Somewhat organised: Strategies for undergraduates

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Preface

In 2015 I (Nic) put together a few notes on how I was organising myself as a postdoc but it's abundantly clear that this is different to how an undergraduate student may organise themselves. Different priorities and responsibilities lend themselves to a different approach.

This update benefits from the insights of Gabi Picard who has massively influenced the review of these ideas with undergraduate organisation in mind.

The way I organise myself has evolved in lots of ways. I can barely make sense of my undergrad or postgrad organisation 'strategies' and I really wish I'd been taught, or at least offered guidance for these sorts of things. It's something I encourage people to think about and this document may be a starting point. Although I feel like it might have saved me time to have received some clues, it's possible that you need to hit upon and develop strategies like these for yourself. Adopt, adapt, and improve – or something like that.

Always keen to hear whether this works for you and/or what you do so please get in touch if you'd like to share.

Your electronic files

Folders

The general plan is to setup a folder/directory structure using intuitive labels so that it's obvious to anyone what's inside (still a work in progress). Useful to keep the structure as shallow as possible; that is, you don't want to have to click through too many folders to get to what you're looking for.

General Folders
In an attempt to manage stuff, start with a bunch of directories in 'My Documents' (or some syncing application: Google Drive, Dropbox, or One Drive). This is where you can keep everything (except confidential files and large data files – see below). Consider keeping everything in the following folders
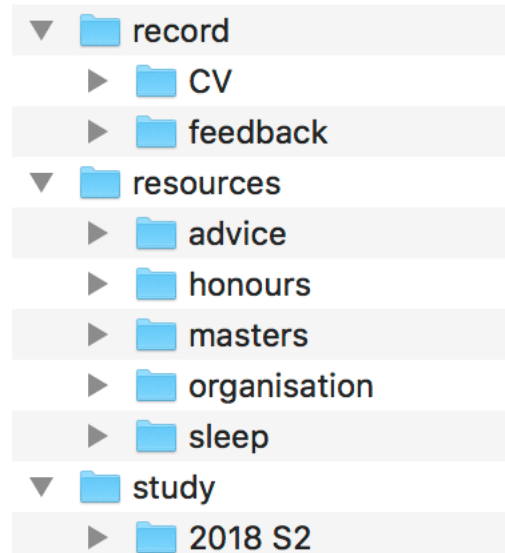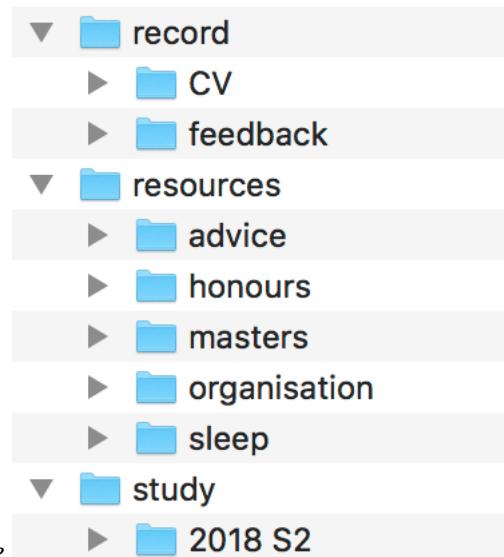

Figure 1 Example folder layout that might assist with the organisation of your electronic files

(for an overview of the layout, see

Figure 1).

record

In the 'record' folder is a collection of folders containing documents about you. A good example of this is the 'certificates_qualifications' folder, which could contain copies of first aid certificates, university qualifications, and courses you complete. A really important folder is the 'CV' folder: here you can keep a current version CV, along with old versions in an 'archive' folder; i.e., ~/record/CV/archive/.

Another useful folder is 'feedback': a folder to keep track of feedback received on your performance (good and bad!) this can be good for references, to show you have achieved at a certain level in the past. If you receive feedback in an email, it could be useful to print it to a PDF and then archive this file. Having this information to look back through can make you feel good but also be useful for applications.

resources

The 'resources' folder contains life-tools, teaching materials, hints, and tips for yourself and others that you might want to look back on or share. These fall into further sub-folders such as 'advice', 'statistics', or 'writing'.

