SMART Goals

Graduate writing projects are often more complex than students' previous work. They may be longer, include work carried out across multiple phases or incorporate multiple rounds of feedback from faculty or co-authors. These projects may take from many weeks to many years to complete and may often run concurrently with other professional and writing responsibilities.

One helpful way to break down tasks associated with larger projects is to use SMART goals.

What makes a goal SMART?

SMART goals are adaptive, contextually appropriate goals customized to your project and resources. They help you to stay clear about your short- and medium-term aims and can help motivate you with continued small successes using the following framework:

Specific – Specific goals are easier to start and more likely to be completed than general ones.

Measurable – Concrete criteria (e.g., articles annotated, words written, minutes spent) support you in measuring progress toward the completion of each goal you set.

Attainable – Dividing your goal into portions that are achievable based on current progress and available time helps you to plan and pace the steps needed to attain your goals.

Relevant – Prioritizing the goals that are most important or urgent for your current project, interests, or needs lets you determine if the goal is relevant to your current motivations.

Timely – Having a time frame gives you a sense of priority and helps you to track and measure progress relative to larger goals.

What does this look like in practice?

Consider the following goal**:** *Work on my dissertation.* This goal could encompass dozens of possible tasks. How could we make this goal SMART-er?

Specific: There are so many things I could do – e.g., research, analyze, incorporate feedback, write, revise, proofread. Let's narrow my goal down to *writing part of my literature review chapter*.

Measurable: About *two pages* would be good progress at this point in the project.

Attainable: Two pages seems like a good length for a subsection of a literature review, and I have a dozen sources found already, so this feels like *something I can manage as a next step.*

Relevant: Two pages isn't a whole chapter. It feels about right for discussing previous applications of my dependent variable, though, *which was one of the things my advisor requested.* I'll start there.

Timely: My advisor asked for a draft by the end of the day Thursday, and I have class that night. So, I'd feel better *sending the draft in the afternoon.*

So, using the SMART framework, the original goal *work on my dissertation* becomes *write two pages about previous research on my dependent variable for my literature review chapter by Thursday at 3PM*. This new SMART goal immediately suggests more actionable paths to progress than the original goal.

Revising SMART goals

However, sometimes we make goals that seem SMART at the time, but we run into challenges that require us to adjust. This is a completely normal part of the process. In the example above, I might find that there is limited research on my variable, and I can only write two paragraphs about the topic. Or maybe I find that a closer reading of a source points me towards a key factor I need to consider, requiring me to collect and annotate additional articles. In those cases, as soon as I realize my original goal no longer matches all the SMART criteria, I can craft a new goal that will be SMART for the evolving situation.

Using SMART goals for larger projects

To practice using SMART goals for your larger projects, you can try creating a schedule using the following process:

>First, select one major goal for this month:

>>*Ex:* Submit revisions for publication.

>Next, list all of the individual steps you need to complete broadly, then narrowly, to meet this goal. This allows you to break each broad goal down into specific and measurable components.

>>*Broad:* Annotate articles; run new analysis; respond to co-authors

>>*Narrow (i.e.,* **Specific** *and* **Measurable**): search [specific term] in [specific database] to find [number of] articles about [specific topic Reviewer 2 felt was underdeveloped]; use secondary analysis technique on phase 1 of project to confirm results are consistent; rerun analysis of phase 3 to address co-author concern

>Then, prioritize these goals in relation to each other. Certain tasks will not be possible (i.e., **Attainable**) until other steps have first been completed. Ask yourself which tasks need to happen before others.

>>*Ex:* find articles before annotating; email co-authors before replying to reviewer comments

>Finally, create your SMART goals schedule by tying each of the steps to an anticipated completion date or deadline, based on your priorities and available time. Ask yourself

>>What tasks need to be started now to stay on track in the big picture of this major goal (i.e., of your possible tasks, what is **Relevant**)?

>>What things do you plan to accomplish each week (e.g., find and annotate 6 articles each week for two weeks for 12 total) to complete your major goal in a **Timely** manner?

SMART goals accountability

To stay on task for your larger goals, you can review your goal(s) from your SMART goals schedule each week. Great questions to ask yourself or reflect on with a colleague or writing group include *What did I achieve this week? What, if any, goals may need to move to next or future weeks? What were some challenges I faced this week? What were some successes from this week?* And *what do I need in order to move forward?*

If you would like help setting or revising SMART goals for your writing project, consultations at the Graduate Writing Center are a great place to practice. Learn more at grad.writingcenter.ttu.edu.