PART 2

Postgraduate Study Skills

Chapter 2 Essential postgraduate study skills 35
Chapter 3 Practical aspects of postgraduate study skills 66
CHAPTER 2

Essential postgraduate study skills

Stefanie C. Reissner

OVERVIEW

Critical thinking, reading and writing are the pillars of postgraduate study, managerial work and continuing professional development (CPD). While this is critical in other domains of our life, many of us find it difficult to critique teachers, scholars and other experts at university or at the workplace. In this chapter, you will learn to understand critical methods in an educational context and to apply them to your work at university and beyond. In particular, you will learn the characteristics of an argument so that you can read and write critically, which is the basis for independent thinking, the creation of knowledge and the improvement of professional and managerial practice. Moreover, you will get useful background information on how to study smartly by following a structured process for approaching tasks during your postgraduate study and other CPD measures. You will also learn why your university tutors expect certain things from you and what the rationale behind these seemingly strange expectations is. The information, activities and checklists provided in this chapter will help you to build a strong foundation for your postgraduate study, managerial work and continuing professional development.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this chapter, provided you engage with the activities, you should be able to:
• understand the qualitative difference between undergraduate and postgraduate study skills
• understand the importance of critical thinking for postgraduate study and CPD
• apply critical thinking to your studies and work
• access high-quality information for study tasks
• analyse and evaluate written and oral materials
• develop and justify original arguments
• apply strategies to improve your writing.
2.1 INTRODUCTION

If you are about to skip this chapter, thinking that you have done all of this before, stop! Yes, the content of this section will sound very familiar to you. Yes, you will have had plenty of practice (and perhaps even study skills training) while studying for your degree (e.g., a British Bachelor’s degree which corresponds to Level 6 of the European Qualifications Framework, QAA 2008). And yes, you may wonder what the point of doing it again is. Let me assure you that this chapter is not a repetition of what you may already know, even though its content may look very similar. Postgraduate study (e.g., a British Master’s degree which corresponds to Level 7 of the European Qualifications Framework, QAA 2008) and continuing professional development (CPD) differ qualitatively from undergraduate study, and in order to be successful you will need to hone the skills that you already possess and develop another, crucial skill: critical thinking. Critical thinking is a meta-skill — that is, a skill that subsumes and enhances many other skills that competent professionals possess. Metaphorically speaking, if postgraduate study and CPD is a house, critical thinking is its foundation. The application of critical thinking to other aspects of postgraduate study and CPD, such as reading and writing, are the walls of this house (see Figure 2.1 below). Your aim as a postgraduate student and smart professional should be to build a strong foundation and solid walls, and this chapter seeks to help you with that.

Figure 2.1 Critical thinking in postgraduate study and CPD

You may not be convinced about this yet, perhaps recalling your undergraduate student days in which critical thinking may have featured strongly. Indeed, critical thinking, analysis and synthesis are key skills of any business and management student (QAA 2007), but they are even more important at
Critical thinking and creativity: managing creative processes in self and others; organising thoughts, analysis, synthesis, critical appraisal. This includes the capability to identify assumptions, evaluate statements in terms of evidence, detect false logic or reasoning, identify implicit values, define terms adequately and generalise appropriately. (QAA 2002, emphasis added)

So critical thinking and appraisal as well as self-management and the organisation of thought are the official minimum requirements for postgraduate study (QAA 2002). Hence, as a postgraduate student you are expected to work at a more advanced and independent level than as an undergraduate. You will not only manage yourself and your studies more independently and professionally, but you will also gain deeper understanding of the subject matter by scrutinising any materials that you are working with through a more critical approach. In addition, by becoming a postgraduate student, you will also become a member of a community of knowledge and scholarly activity in your chosen field. You are expected to think independently and contribute to the knowledge of your field of study by engaging in research and other thought experiments (Hart 1998). You may wonder what this actually means for you as a postgraduate student, so let me try to illustrate this qualitative difference with the following example.

Imagine that you have been given an assignment asking you to analyse the human resource function in a country of your choice. Such an assignment may feature both in undergraduate and postgraduate courses, but your tutor would expect a different, more advanced approach at postgraduate level, which is summarised in Table 2.1 (overleaf).

Sounds difficult? Well, it may not be easy at first to approach such a seemingly simple task critically. With the necessary skills and some practice, however, you should be able to make good progress (Hughes 2000). This chapter will provide you with exercises, activities, tips and tricks to support your learning journey towards becoming a more critical student and competent professional. Practice is famously the first step to mastery, so we will start off with an activity.

**Activity 2.1**

*New approaches to previous student work*

If you have kept any previous assignments from your undergraduate student days, look at them again and analyse your approach in the light of what you have been reading so far. (Those of you who have not kept any assignments, please use the sample assignment ‘HRM in Russia’ provided on the companion website.) Read through the assignment and ask yourself the following questions:
1. What is the main argument of this assignment?
2. What does the reader learn about the topic under investigation?
3. What kind of sources does this assignment draw on?
4. How much detail is provided about the topic under investigation?
5. How is this assignment structured and what kind of language is used?
6. How sensible and original are the conclusions and recommendations?

I recommend you write down your answers and discuss them with a peer or in a small group, if possible. Asking such questions about a written piece of work, particularly if it is your own, is the first step to a more critical approach to your studies (Wallace and Wray, 2006). Exercises like this allow you to view your work with the eyes of a third party, so I expect this to be an eye-opening exercise for you. Just a few hints with regard to your answers to these questions:

1. If you cannot identify a main argument, there probably is none. Any assignment should have something to say and it is your task to work it out before you start writing. There is a range of techniques that can help you to identify your argument and present it in an effective manner; see Sections 2.3 and 2.4 below for details.

2. If you cannot answer the second question, then there is probably not much new or original in your assignment. Again, any assignment should have something in it that the reader can take away – and that does not have to be groundbreaking new knowledge! A well-developed argument can help you to elicit the key learning points of your assignment; see Sections 2.3 and 2.4 below for details.

