

A2

Assessing Your Research Project

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Whilst each individual college or university will have its own particular marking process and criteria, there are large areas of common ground when it comes to the assessment of research projects. We have studied an extensive set of marking guides and combined features of these to produce three fictitious examples (which we refer to here as universities A, B and C). Our purpose in doing this is to illustrate some key points about assessment. These marking guides are reproduced in Table A2.1 below.

Table A2.1: Anonymised research project marking guides

Guide A	Guide B	Guide C
Identification of the research area, aim, objectives and/or research questions [20%]	How well chosen and well justified are the research methods employed in the project? [25%]	Is the purpose of the research clear, justified and achievable? [30%]
Does the literature review inform the research? [40%]	Literature or body of knowledge has been thoroughly investigated, understood and incorporated [45%]	Technical content including use of literature and methods [30%]
Is the chosen methodology appropriate? Are valid and reliable analysis methods used? [30%]	Initiative, originality, imagination and skill in construction and execution [10%]	Evidence of the effort involved and of originality [30%]
Writing style and presentation: (English grammar, reporting style, presentation of tables, figures, equations, etc.) [10%]	Presentation of relevant and well-founded conclusions and recommendations [20%]	Implications for practice, for theory and limitations to the work [10%]

It is worth noting that we are examining general principles, not specifics, since these would vary with the nature of your programme of study. A very sensible next step would be to find and read the specific equivalent from the course handbook of the programme that you are studying.

Of course, what interests you as a student is the mark that you will eventually obtain for your research project, and how that mark is constructed. The primary concern of those marking your research project is ensuring fairness and consistency in the allocation of marks. Consider for a moment a cohort of 100 students, each working on a research project in their final year of study. Naturally, the 100 projects will vary in terms of topics, methods, types of data, etc. From the university's perspective, marking 100 research projects is qualitatively different from marking 100 exam scripts, because of the inherent variations from one project to the next. To deal with this, most universities involve multiple markers to ensure consistency. First, your research project will likely be marked by your supervisor. Then, typically, a second copy of your project is given to an independent second marker who forms their own view of the grade in relation both to the kinds of criteria set out in Table A2.1 and to more generic grade descriptors that set out the characteristics of an A, B or C grade piece of work (see Table A2.2). Where the marking guide sets out weightings for individual aspects of the project, each aspect would be graded individually then weightings applied to arrive at an overall grade. Once both markers have arrived at an independent assessment of the project, their written comments are compared. The second marker role is a safeguard against bias (positive or negative) from the first marker. Where there is agreement the mark is confirmed. Where the first and second markers disagree, a third marker is usually asked to offer an opinion, often with sight of the written reports from the first and second markers. This process is time consuming but helps ensure that there is a consistent standard such that all distinction or first class projects are of a comparable standard, and all fails are confirmed as deficient in relation to the grading scheme, etc. All of this occurs within the university and is then endorsed by an external and independent examiner from another university. Typically, a representative sample of all research projects are considered by the external examiners, alongside a statistical analysis of the spread of marks, standard deviation, comparison with previous years, etc. External examiners are appointed for a fixed period of 2 or 3 years and cannot fulfil the role of examiner indefinitely, to ensure that there is always a fresh perspective on the marking process.