SOMEDAY THIS PAIN WILL BE USEFUL TO YOU[1]
Embarking on a research project

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"Too many Spanish students do not know how to construct an argument, how to write, how to give public presentations or analyse data. […] They don't know […] how to do good work, or carry out research using their own data and reach original conclusions. Even the best students have a poor command of English and minimal self-drive when it comes to the learning process."

J. Fernández-Villaverde and L. Garicano, "Educación: cambiarlo todo para que todo siga igual", *El País*, 7th July 2013

"A research topic is not something which should be asked of others – the same goes for a bibliography – rather, it should be chosen personally."

Gonzalo M. Borrás Gualis, *Cómo y qué investigar en historia del arte*, 2001

"[…] someone who believed in the University and Academia as a place for passing on the world of the soul, understood as humanity's true heritage, a space of freedom and continuing education."
J. Vallcorba, "La auténtica sabiduría", *El País*, 19th September 2013

This chapter aspires to help Master's and PhD students of Fine Arts and Design when the time comes for them to write their own research project. It is aimed at somebody who generally uses their artistic experience as a starting point, and who is embarking on this process in which their research will broaden their own field of action. This is achieved by means of reflection, acquiring further knowledge of the professional context, rigorous documentation of their activity, searching for the right tools to deal with any questions that may come up, and the need to find a way to communicate this whole process. The idea is that, subsequently, this information and experience be made available and accessible to other researchers working in that field. The research project will have a visual component, given that the student must make the most of their own professional resources, both when looking for sources of information and when analysing these sources, as well as the subsequent presentation of their own conclusions.

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[1] I have borrowed this quotation from Ovid, which also lends its title to a novel by Cameron, Peter: *Someday this pain will be useful to you*, Frances Foster Books, United States, 2007.

Choosing the topic

Beginning a research project is the time to think big, to create a project which is "as yet unwritten, that sidesteps all the mistakes and imperfections to which we all know we are condemned"[2]. The proposal must be ambitious, because it will only be achievable if there is genuine intellectual curiosity and a profound passion for knowledge, and also because, from the outset, it must endeavour to seek out a gap within the general landscape of artistic research. The search for this as-yet-unexplored gap does require us to do some groundwork, in which we revise, in detail, everything that is known about the topic that concerns us, to see if it is still possible to put forward new questions based on what is already known. Only then should we embark on the research itself, looking for the new responses that our critical spirit deems necessary and possible.

The initial aim must follow common sense: the project has to be possible within a given timeframe, using the intellectual and material resources that we have. Bearing this in mind helps us dismiss, from the very beginning, those ideas which are too vague, or those which would force us to wander into vast and unknown fields of knowledge, demanding we spend an excessive amount of time in just catching up. We have to take advantage of the knowledge we already have and the research that already exists, to find a clearer path right into the field that we are interested in studying.

The current state of affairs

This is an initial sounding-out of the space within which we shall operate. The research will begin with as much reading as possible, to systematically go over what is already known about the topic. Only then can the researcher know how to contribute to and expand on this knowledge. José Alcina Franch, when explaining work methods for how to write doctoral theses in Humanities and Social Sciences, notes: "It is worth us posing the question of how best to draw up what we could call the "ideal bibliography" of a topic"[3]. This immersing oneself in the current state of affairs

> requires a bibliographical framework which […] identifies the theoretical and methodological guidelines to help build upon the project's original reasoning, and which will therefore be indebted to the contributions of other contemporary or past writers[4].

University libraries and those in museums and public art centres will be our first port of call. We will trawl through them using a short list of keywords, jotted down beforehand whilst considering a wide range of questions about the topic at hand. The books we find will open up new horizons, giving us clues to find other useful reading material. "Every book in the ideal library echoes another book"[5]. This is an important way of building up an initial working bibliography, which will grow and fill out as the project goes on.

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[2] MANGUEL, Alberto, "La biblioteca como imaginación", *Bibliotecas*, Gobierno de Navarra, 2011, p. 86.
[3] ALCINA FRANCH, José, *Aprender a investigar. Métodos de trabajo para la redacción de tesis doctorales (Humanidades y Ciencias Sociales)*, Madrid, Compañía Literaria, 1994, p. 177.
[4] ALCINA... *op. cit*, p. 176.
[5] MANGUEL, A., "La biblioteca ideal", *Bibliotecas... op. cit*., p. 13.

This trawling ought to accompany, tirelessly, the progress of the project itself: trying out new keywords which begin to whittle down, more and more accurately, the range of issues which we consider relevant to us. This is a subjective selection, but it is based on a critical evaluation of the sources we are gathering.