3. If you have used academic journal articles, conference papers, research monographs – well done and keep up the good work! If you have relied heavily on websites and textbooks, then Section 2.3.1 will be of utmost importance to you. Postgraduate students are expected to draw on high-quality sources for their work and your reading should reflect this.

4. The fourth question really is whether you are looking at the topic under investigation in a superficial manner or whether the analysis digs deeper into what is going on. A superficial assignment will lack numbers and figures as well as specific examples to illustrate the main argument.

5. A good assignment has a clear structure that builds the main argument. It uses formal yet simple language and provides clear definitions of the key terms and issues. See also Chapter 3, Section 3.2 for the characteristics of effective writing.

6. The answer to this question will tell you a lot about the quality of your assignment and is closely linked to points 1, 2 and 4. It is not difficult to conclude that ‘organisation A needs to improve its employment practices’, but more so to specify what that improvement could look like, how it might be achieved and how much it may cost.

I do encourage you to engage with Activity 2.1 and identify any areas of the assignment that you are either particularly happy or unhappy with. If you are working with a peer or in a small group, you may want to compare your notes and discuss any discrepancies of opinion. In that way, you will find out what other ways this piece of work can be approached, which will enhance your understanding.

While Activity 2.1 provided you with an opportunity to learn about your own writing (or my early student writing if you used the sample assignment ‘HRM in Russia’), you may now want to look ahead to your postgraduate study with Activity 2.2.
CHAPTER 2: Essential Postgraduate Study Skills

Table 2.1 Undergraduate and postgraduate approaches to study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Undergraduate approach</th>
<th>Postgraduate approach</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Collecting information about the country (probably from the Internet)</td>
<td>• Collecting information about the country from more than one source and scrutinising it for quality and veracity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Using theory to understand the different aspects of the human resource function</td>
<td>• Using (and possibly integrating) different theories to understand the different aspects of the human resource function, looking at the situation from different angles and evaluating the theories for their suitability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Describing your understanding of the human resource function employment practices in the country in question</td>
<td>• Describing your understanding of the human resource function in the country with the help of theory and with a clear argument and concise language, eliciting the meaning of the situation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Identifying good and bad practice, possibly followed by some basic recommendations</td>
<td>• Identifying and evaluating practices, taking the country’s wider context into account, possibly offering some thoughtful recommendations with consideration to the consequences</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Activity 2.2**

**Reflect on and Analyse Postgraduate Studying**

Now consider alternative approaches to tackling the assignment that you have analysed in Activity 2.1. Again, it will be beneficial if you do this with a peer or in a small group and if you make a note of your thoughts and ideas. Here are some questions that may help you with this and there are no answers apart from the ones that you come up with:

- What could be done differently?
- What other points could be raised?
- What other sources could the assignment draw upon and of what quality are they? (See also Section 2.3.1 below.)
- What level of detail could be added to the text?
- How could the assignment be structured differently?
- What other conclusions could be added?

This exercise will allow you to step back from your own knowledge and understanding, to question it and to see it differently. It will also tell you much about your approach and your way of working and will highlight any areas for development. By knowing both your strengths and weaknesses, you can target any intervention to where it is needed most, thus helping you to study more...
effectively and efficiently and to enhance your capacity as a competent professional.

The remainder of this chapter will elaborate on many of the issues raised so far. In more detail, Section 2.2 will examine critical methods with a focus on critical thinking in an educational and work context. It will provide questions commonly used to scrutinise written and oral materials in order to understand the argument comprehensively. Section 2.3 will apply critical thinking skills to reading, including the analysis of texts such as research reports and other academic literature. It will also distinguish between different sources of literature and outline how to access them. Section 2.4 will apply critical thinking skills to writing with a focus on the development and justification of original arguments. The activities and exercises will help you to hone your current study skills for postgraduate study and beyond, and checklists will help you along the way.

2.2 Being Critical: The Mother of Postgraduate Skills

Before delving into critical methods in more detail, I would like you to consider the following (somewhat fictional) excerpt from an advert of a promise of extra income. Ask yourself if you would respond to it or what might prevent you from responding:

Is your monthly income really enough? Supplement your income by £250–£500+ immediately and develop a passive stream of income of £2,000+ every month with no boss, full control over the hours you work, no targets, no fuss and no hassle. We are looking for motivated people aged 18 or over who want freedom and control of their life to take up this fantastic opportunity.

So, what would your reaction be? Would you respond straightaway? My guess is that you would not. You would probably either discard this advert straightaway, thinking that this offer sounds too good to be true or you would scrutinise it using questions like ‘What kind of work is this?’, ‘What is the risk?’, ‘Who is behind this?’, ‘What is in it for them?’, ‘Is this legal?’, ‘Where is the catch?’, ‘Do I have to put funds into this?’ to find out more about it. So, if you would be cautious, you already have a critical mindset. Your experiences in life will have taught you that a healthy level of scepticism will protect you from people who want to take advantage of you. Unfortunately, this will not be enough to turn you into a critical student and professional. It does not come naturally to most of us to critique our teachers and other people whom we consider to be experts (Cottrell 2005), probably because most of us were brought up to respect (meaning: not to question) them. After all, academic authors mean to be honest and present truthful accounts (Wallace and Wray 2006) and many of them are experts in their field, knowing more about a particular subject than most other people. Moreover, academic sources usually have to pass stringent quality tests by other academics in a process called ‘peer review’ before they are published.
(UNC University Libraries 2007). However, despite the authors’ expert status and stringent quality checks, educational and academic materials may contain untrue assumptions, flawed reasoning and conflicting information, and may even use evidence selectively to highlight a particular point (Wallace and Wray 2006). Hence, we ought to be equally sceptical in educational and academic matters as we are in other domains of our life, asking more critical questions such as:

- Why?
- To what extent?
- For what reasons?
- How do we know this is true?
- Is there sufficient evidence for the claim?
- Does the evidence add up?
- What do we not know about the topic?
- Is there any bias?
- How reliable is the source of evidence?
- What are the authors’ credentials?
- Is there a hidden agenda?
- What are the implications?