3rd-year perspective:

The 'resources' folder includes information I've gathered that I think is useful for Uni and for life in general. This can be advice people have given me, ideas I might be collecting for Honours or Masters projects, tips on writing papers etc. At this stage, I've also found it hard to remember all the people I meet and what they exactly do, so I'd try to keep a record of who's who, in case I need to talk to them again, and would like to keep up with what they're doing.

study

In here resides a collection of unit folders, organised by year, semester, and unit. More information on these on page 4, but the basic idea is having a common set of subfolders to make information easier to file and to find. Both should save you time.

work

This is a store for things that aren't regularly needed, are returned to infrequently, or my extra-curriculars that aren't necessarily linked to Uni; e.g., English tutoring lesson notes. You might then work to have year subfolders; for example, ~/work/2015/. This might contain: 'awards' (applications), 'job_applications', 'misc', and 'workshops'. The 'work' folder is where I

tmp

This is a temporary location for documents that you want to share or work with for a short period of time (< week). This is one of my habits from using Dropbox and wanting to share files with people via links on a temporary basis; i.e., once accessed/used, they can be deleted.

Unit Folders

Within the 'study' folder consider subfolders for each session: '2018 S2' or '2017 Session 2' to be more transparent. You could also include your year of study; e.g., '2018 S2 Yr3'. Then within each of these place unit folders, with the course code and perhaps a name; e.g., 'COGS399 Cog Sci in the Real World'. See below for some potential subfolders and their use.

In addition, for each session, it's easy become a bit lost in working out what is due when across all four units. Consider creating a document lists ALL due dates for all assignments, exams, presentations etc. for the whole session for all units. This would live in a 'schedule' folder within the relevant session folder (see Figure 2, page 5).

resources

This resources folder contains information given out to students from the unit, so stuff like unit guides, assessment outlines etc.

assessments

A folder that houses subfolders for each assessment task for each unit. For example, a folder for an essay, and a separate folder for a presentation. Folders for exam preparation (mid-terms and finals) would also live under the Assessment Task folder structure. Each folder would best be sub-divided into a folder for relevant papers, then for drafts. If there are any other folders, they could be added here as the unit progresses.

tutorials

A folder for electronic copies of tutorial notes, as well as handouts from tutorials like readings or resources (these could be subfolders, see Figure 2, page 5).

textbook

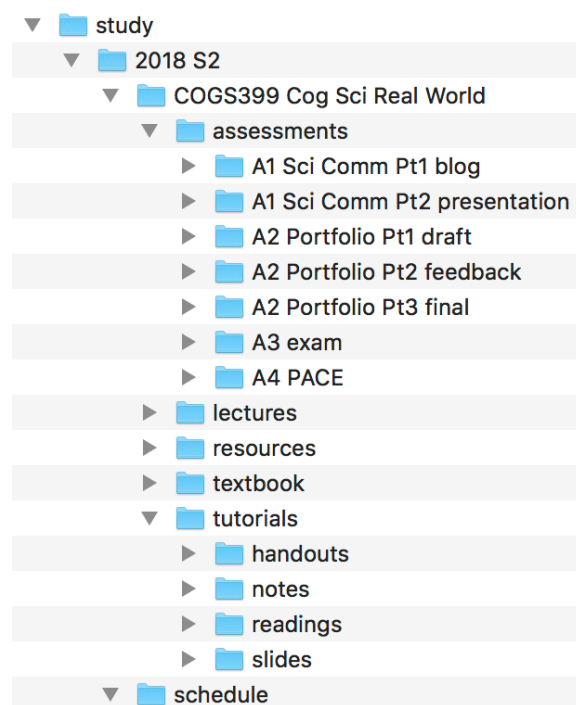Some people like to have electronic copies of textbooks. Perhaps too tight to buy them

Figure 2 Example folder structure for a unit.

and too unlucky to not have some recall the textbook the day after it's borrowed from the library. For this reason, online copy can usually be found in the library's multisearch, or if that doesn't work, they may be on PDF online (perfectly legal...) and the PDF would be saved into this subfolder

File names

Please use descriptive files names. When you got to a conference, 'conference_year' will not be an original or useful file name! This holds for sharing documents with fellow students or giving a presentation in a tutorial. If everyone's PowerPoint slides are named 'COGS399_presentation' there might be some confusion…

The working copy (of a file)

Sometimes people create multiple versions of a manuscript (e.g., 'honours thesis 1', 'honours thesis 2', 'honours thesis final', 'honours thesis final 2', 'honours thesis final FINAL' etc.). Many people do this but it often becomes confusing and difficult to find the latest versions when you go back. Here's a habit that may be useful.

Within a folder (e.g., ~/projectName/manuscript/), keep a working copy of the file with a descriptive name (e.g., projectName_manuscript.docx). When you send-off/share drafts for comments, add the sent file with a dated name to a 'drafts-feedback' folder.