> Within the bibliography of a topic, taking a few specific studies as a starting point, you can come across a good number of others […] If we apply that method along with a systematic search in bibliographical catalogues, and a sprinkling of good luck, we can reach optimum levels: 80% of the 'real' bibliography on a topic is an excellent percentage[6].

To find material in specialised art magazines or journals, Juan Antonio Ramírez recommends looking into

> some catalogues of articles with comprehensive indexes, sorted by name and by topic, which are highly useful for most research projects. I refer to periodicals, like Art Index, RILA, or […] BIHA. The latter two periodicals have abstracts of the articles in English and French. All important libraries keep every issue of these publications[7].

Once we have located the articles which might interest us, we have to search for them to be able to read them in their entirety – the abstract alone does not contain enough information to move forward in a research project. Similarly, if starting a thesis, it is necessary to carry out a revision of the doctoral theses and Master's dissertations available in university libraries, and the indexes thereof. This way, we can detect those which study aspects related to our research topic, and they might help us with further data, methodology, and bibliography.

Due to current electronic media and their management of digital resources, it is easy to feel overwhelmed by the amount of information at our fingertips. We should therefore also place ourselves a limit, and Antonio Bonet Correa's advice is highly pertinent:

> One should always aspire to as much information as possible. Even so, there is a limit, to know when to stop. Excessive reading ends up being repetitive and pointless. Realising where this line is, i.e. that which separates a lack of data from an overload, is a sign of the researcher's intellectual maturity[8].

We have to strike a balance between taking on a wide range of information for our project, and being able to study the material carefully, and in depth.

Organising the material

It is necessary to read all of the information gathered in this process, and not just summarise the content that we want to go over for our project – we must also evaluate, critically, the new

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[6] ALCINA… *op. cit*, p. 179.

[7] RAMÍREZ, Juan Antonio, *Cómo escribir sobre arte y arquitectura*, Barcelona, Ediciones del Serbal, 2005, third edition, p. 23.

[8] RAMÍREZ… *op. cit*., p. 25.

viewpoints we come across, regarding the topic in question. The first time should be a quick skim-reading, trawling through the books' indexes and article abstracts to find what we are looking for. This task is a quick way to get hold of a great deal of useful data and ideas. What is the best way to keep them in order? Traditionally, students were recommended to make small paper file-cards of everything they read, but now they can be made on a laptop, which can be used in the library. These bibliographical cards gather together the ideas and data that interest us from the selected bibliography, and they are organised by the researcher in such a way that makes them manageable when it comes to reorganising all of their content into a new composition, i.e. an original text. We can make new folders and documents on our computers, giving them carefully-chosen titles. When we come to work on that material at a later date, we will do so using these titles as a starting point.

Each book's file-card must always have the bibliographical reference with the author's surname, the year of publication, and the page number which contains the information of interest to us. There are several possibilities when it comes to gathering the information itself:

a) Make a *direct quotation* of the author's words, copied inside quotation marks.
b) Quote the author's words, but abridging the text, to skip the parts which are not of interest to us. We will indicate where the text has been cut by using an ellipsis between brackets […]. It will also occasionally be necessary to include some words of our own within these brackets, so as to not interrupt the meaning of the *abridged text*.
c) Write an edited *summary* of the content *in our own words* when the original text is very dense yet contains some ideas which we want to retain.

The file-cards will have a title which includes a few keywords. It is advisable to fill out these file-cards with our own critical commentary, noting why this reading has been useful to us. We can also include useful details, such as the library where found the book and its catalogue number.

At the same time as making these file-cards, it is essential to also keep an alphabetically-ordered bibliography, including the details of every book used. This is the beginning of our final project's completed bibliography, and it brings together the information in the basic bibliographical reference information that has been noted on the file-cards.

Other materials

In an art-based research project, the sources used cannot exclusively be books: the documentation must also include recognition of the original artworks, whatever their format, as well as the studying of other sources like photos, films, videos, recorded interviews, documentation from exhibitions in galleries and museums, music, or maps. Press, radio and television archives can also be a good place to obtain valuable information. Therefore, the researcher has to find their own ways of selecting, identifying and classifying their material, which will be largely visual and digital. "The research habits of learning to select, record and use references are as important as the content itself"[9].

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[9] GRAY, Carole, and MALINS, Julian, *Visualizing Research. A guide to the research process in Art and Design*, Ashgate Publishing Limited, Hants, England, 2004. p. 36.

It must be remembered that the basic rules for citing works of art and design are: name of the creator, title of the work or a brief description, date, materials, measurements, location (public or private collection, and the city where it is currently located). If the researcher's own experiences as an artist are to form part of the research project, it is also necessary to document them with high quality material.