This means that as a postgraduate student you are not only allowed but expected to think independently, which includes scrutinising the materials that you are exposed to or working with, such as lecture and seminar content, case studies, papers and presentations – both other people’s and your own (Cottrell 2005). This also includes asking critical questions about the content of the material, the key terms and definitions, the underlying assumptions, the methods used to gather information, the process and approach of writing as well as the credentials of the author(s). It means identifying the key elements of the argument, the key learning points, benefits and advantages, but also omissions, pitfalls and disadvantages. Hence, a critical mindset does not mean taking materials at face value and accepting every point that is being made. A critical mindset does not mean either rejecting everything that you are presented with or being negative, bitter and disgruntled. It means being open to accept the valuable points the author makes while being sceptical about content and approach; it is about a reasonable balance between ‘uncritical acceptance’ and ‘overcritical rejection’ (Wallace and Wray 2006, p5), which Paul and Elder (2002) describe as ‘fair-mindedness’. ‘What a task,’ you may think. ‘How am I ever going to finish reading or writing anything at all?’ Yes, it will take you some time to get into the habit of thinking critically, scrutinising and questioning what you are hearing, reading or writing, but it will be worth it for your postgraduate studies and your further professional development as the quality of your work will improve considerably. The following activity will help you to apply critical thinking to a short text, using the critical questions above.
Let us delve more deeply into critical methods now, beginning with critical thinking. The term ‘critical thinking’ has become a buzzword in higher education over recent years, but has actually been around for more than a century (Fisher 2001). It is sometimes seen as one of the pillars of the educational trinity of knowledge, intelligence and thinking (De Bono 1976). Critical thinking is a way of interacting with others (Cottrell 2005) and is fruitfully defined as ‘that mode of thinking – about any subject, content or problem – in which the thinker improves the quality of his or her thinking by skilfully taking charge of the structures inherent in thinking and imposing intellectual standards upon them’ (Paul et al 1993, quoted in Fisher 2001, pp4–5). Hence, critical thinking is a very deep, reflective and independent form of thinking that seeks to understand the assumptions and thought structures behind a statement or argument and that integrates the following three skills (Hughes 2000):

- **interpretive skills** to identify the **meaning** of a statement
- **verification skills** to determine the **veracity** of a statement
- **reasoning skills** to analyse the **inferences** made in an argument.

Through the integration of these skills, critical thinking leads to informed and thoughtful decision-making by constantly challenging the status quo; this can even modify practice (Brookfield 1987), for instance in management. Critical thinking will give you a more independent mind that is able to appreciate both sides of an argument (Wallace and Wray 2006) and that can engage in thought experiments to create new knowledge. Critical thinking will also help you to approach tasks in your studies or at work in a more strategic fashion (Moon 2007). As such, it permeates many other fundamental skills that you will need as a postgraduate student and competent professional, such as advanced reading, writing, evaluation and analysis. The process of critical thinking contains the following elements (drawing on Brookfield 1987, Fisher 2001, Cottrell 2005, and Wallace and Wray 2006):

- identifying and challenging assumptions, arguments and conclusions
- evaluating evidence that supports any points made and identifying any unsupported claims
- weighing up opposing arguments and taking supporting evidence into account
- reading between the lines and understanding deeper meaning

**ACTIVITY 2.3**

**CRITICAL DISCUSSION OF ASSIGNMENT**

Print a copy of the sample assignment ‘Is knowledge the only source of competitive advantage today’ provided on the companion website and approach it critically using the questions listed above. You may find it useful to discuss your findings with a peer or in a small group.
• recognising any flaws, hidden agendas or mismatch with other authors’ arguments
• taking context, purpose and values into account
• matching authors’ claims with your own knowledge and experiences
• reflecting on issues in a structured, logical and insightful way
• drawing conclusions based on evidence and reasonable assumptions
• clarifying expressions, claims and meanings
• producing logical arguments
• presenting a viewpoint clearly and with good reasoning
• exploring alternatives in a creative and reflective manner.

So, what does this mean for postgraduate study and continuing professional development? It means being more sceptical about what you hear, read, say and write in the classroom, in independent study and in the workplace. It means stepping back from taken-for-granted knowledge, questioning it and reflecting on it, both in your own work and in the work of others. While it may not come naturally to you to be critical in such contexts, you will be able to hone your critical skills and apply them if you follow the guidance in this chapter and follow up other, specialist resources. Critical thinking will emancipate you (Paul and Elder 2002) as a learner and professional and it will improve your work for postgraduate study and other continuing professional development.

2.3 Applying Critical Thinking (1): Reading

Reading is an integral part of postgraduate study, but you will not have time to read everything that sounds interesting or relevant to a particular task or project. Instead, you will need to select appropriate materials for your study, access them strategically through your library, read them critically and evaluate them in the light of any claims made and any evidence presented. This process requires some thought and preparation every time you approach a new task, but it will not be a waste of time. Thorough preparation is famously half the work, and reading for academic purposes is no different. I propose the following six-stage process (see Figure 2.2), through which the remainder of this section will guide you.

Critical reading can be time-consuming (Cottrell 2003), particularly if you do not have the necessary knowledge and skills to do it effectively and efficiently. The following headings will guide you through this process, giving you background knowledge and introducing you to smart strategies for critical reading as well as the evaluation and analysis of texts.

2.3.1 Knowing Why You Read

Before opening a book or accessing any other written source, you need to establish your motivation for wanting to read that item. Do you want to find out
more about a new subject area? Are you more interested in methods and approaches? Or are you searching for the practical application of knowledge? So the very first question should be: ‘What do I want to get out of reading this item?’. Then bear this question in mind when reading (Cameron 2007). Knowing in what way a text will inform your understanding will determine what sources will be most appropriate, and it is useful to distinguish between the following types of literature:

- **reference literature**, which provides definitions and explanations of terms and concepts
- **theoretical literature**, which develops and reports theoretical advances in a field
- **research literature**, which reports original research to deepen the understanding of a topic of interest or to test theory
- **review literature**, which reviews current theory and research in a field of study
- **methodological literature**, which suggests advances in methods of study
- **practice literature**, which focuses on practical aspects (for example of managerial work)
- **policy literature**, which reviews policies and suggest amendments.