So, now we've got "~/projectName/manuscript/drafts-feedback/" and in here, there's "20180717 projectName_manuscript.docx"

Then when some feedback comes in the form of a document (e.g., "20150601 projectName_manuscript_INITIALS.docx"), add that to the archive folder. Any updates or changes incorporated into the working copy of the file in the original directory (~/projectName/manuscript/).

In some circumstances, the changes will be so severe that you just replace the working copy with the feedback document, changing the name to the working copy.

Whatever your approach, it's best to have a system and stick to it. Figure out what works best for you.

Research Projects

If you're involved in research projects, the following structure might be helpful. Some of this structure was reinforced by a couple of blogs circulated by a colleague (Thanks Anina Rich): one from Tom Wallis and another from Nice R Code. As mentioned above, the idea is to keep these intuitively labelled, shallow, and also minimalist. With a consistent and intuitive structure, you (or someone else) should be able to look at old projects and efficiently find what you're looking for.

So, this would be a 'project' folder at the same level as the 'record', 'resources', and 'study' folders. Then project names as subfolders, and within each subject folder:

articles

This holds key articles files related to the project. Potentially only include the 'articles' folders for collaborative projects. For my solo projects or those requiring less interaction with others,

I keep all articles in a bibliography package; Zotero is my current choice (can't recommend getting a handle on one of these soon enough – I wish someone had mentioned these too me as an undergrad. Other well-known packages are Endnote and Mendeley). As a student, you might not be using a bibliography package (but you should be!) so this would be a handy folder for assignment resources.

data

Exactly as the name suggests: raw or summarised data files for the project. This may be within task labelled folders if the project has multiple tasks. This works nicely for behavioural tasks but larger (e.g., EEG) files may need to be in a separate location (server or external hard drive), within a 'data/year/project/' folder.

figures

Image files for graphs related to the project. This may include the source files of graphics (e.g., trial schematics) that you create, for example, in programs like Scribus (open source desktop publishing), Gimp, or Photoshop.

manuscript

An appropriately titled Word document lives in here, along with a 'drafts_feedback' folder for, surprisingly enough, drafts and feedback from co-authors.

Submission for publication could be in this folder as well.

notes

It's useful to keep an up-to-date record of what's happening and what's been done for the project in a 'notes' file. This is like an electronic lab book. Something like Excel can be really useful for this – happy to share copies of what I do (Nic), just ask.

scripts

Programming scripts sorted into folders like 'presentation', 'summary', and 'analysis'.

tables

Word and Excel documents containing tables for the manuscript.

Your time

Your work

Procrastination happens. It's useful to find your best time of day to work and stick to it. This might be the morning. Do a few good hours of non-urgent, important activities (see Stephen Covey, 7 Habits of Highly Effective People), and you'll be onto a winner.

One project at a time

Some people may be able to multi-task but others find it most productive to work through one project to completion and then start on the next. Multi-tasking may be a myth. If you're chopping and changing from task-to-task, you're putting a lot of effort into remembering where you were up to. And this is associated with a cost.

But how long is the current task going to take? Consider tracking your time with an electronic time-tracker (e.g., Toggl). This will help you get a feel for how long a task takes (e.g., an assignment) which will help you plan how this or the next semester is going to fit together.

Structure your days

As much as is possible when there's a timetable to content with that's outside of your control, it can be useful to cluster your activities (i.e., classes, meetings, and work) onto as few days as possible across the week. If you can clear a day to get your work done, keeping this generally meeting and work free, it can be a productive time.

Structure how you spend your study time

Years ago, my cousin said to me: "If you have two hours a day to do your assignments and homework, spend the first hour on the assignment and then do the homework." His thinking was that you have to get the homework (e.g., weekly tutorial exercises, readings) done on a shorter timeline, while assignments usually have more breathing space. But we can be tempted to just do the homework and call it a day, usually leaving the assignment until the last minute. This way, if you make yourself do some work on your assignment first, the homework will still get done because it's under a greater time pressure. Although it's sometimes annoying, it has worked for me so far!

Your inbox

As nice as email is, it can very easily eat away your days attempting to clear-out your inbox. It's nice to have an empty inbox, a little like a clear to-do list, but it's probably worth having a strategy. For example, setting a time to respond to emails and only turning on your email during this time. Maybe it's the final hour of each day. As a student, you might want to be more responsive than this but find out from the people you work with what their expectations are, you might be surprised.