Carole Gray and Julian Malins recommend a series of useful strategies for organising the studying process:

1. *Create your own coding system using colours or simple geometric forms.* Each colour would identify one of the key ideas. It is worth setting aside a physical space for the non-digital material; this makes it easier to add new elements to your collection of data.

2. *Keep a diary.* It does not have to be in book form, nor is it necessary to work on it every day. It could be a blog or a website, which gathers together your written, visual and audio information together. This is really useful because it keeps, in one place, the documentation from our work process, and it can also include further background information, like a visual collection of works by other authors. It is important for that diary to include what we think about all that material, why we have selected it, how we plan to use it, and even why we have chosen to dismiss it, if we eventually get rid of it at a later stage in the project. Doubts and mistakes, and breakthroughs, can be cause for reflection and learning. The diary is an intimate retreat, for sincere self-reflection[10].

3. *Write a glossary* of the main concepts we have used. This becomes a small database that marks out the territory we've studied and makes it clearer. It can include these terms' dictionary definitions, citing examples of how they are used in the professional context and also giving examples of how we have used them in our work[11].

4. *Make databases* with the information. Organise, for example, contacts and correspondences, or saved images. It is about trying to make the data more manageable. Furthermore, "the ability to group and re-group information [are] essential processes in evaluating and analysing your research project outcomes"[12].

Jaime Munárriz proposes a range of digital tools to select and order the information found online. There are programs for creating diagrams (*Mind Maps, Outliners*); tools to help organise bibliographies (*Zotero, Wikindx*); programs to highlight keywords when browsing online (*Delicious*), etc…[13]

Processing the documentation: the initial work plan

The material that we have gathered and registered, diverse in content and format, will be the evidence upon which we base the ideas and interpretations of our research project. In order to do so, we must use it to build a coherent structure, which brings together its various different parts. But during this process, we have to think about the final summary like a horizon further on in the research process. For the moment, we must immerse ourselves in all the relevant information we have saved, and study it all together, looking for possible connections, interpretations based on

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[10] GRAY and MALINS… *op. cit.*, pp. 59-63, 87.
[11] GRAY and MALINS… *op. cit.*, p. 88.
[12] *Ibid*.
[13] MUNÁRRIZ ORTIZ, Jaime, "Investigación y tesis doctoral en Bellas Artes", pp.9-11, in: http://eprints.ucm.es/23022/

comparisons, contrasts, new ways of ordering the data, albeit incomplete at this stage. This is the time to make detailed outlines, which help us to organise and visualise the project in its entirety. We can also think using metaphors, which activate the relations and open up new paths for interpreting the information. We have to play with what we have already obtained, and imagine new possible constructions: "Research is about searching for alternatives. Being sceptical and critical are crucial research characteristics in progressing from one piece of knowledge to a better, more 'fit' version"[14].

We work using these classifying folders and file-cards, which can include bibliographical, visual and audio material. In the definitive writing-up, we will try and re-order this diverse documentation, searching for different ways for it all to complement each other. An initial work plan helps us put the relevant topics in order. We are still free to redo this plan as the project advances, adding more detail as we further comprehend the scope of our work. The final version of this plan will be the definitive index. José Alcina explains the general structure for a research project in Humanities and Social Sciences:

> The initial work plan […] should consist of three parts, unequal in length and importance, which we shall call (a) introduction; (b) development and (c) conclusion. Naturally, the second one is the longest, being the most laborious and important part. The first and final parts – which should be written, of course, after the second part – contain what we could call prerequisites, i.e. the determining factors and the summary, and reflections on having reached the project's ultimate objective, i.e. what we have learnt following the whole development process of the project[15].

It is a good idea to write the introduction when we have finished the main development of the project. At this point we know what we have managed to achieve, and that is what we present, aiming for coherence. We delimit, very clearly, the field of knowledge that we have explored, highlighting our objectives and the analytical instruments we have used to reach them. We can also present our main information sources.

The introduction may take up more than one chapter, if we include therein a writing-up of the current state of affairs, again put together at the end of the process, even if we already have previous versions. This is the time to evaluate, more clearly, where our own viewpoint fits within the general context of the art world.

Finally, the conclusions should match the objectives, indicating to what extent the initial questions, which formed part of these same objectives, have been addressed. Our work should add some kind of knowledge to what is already known, doing so in such a way that is intelligible for the wider research community. The conclusions are the place for recapping the work process and presenting the results. We can also now comment on the limitations of our study, namely that which did not ultimately fit in with our objectives and work methods. The research project obliged us to mark out a field of work, and now we can indicate other possibilities and suggestions for future research.

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[14] GRAY and MALINS… *op. cit*., p. 17.
[15] ALCINA… *op. cit*., p. 206.