So, if you seek to learn more about a topic, the theoretical, research and review...
literature is likely to provide you with the necessary information. If you seek to learn more about current practice in your field of study, the practice or perhaps policy literature will be more appropriate. If you seek to learn more about approaches to gathering and analysing data, the methodological literature will be the place to start. Hence, knowing your motivation for reading will help you to search specifically for a particular type of literature. It is smart to target your reading and read different types of literature for different purposes and at different stages of your studies. For instance, an assignment in the early stages of your studies may draw on a limited number of types, while your project or dissertation is likely to draw on most if not all of them. The difficulty is that not all sources belong in only one category; a good research paper, for example, will contain sections on theory, methods and original data. A better understanding of different types of literature may help you to judge what category an item may belong in and which elements of the item will be most suitable for your purposes.

2.3.2 UNDERSTANDING DIFFERENT SOURCES OF LITERATURE

You will need to know your literature to make most of your literature search for your postgraduate studies and beyond. You may have worked with many sources of literature before, but what you know from your undergraduate student days or work experience does not necessarily apply to postgraduate study and continuing professional development. Table 2.2 below outlines the nine most common sources of literature which you will draw on for your studies to find out what is already known in a subject area. Not all sources are of appropriate quality, however, which means that you will have to make an informed judgement about which materials to select for your work.

You need to be aware of the limitations of free materials available on the Internet, which can be accessed through search engines such as Google. As a postgraduate student, you are expected to access high-quality sources that are recognised by the experts in your field of study because they have been published following peer review, which is a rigorous quality assessment by fellow academics (UNC University Libraries 2007). These are usually sources that draw on original research and the content of which can be trusted; examples include reference materials, journal articles and specialist books. You should always be able to identify the author and/or editor of a source as well as their affiliation, and ensure that the information is still up-to-date (Fink 2005); this is a great challenge for web-based materials that do not come from a university’s or other trustworthy organisation’s website (Wallace and Wray 2006). You also need to bear in mind that all sources will, to a greater or lesser extent, reflect the personal choice of the author(s) or editor(s) of what is important enough to be included in that particular item. Nothing that you will read in the social sciences will represent a universal truth or a complete account, and as a postgraduate student you will be encouraged to look for different viewpoints and alternative interpretations and juxtapose them. Your critical thinking skills will help you in this process.

The ability to develop and share knowledge within your community of scholars or practitioners depends on organised collections of knowledge – a library. Hence,
### Table 2.2 Common sources of literature, their use and quality

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Definition and examples</th>
<th>Use in postgraduate study</th>
<th>Quality of information</th>
<th>Accessibility</th>
<th>Category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reference materials</td>
<td>Dictionaries, encyclopaedias.</td>
<td>Good starting point to learn more about a new subject area and its language.</td>
<td>Print and licensed online versions are usually very reliable. Beware of free web-based dictionaries and encyclopaedias (such as Wikipedia) as entries can contain false information.</td>
<td>Reference section of your library or online portals. Also available for purchase in hard copy or on CD/DVD.</td>
<td>Reference literature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skills textbooks</td>
<td>Focus on building transferable skills, usually practical and process-oriented.</td>
<td>Valuable resource for any student and professional to complement their studies and work.</td>
<td>Contents can usually be trusted, but level of detail may vary considerably.</td>
<td>Hardcopies in library, increasingly also as e-books.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject textbooks</td>
<td>Introduction to a field of study through summary of prevalent knowledge in that field.</td>
<td>Useful support for course or module, good starting point for research because of detailed reference list. Not suitable for assignments or projects.</td>
<td>Contents can usually be trusted but is only an abbreviated interpretation of knowledge. Level of detail may vary.</td>
<td>Hardcopies in library, increasingly also available as e-books.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal articles</td>
<td>Academic papers reporting on current research and academic debates.</td>
<td>Peer-reviewed journal articles should be the staple diet of your reading. Special issues offer debates on a particular topic.</td>
<td>Up-to-date information published after scrutiny by review panels.</td>
<td>Hardcopies in library, increasingly also available as e-journals.</td>
<td>Theoretical, research, review, methodological or practice literature</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 2.2 continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Readers</th>
<th>Edited book containing research reports about a particular subject area.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research monographs</td>
<td>Report on original research with great detail about results and interpretations provided.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conference and working papers</td>
<td>Report on original research at a preliminary stage of development.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government and other reports</td>
<td>Report on policy or other relevant issues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>Websites, often commercial. Use Google Scholar (<a href="http://scholar.google.com">http://scholar.google.com</a>) to search for academic sources. Otherwise, use websites sparingly, eg for company or industry information. Avoid sites that provide basic subject information and also free encyclopaedias.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Content:**
- Readers: Focused reading of sources that the editors regard as classic sources. Some chapters may have been published as journal articles in their own right.
- Content can usually be trusted but is only a selection of knowledge in a particular area.
- Research monographs: Detailed information about a research project. Content is usually reliable because of peer review procedures.
- Conference and working papers: Up-to-date knowledge in concise format and easily accessible. Content tends to be assessed through peer review before publication.
- Government and other reports: Useful for background and contextual knowledge. Content is usually reliable but may represent a particular political ideology.
- Internet: Content is freely publishable without any quality procedure, hence it requires careful scrutiny. There are subject gateways which can help you find suitable online sources; ask your librarian.

