to your project. Third, you'll learn how to use the canvas as a coherence building and storyline crafting tool

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for **Creating A Compelling Proposal, Report, or Presentation**.

OK, now let's consider the nine canvas building blocks in chapter 2...

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