Something else that happens with email is that when you send one, there's often a reply. Another interesting strategy is to write your emails but keep them in your drafts folder until the end for the day, sending them before you sign-off for the day. This way, you won't be bombarded with replies when you should be doing something else.

And turn off desktop or push notifications!

5-minute rule

There are books and blogs written about dealing with your email. One is the 5-minute rule: if responding is going to take more than 5-minutes, schedule time for it.

Filters

Filters can be helpful. Universities, journals, and alerts etc. will send lots of email to you. Consider setting- up filters to skip your inbox and push categories of emails to different folders (or tags in gmail), then schedule time to look at these folders. This makes clearing your inbox less onerous and filters away the less important things. More or less.

A tip

A great piece of advice worth bearing in mind is from a fellow by the name of Stephen Lewandowsky. He said: "If there are two ways to do something and one involves a learning

curve, choose that one." You could interpreted/exercise this with respect to organisation by spending time automating tasks. Programming is a good example. Sure, you can use the dropdown menus in SPSS but creating the syntax or, better still, writing the script in R, will save me time in the long run. Using the 'Styles' in Word for document formatting and table-of-contents creation or using a reference manage (e.g., Zotero, Mendeley, Endnote) are in the same category. Time spent getting on top of these things will be a good investment.

Me Update

As useful habit that allows you to reflect/take-stock and maybe even provide you with a little time to think, is to set aside some 'meupdate' time on a weekly or monthly basis. This could involve returning to some of the things below.

CV

This might as well be up-to-date. One strategy is to keep items to add in a #meupdate tag in a package called WorkFlowy (this is a dynamic to-do list application that may be helpful for all sorts of things). Alternatively, an easy-to-access document or notebook might work. On the run (i.e., you don't want it to be too effortful), make brief descriptions of things that need to be added to your CV (e.g., experience, skills, courses etc.) and aim to do this regularly.

It may also be useful to have a longer look at your CV from time to time and make sure that it contains the most relevant information. If you've been maintaining a CV since high-school, there's a chance that some of the items are no longer necessary to describing the current version of you! Using 'The working copy (of a file)' (see page 5) idea here to archive major changes is useful – you never know when you might want to take a trip down memory lane.

Advice

You'll probably have received lots of useful advice over the years but not necessarily had somewhere to collect it - try the 'record' folder (page 3). Whilst it's nice to have an archive of this, revisiting it as a reminder from time to time feels helpful.

Online profiles

Perhaps you've got a LinkedIn profile. If you don't you might want to consider setting one up as employers are known to search LinkedIn for potential employees. There may be other similar profiles as well. Maybe you're thinking about a research career – ResearchGate might be worth considering. Just like your CV, if you do choose to engage with online profiles, it's worth making sure you keep them up-to-date. So, dedicating some 'meupdate' time to management can be helpful.

LinkedIn is also a great place for finding employment opportunities, both through active searching and also through recruiters contacting you with positions available. This provides incentive to maintain a great, up-to-date profile to attract the interest of your possible future employers!

Goals/Direction/Motivations

It can be really useful to know where you're going and why – but maybe not in that order (see Simon Sinek, Find Your Why or Start With Why books, also check out his youTube videos). This isn't easy, especially as an undergrad but give it some time and see if you can make it work for you. One of the useful outcomes of having some direction is that it can be used to

make decisions about opportunities that arise. For example, there are often lots of volunteer roles you might be able to take-on as an undergrad but you have a limited amount of time and energy. How should you choose? If you've got a direction and a motivation, you could check whether it aligns with these. If you're not sure, consider asking someone who's in the position (or a similar one) that you're aiming for.

Having a 'Personal Interests' or 'Research Interests' section to your CV and reading/updating this from time to time may be a good strategy to keep on track where you'd like head.

I've also found that it can be very easy to get caught up in what everyone else is doing. You watch your friends decide on career paths, and as more options open up to you and you learn more, it can get very confusing to even remember why you decided on your degree in the first place. I've found it useful (and I don't do it nearly enough) to check in with myself, asking myself if what I'm doing now is making me happy, and if I can see myself doing it for another 40 or so years, thinking career-wise. I try to pay attention to what I like and equally what I don't like, so I can get a sense of where I would fit in terms of developing a career. For example, I know I love neuropsychology, but find some areas of social psychology aren't very exciting for me.

The 30-second Elevator Summary

Another reminder to myself: you need to be able to efficiently summarise what you're interested in and why it's important. And the time limit you've got for this is 30-seconds. This will take some practice but just might get you a job or funding!