**Form:**
- Readers: Hardcopies in library.
- Research monographs: Hardcopies in library.
- Conference and working papers: Through university websites or specialist databases.
- Government and other reports: Through government departments or the Internet.
- Internet: Everywhere and at any time.
your university’s library (nowadays sometimes called ‘information services’) will be your closest ally in your studies as a portal from which to access a wide range of high-quality sources. If you have not been to a university library for some time and think about dusty volumes stacked high on shelves – think again. Although the concept of the library remains unchanged, the way in which libraries operate has changed significantly over recent years and continues to change in accordance with technical advances. Modern libraries provide a range of services that are invaluable to twenty-first-century students, particularly at postgraduate level. In addition to the traditional hard-copy books and academic journals, you will find a wide variety of audio-visual, digital and online resources to support your study, and your library is the portal from which to access these increasingly virtual resources that are not accessible through other means. The best thing you can do at the beginning of your studies is to attend the library tour that your institution is likely to offer and spend some time in the library to familiarise yourself with the facilities and what is on offer. Moreover, Easterby-Smith et al (2002) recommend that you build a good relationship with your subject librarian, who is a highly trained specialist who will select the materials provided in the library on the recommendation of teaching staff. Librarians will be able to advise you on the availability of sources and help you to get materials from other libraries through a system called ‘inter-library loans’ (ILL). The following activity will help you to get to know your library at bit better.

### Activity 2.4

**Library Checklist**

Download the library checklist from the companion website and complete it if you have not done so yet as part of your university’s induction programme.

In addition to your university library, your local library may stock relevant materials and is worth checking, too. If there is another university nearby, you may want to enquire what level of access is offered to visitors. There are different arrangements; some will only allow you to study on site while others will allow you to take out a limited number of sources (online materials are usually exempt from any arrangement, though). If you are a member (whether full or associate) of a professional body such as the CIPD, you may also want to check what materials are available through them. Working in and with libraries and other collections will give you access to a wide range of print sources and will keep down your expenses on books.

### 2.3.3 Selecting and accessing academic literature

Once you know your motivation to read and which type of literature will be most appropriate for your purposes, you can start searching for materials. ‘What?’ you may ask, ‘I am still not reading yet? I really cannot afford to waste more time!’ I know how tempting it is to roll up your sleeves, get stuck in and play things by ear. But after studying successfully for six degrees, I also know that it is more
effective and efficient in the long term to be strategic and follow a logical process. Thorough preparation is the key to success in postgraduate study and beyond.

You may find it useful to focus your selection of literature early on. Currie (2005), for instance, suggests you look at the research field (e.g., human resource management), followed by the parent discipline (e.g., human resource planning), sub-discipline (e.g., recruitment) and research subject (e.g., interviewing). While in some instances you will be able to identify them relatively easily, you may have to be creative in others and use brainstorming and associated techniques (see also Chapters 14 and 16). Do ask your tutor or librarian for help if you are stuck.

2.3.3.1 Clarifying terms and definitions

If you are new to a field of study (or if you are a non-native speaker exposed to subject vocabulary for the first time), you may want to start browsing the reference literature. You may find that a specialist dictionary and a subject textbook in a particular area are a good starting point for getting to know the subject-specific language of your field of study (this is often called ‘jargon’). The dictionary will provide you with key definitions and the textbook will give you a broad overview of the subject, indicating how different aspects of a field of study are related. Both sources will introduce you to the prevalent terminology of the field of study, which is the basis for the identification of key words and a focused search for literature.

2.3.3.2 Identifying key words

Key words describe your area of interest and may even reflect the title of an assignment, project or dissertation (Cottrell 2003) and they are sometimes called ‘descriptors’ or ‘identifiers’ (Fink 2005). Key words are the terms that you will type in the library catalogue or online database to identify which sources will be most relevant for your purposes. According to Easterby-Smith et al (2002), a good set of key words is the greatest asset for your literature search, but you need to be aware that a term may refer to different things in databases originating in other (English-speaking) countries and also in different subject areas. If your search is unsuccessful, remember alternative spellings and identify synonyms of the terms you are searching for; a thesaurus will be of great help (Fink 2005). Some search engines allow you to search for more than one term using the AND function or for alternative terms using the OR function to make your search more specific to your needs. Some search engines also allow you to search for subject areas and to exclude a term using the NOT function. So check with the search engine that you are using how to improve your searches, and consult your librarian if in any doubt. Key words can feature in the title of a book or paper, in the list of key words provided in most journal articles, in the table of contents of a book or in the text as such. As a rule, if the key words feature in the title or list of key words, the source tends to be more relevant.
Hart (2002) suggests that you also think about the boundaries of your topic: that is, what is relevant and needs to be included in a particular piece and what is not. Considerations like this may be the last thing on your mind when starting a project, but it is something to be aware of. Any assignment or project will have a word limit and will therefore be limited in scope, yet, a characteristic of postgraduate assignments is their open-endedness. Many of my students complain that the word count of an assignment or project is insufficient, but in my experience even 100,000 words would not be enough for everything that you may want to say. Hence, you will not be able to include everything that might be relevant and you will have to choose carefully what to include and what to leave out. Let me illustrate this.

Imagine you have been given a 2,000 word assignment asking you to discuss theories of motivation that are relevant to explain employee behaviour in twenty-first-century organisations. On the one hand, there is a myriad of theories that seek to explain motivation in employees (the earliest are Maslow and Herzberg), and on the other hand, there is a wide range of behaviours in modern-day organisations, both desired and unacceptable. It is beyond the scope of any piece of work, let alone a 2,000 word assignment, to deal with all of that. It makes sense to focus on a small number of behaviours (for example the recent phenomenon of employees engaging in social networking during working hours) and a small number of theories to explain why this may be the case. This will allow you not only to focus your literature search and reading, but also to deal with the theories and behaviours in sufficient depth to create a critical, discursive argument in your writing and in that way contribute to the knowledge in your field of study.

### 2.3.4 Searching for Literature

Once you have identified the key words of your assignment or project, you can start searching for relevant materials. Wallace and Wray (2006) recommend that you draw up a long list of possible sources, comprising items from reading lists past and present, one or two key textbooks and the names of a few journals that publish relevant papers. It is a good idea to do an initial appraisal of each item before adding it to your long list. Your long list should include both the seminal works by the key authors of your subject area and more recent work that builds on them. The question will be, however, what constitutes a seminal work and how to recognise it. As a rule, the more often you hear about an author or a book or journal article, the more importantly this item is regarded in the subject area. For instance, Herzberg and Maslow are widely recognised as the key authors on motivation and therefore their names will be frequently mentioned in that context. Another clue can be found in the library catalogue: the more copies of a particular book that are available and the more editions of a particular book that have been published, the more important it is regarded as being by those teaching the subject.