I have always advised students to write a "final reflection" to be used as their conclusion […], which highlights and serves as a reminder of the fundamental aspects of the project. It should also present those reflections in which there are certain subtleties and nuances that, when compared with the previous knowledge in the field, truly constitute the project's most important achievements […][16].

Planning out the writing process helps to order key ideas into chapters. From that provisional outline, we go on to develop a rough plan for each chapter, which can be a brief summary. And we choose one of these to begin the writing. It is better to start with the one that we find most interesting out of everything we have studied; the project can grow and expand around this initial and intense core, as we try to explain it clearly and fill it out naturally. It is an effective way of prioritising certain information.

The work plan, using the outline, is a process that can be compared with the focussing of a camera lens, and it also forces us to decide what we have to leave out of the final work, given than "we must only use the relevant information in the development of our argument"[17]. This is highly important, and at times it can even be painful: we must view our own work selectively in order to construct something coherent, and some information will have to be sacrificed if it leads us astray from our current argument. We cannot be exhaustive; an overload of information in fact blurs our intentions, which is tedious and tiring for the reader. If we choose not to explore certain possibilities related with the topic at hand, we can save the information to work on at a later date, in a different project.

Writing up

It is time for the final part of the process, when the outline will have help us see a general overview of our project's topic. It will also have led us to discover a series of key ideas that we want to include in our project. Those ideas will take form in the writing up, which is a great exercise in composition, and by means of which we give our research an original form. The structuring of the ideas in the text is achieved via reflection, analysis and exploring the topic in depth. It is now, somewhat mysteriously, when we can discover new nuances and links between ideas, as we order the information and decide on the sequence in which we introduce the various different points we want to address. Writing is thinking and constructing. What we are capable of expressing on paper strengthens our thinking.

A research project mentions a lot of data and interpretations from other authors. We must manage those sources carefully, quoting them with precision. Umberto Eco identifies two fundamental kinds of quotation: "(a) a text is quoted which is then interpreted and (b) a text is quoted to support a personal interpretation"[18]. In the first case, we are using a primary source for

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[16] ALCINA... *op. cit.*, p. 207.
[17] RAMÍREZ... *op. cit.*, p. 45.
[18] ECO, Umberto, *Cómo se hace una tesis*, Barcelona, Gedisa, 1990, p. 188.

our study, and it is important to work with an authorised edition or a good critical edition. It is not good enough to quote from an anthology of texts, where there are only incomplete fragments. It is strange to quote, in this way, an author which interests us greatly in terms of our argument, because it reveals that we have not even read an edition of their work. The second kind of quotation is used to support, with some degree of authority, an idea that we have put forward in our text, or to fill out that idea[19].

In both cases the quotations will always be followed by a note that states which book or document the text has come from, and from what page in said book. The note with the bibliographical reference may either go between brackets after the quoted text (author's surname, publication year of the book, and the page number), or in a footnote, or at the end of the chapter or book. We supply this information so that our readers can verify it, go to the source material and find the exact text we have referred to, should they want to find out more information or include it when studying for another research project.

The bibliographical references of these notes are completed at the end of the work, with a bibliography with all of the cited works, written in alphabetical order of the authors' surnames. Works from the same author are ordered chronologically, with the oldest first. If there are several works from the same year, they are classified using lower-case letter: a, b, c…

The reader hopes to find new information and arguments in a text, and original conclusions. The author should not distract the reader by drawing attention to him or herself. Lillian Ross puts it bluntly and simply in this example:

> Do not, if you want to reveal that the Emperor is not wearing any clothes, write, 'I am showing that the Emperor is naked'. […] Your point of view should be implicit in the facts you present[20].

The title of the work and the titles of its chapters are crucial elements in attracting the reader. You can look for a short and punchy idea for the title, and round it off with a more informative subtitle, academically speaking. The index will grab the reader's attention and curiosity, due to the clarity of its structure and the appeal of the chapter titles. These are the first steps into the terrain that the project has explored. As Umberto Eco notes: "A good title is already a project"[21].

We should always bear in mind that we are writing for readers who expect us to be true to ourselves, and that we do our best[22]. In time, a writer finds their own voice. But at first, for the less experienced writer, a general recommendation would be to write in short sentences, aiming for clarity, moderation and brevity. Yet, at the same time, always try to be interesting: "If we can say the same thing in various different ways, why wouldn't we choose the one which is the most persuasive or least boring for the ideal reader?"[23]

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[19] ECO… *op. cit.*, pp. 190-191.
[20] ROSS, Lillian, *Reporting*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1981, pp. 3-4.
[21] ECO… *op. cit.*, p. 138.
[22] ROSS, *op. cit.*, p. 7.
[23] RAMÍREZ… *op. cit.*, p. 49.