When producing your long list of potential sources, make sure you note down the full reference (i.e., author, date of publication, title of book or journal article, publisher or name of journal plus volume, issue and page numbers; for details
CHAPTER 2: Essential Postgraduate Study Skills

on referencing please refer to Chapter 3) together with information on how to access it. The latter includes the name of the library or library site if you access more than one, the floor and the shelf mark. You may want to check the availability of these items using the library catalogue and big databases with journal articles and conference proceedings (in business and management, these are currently Business Source Premier, Emerald, JStor, Science Direct and Web of Knowledge). Keeping track of your library search is vital: we all think that we can do without it but never quite manage. There is nothing more stressful than hunting for references in the last few hours before an assignment or project is due!

Currie (2005) proposes eight criteria which can be used to determine the relevance of any source you may wish to include in your written work (see Table 2.3).

2.3.5 accessing the literature

Once you have identified how to access what sound like the most appropriate sources, you can access them through your library or any other information portal that it may provide. If you can, scan an item before taking it out (in the case of a hardcopy book or journal article) or before printing it (in the case of an e-book or online journal article) to ensure that the item is indeed what you are looking for. It can be frustrating to locate an item that sounds exactly what you were looking for, just to find that the title is misleading and that the item is not suitable after all. The earlier you come to realise this, however, the better.

One common myth among my students is that you need to start reading at the beginning of a book or paper and finish at the end. Well, it really is just a myth. The key to postgraduate study and CPD is strategic and selective reading (Cottrell 2003), always bearing in mind your motivation for reading a particular item. So, when accessing a written source for the first time, start with the summary information. In the case of a book, this will be the back flap, table of contents, index and list of figures. In the case of a journal article or other paper, it will be the abstract or executive summary and the list of key words. If the information there sounds promising, progress to the introduction and conclusion to learn more.

You may find that you have already got enough information or that the item is not as relevant or useful as expected; if this is the case, discard it. It is a good idea to make a note of it, though, as it is frustrating to take out an unsuitable item more than once simply because you have lost track.
### Table 2.3 Evaluating the relevance of literature

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Guidance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. How recent is the item?</td>
<td>This question does not mean that all of your data should be recent. In fact, many tutors like you to draw on seminal work in the area, which can be 20, 30 or 40 years old and still valid, relevant and important. However, you are expected to demonstrate your awareness of up-to-date thinking.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Is the item likely to have been superseded?</td>
<td>To find out, compare the item with other similar items of data, note the dates and assess the degree to which they all match up. If the item is the oldest, does not match up and other theories may be taken as modern alternatives to those in the item, then the likelihood is that it has been superseded.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. How relevant is the item for the purpose of reading?</td>
<td>Evaluate the degree to which the item is central to your motivation for reading. If it is only marginally relevant, hold on to it and decide later whether to include it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Have you seen references to this item (or its author) in other items that were useful?</td>
<td>If you have, then study those other items to see if this one should be integrated with them. How does it relate to them? Is the item relevant enough to justify inclusion? At the early stages of your literature search, it is not advisable to discard marginal material.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Does the item support or contradict your arguments?</td>
<td>If the item supports your argument and is central to what you have to say, it will serve as evidence for your case. If it is contrary, you may still decide to use it when you are comparing and contrasting what others have said.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Does the item appear to be biased? Even if it does, it may still be relevant.</td>
<td>While not all published material provides a balanced view of the subject, what is said may be relevant to the questions you are answering. You have to decide whether it fits into your argument and, if so, where. Depending on your task, you may have to justify why you included this item despite its bias.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. What are the methodological omissions from the work? Even if there are any, it may still be relevant.</td>
<td>Does the item include sufficient evidence to support what is being said? Should the researcher have used different research methods and, perhaps, further methods so that the data could be cross-checked? How valuable is it to your task? Depending on your task, you may have to justify why you included this item despite its methodological omissions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Is the precision sufficient? Even if it is imprecise, it may be the only item that you can find, and so may still be relevant.</td>
<td>Lack of precision may have occurred in the application of the data gathering and analytic techniques. Before you use imprecise data, you have to check their validity. If you decide to use something you should point out where you think the imprecision lies. If it is the only item you could find when you did the search, try searching further for other items that support the claim. Depending on your task, you may have to justify why you included in this item despite its imprecision.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** adapted from D. Currie (2005), Developing and applying study skills, CIPD, London, p78.
If the source is relevant and suitable, you will need to select the most relevant **parts, headings and subheadings** of the book or paper. Buzan (1977) suggests that scanning the item with a focus on headings and anything that is highlighted (with figures, colour, bullet points, bigger font, bold or italic print etc) will give you the gist of the text. Once you have selected the most relevant parts, read the **first paragraph of a section** (Cottrell 2003) as well as the last, which should contain the most important information (Buzan 1977). Bearing in mind your motivation for reading that particular item, you need to decide how you can use what you are reading and how much detail you need; this may vary from source to source. More often than not, you will read for content of a particular theory or research project. Sometimes, it will be enough to briefly mention a particular fact, but sometimes you will have to discuss large parts of it in great depth. However, you may also wish to adopt a particular research approach used in your source or borrow elements of style that are particularly effective. Once you have decided which elements of a source to read, you can start to read critically and in depth. But what does this mean, you may wonder?

### 2.3.6 Critical reading and analysis

Critical reading means applying your critical thinking skills when selecting, reading and analysing written materials. This means identifying and evaluating the main argument of the text, asking questions like ‘What is this text about?’, ‘What is the purpose of this text?’, ‘What is the author trying to say?’ (Wallace and Wray 2006). It will be useful to bear in mind the different types of literature here. As the names suggest, a theoretical piece will be written to advance theory, while a practical piece will focus on practice. Hence, you cannot expect a theoretical piece to tell you much about practice and vice versa, and you will need to bear this in mind when analysing that piece. Critical reading is a slow process (Cottrell 2003) because you will need to read, scrutinise what you have read using the questions listed in Section 2.2 above, think over what you have read, make notes of both content and your thoughts, and maybe go back to the text to re-read a particular passage and go through the above steps again. However, only such a thorough process will give you the in-depth understanding that is required for many tasks that you will encounter during your postgraduate studies and beyond.

Critical reading focuses on the main argument of a text and you will therefore need to understand the components of an argument and how to analyse it. It is widely recognised that an argument consists of a claim and a justification and that an unjustified claim is nothing but an opinion (eg Fisher 2001, Wallace and Wray 2006, Lapakko 2009). Let us take the following sentence, which I have seen in many student assignments: ‘Organisation A is an innovative organisation.’ This is an opinion. If we add a justification, such as ‘because it has adopted the latest management thinking for their human resource processes’, then we have created a very basic argument. So, an argument is essentially a causal relationship between two pieces of information (the claim and the justification), and this causal relationship is often highlighted by the use of the following language indicators (Fisher 2001, Wallace and Wray 2006):
because, since, for, so, hence, thus, consequently, therefore
it follows that, x demonstrates that, it must be concluded that.

This list is not exhaustive, of course, but intended to serve as a starting point for your critical analysis of text. You may want to look out for such language indicators when reading and analysing a text, but you may find that the causal relationship that you are looking for is simply implied (Lapakko 2009). The logical strength of an argument depends not only on the extent to which the claim is justified (Hughes 2000), but also on the way this is done – whether by facts, data or other evidence, by definitions or principles, or by causal explanations, recommendations and value judgements (Fisher 2001). Claims justified by facts, data or evidence tend to be strong (Lapakko 2009), so be aware of value judgements and unfounded recommendations, particularly if they are well presented. Your prime task will be to determine how convincing the argument is by evaluating the claim, the accompanying justification and any evidence presented against the background of its purpose. It will be useful to identify which evidence is essential to prove a point (necessary conditions) and whether there is a range of conditions that must be met if a point is to be proven (sufficient conditions). Cottrell (2005) distinguishes the two as follows: a necessary condition can be identified through the statement ‘without this, then not that ...’ (p109) and a sufficient condition can be identified through the statement ‘if this, then that’ (p110). For instance, a university degree is a sufficient condition for access to postgraduate study, while a particular degree classification, a relevant degree, finance and work experience may be necessary conditions to be admitted to the programme of your choice.

It is also the reader’s task to identify the critical assumption behind an argument and to determine whether it is reasonable (Lapakko 2009, drawing on Toulmin 1958). So, in the example above about the innovative organisation, the critical assumption (ie the assumption on which the causal relationship between claim and justification depends) is that an organisation that has adopted the latest management thinking for its human resource processes is innovative. As the term ‘innovative’ is defined as ‘featuring new methods’ (Oxford dictionary thesaurus and wordpower guide 2001, p669), the argument that ‘Organisation A is an innovative organisation because it has adopted the latest management thinking for their human resource processes’ is probably reasonable. The absence of such a critical assumption is often called a non-sequitur, which is Latin for ‘does not follow’ and which suggests that the assumptions do not support the claim of the argument. You can see that scrutinising a text in that way answers many of the questions outlined in Section 2.2 above. You may want to track the claim and justification(s) of an argument graphically through an argument map (Cameron 2007). An argument map identifies the claim, justifications and evidence as well as any supporting or opposing links, as illustrated by Figure 2.3.

An argument map can also help you to identify any flaws in the argument, of which there are many different types. Firstly, if you are left with questions like ‘Why?’ or ‘So what?’ while reading a text in detail (Wallace and Wray 2006), there is likely to be something missing. So, if you are left asking ‘Why?’, then the justification is weak or missing. If in the earlier example the argument consisted only of the claim, ie that ‘Organisation A is an innovative organisation’, then you
would quite rightly ask why that was allegedly the case. If you are left asking ‘So what?’, then the claim is weak or missing. If in that example the argument consisted only of the justification, ie that ‘Organisation A has adopted the latest management thinking for their human resource processes,’ you might rightly wonder why this is important or relevant. In addition, it will be beneficial to examine the evidence that is provided for the justification (Lapakko 2009). In the above example, you may want to determine whether the management thinking that has been adopted by Organisation A is indeed as recent as claimed, or whether these allegedly new ideas have indeed been applied to their human resource processes.

Other flaws in the argument are more difficult to detect, and some authors can be very good at masking a flaw in the argument through the use of deflective language (Cottrell 2005). On the one hand, deflective language includes words that suggest that a claim is so obvious that it does not need to be proved, such as ‘naturally, of course, clearly, obviously’. On the other hand, deflective language also includes attempts by the author(s) to collude with the audience through phrases like ‘everybody knows/believes, as we all know, anyone with any sense’ and so on. Critical reading will help you to identify such tactics.

It is crucial that you take detailed notes about what you are reading as well as your thoughts about the text. Cameron (2007) suggests that note-taking enhances both your concentration and understanding, helps you to retain what you have read and is useful when revising content. Perhaps more importantly, writing supports your thinking (Huff 2002) and allows you to create new knowledge. To
support your reading and note-taking, you may want to photocopy or print relevant sections of a book or journal article so that you can code, highlight, cross-reference and comment on the most important parts of the text (this is also called annotation, Cameron 2007) or use a voice recorder to record your thoughts. It may be a good idea to start a small database of what you have read and what you learned from each item to keep you on track (Hart 2002). Specialist software packages are available, but a simple database on record cards or a computer spreadsheet will usually do the trick (see also Chapter 13).

In order to enhance your understanding of what you have read, you may find it particularly beneficial to create a knowledge web (Birkenbihl 2007) for each subject about which you are reading. A knowledge web is a collection of information that you already know about the field of study (or maybe even a particular aspect of it) and that helps you to ‘trap’ other pieces of information like a spider’s web. A good starting point for a knowledge web is the creation of an alphabetical list (Birkenbihl 2007) at the beginning of your project and this is how to do it. Divide a plain sheet of paper into two columns. Write the alphabet from top to bottom in the first column. Then take a minute or two to fill in the second column with relevant words, terms and concepts that you already know about the subject in question. It is important to write anything down in the order you think of it rather than alphabetically to get as full an account of your previous knowledge as possible. Feel free to write down more than one word per letter if necessary. Why not give it a try?

**ACTIVITY 2.6**

**ABC LISTS**

Take a plain sheet of paper, fold it in half to create two columns and write the alphabet from the top down in the first column. Then allow yourself 90 seconds to jot down anything you know about ‘coaching’ or a subject that is closer to your heart. Your time starts now.

What does your list look like? How many terms and concepts have you come up with? How many blanks are there? You may want to compare results with a peer or in a small group and fill in any more terms and concepts that you are learning in this process. You will be surprised at how quickly your alphabetical list will fill up and how easy it is to add any other terms. Once you have built a framework of terms and concepts with your alphabetical list, you can start mapping your knowledge web graphically and add any links in the style of a MindMap (Buzan 2000). If you prefer, you can apply the post-it note technique, in which you write each key term and concept of your subject of study on an individual post-it note and then use a big sheet of paper to determine the relationship between the different elements. The advantage is that you can move things around, either on your own or in a small group, until you are happy with how they relate to each other. In that way, you can build up your understanding about the subject in question and link anything you read to information that you already know. Do not worry if the techniques outlined above are not for you; there are many more...
and I would encourage you to experiment with different techniques to find out what suits you best.

In conclusion, critical reading is an in-depth way of engaging with written materials that helps you to enhance your understanding of a subject and your ability to make informed decisions. Critical reading will enable you to analyse both written and oral materials for their quality and their relevance, allowing you to make informed judgements about which sources to draw on and to what extent. This will have a major impact on your studies, particularly the way in which you approach any new task, access written texts and select materials to include in your writing. Critical reading is also the foundation for critical writing in postgraduate study and beyond. It is a somewhat time-consuming process, but what counts in postgraduate study is the depth of your analysis. Engaging with the process of critical reading will enable you to work more efficiently and effectively as you will be more thoughtful about the decisions you make and more careful in approaching your work. As a result, you will waste less time on unproductive ad hoc reading and writing.

2.4 APPLYING CRITICAL THINKING (2): WRITING

2.4.1 CRITICAL WRITING

Critical writing means applying your critical thinking skills to your writing, which is a vital process for the creation and communication of knowledge in the social sciences. Critical writing is best perceived as the continuation of the critical reading process outlined in the previous section as you will be drawing on the understanding of argumentation that you will have built there. Critical writing is about carefully crafting the argument of your writing by determining the claim, justification and any supporting evidence in the light of the intended audience (Wallace and Wray 2006). The deconstruction of ideas as well as the analysis and evaluation of arguments are at the heart of critical writing (Moon 2007), which also involves asking questions such as:

• What is the critical assumption I am making? How reasonable is it?
• Are all claims I am making supported by evidence? How credible and appropriate is the evidence supporting my argument?
• Are my conclusions based on evidence and reasonable assumptions?
• Have I clarified expressions, claims and the meaning of key terms and concepts?
• Does my argument follow a logical line of thought?
• Have I considered alternative arguments?

You can see from the above questions that critical writing is a well-planned process that will enhance the quality of your work in various ways. Firstly, it will allow you to develop what Moon (2007) calls ‘academic assertiveness’, a concept which comprises notions of challenging other authors’ work, acknowledging alternative viewpoints, finding your voice and developing confidence in your
writing. Secondly, your writing will be more logical and convincing because the claim and justification of your argument can be clearly identified and supported by high-quality evidence. Thirdly, your writing will be more concise if you approach it in a critical fashion because you will be more thoughtful in the way you work (see also Chapter 3, Section 3.2). Remember that as a postgraduate student you are expected to contribute to the knowledge of your subject area through research and independent thought experiments. Only if you know your subject, will you be able to do so with confidence, and this is what examiners tend to look for in postgraduate students’ work. You are unlikely to receive good grades without it.

2.4.2 DEVELOPING ORIGINAL ARGUMENTS

One of the biggest let-downs I encounter in student work is a lack of argument: it is not clear what the student wants to say (lack of claim) and/or why this is worth saying (lack of justification). Hence, it is fundamental that you establish the claim and justification of your argument at the outset of a new writing project. This is often easier said than done but the analysis of text through critical reading will have given you a sound understanding of your subject, and the development of a knowledge web or other techniques will have supported this. You may also wish to map out your argument using an argument map (Cameron 2007), which is useful both for critical reading and writing. Wallace and Wray (2006) recommend the creation of a subject map, which brings together the key elements of a topic under investigation as well as their causal relationships; an example can be found on the companion website.

Most of us will go through an unstructured thought process looking at different observations, experiences, theories and models that will lead us to the conclusion. This conclusion will then constitute the claim of our argument. For instance, in the example of the presentation on HRM in Russia (Klose and Reissner 2000), my colleague and I will have drawn on what fellow students (Russian managers studying for a British MBA) will have told us about their work and organisation. We will have looked at the literature on human resource management in different countries to see if our fellow students’ experiences have been validated by other sources. We will have developed our argument by discussing our observations and our understanding from the literature. According to Fisher (2001) there are two approaches for the structure of reasoning, which allow you to check whether your argument is logical. The first approach is about the development of a chain of reasoning, which consists of at least four elements that are linked by the words ‘so – thus – therefore’: firstly, a statement which leads to claim 1 (‘so’), which is the justification for claim 2 (‘thus’), which leads to the overall conclusion or claim (‘therefore’). Going back to the above example, this chain of reasoning could look as follows: increasing globalisation requires an effective HR function in Russian firms, so Russian firms need to adapt and build an HR function; thus attitudes of Russian managers towards HR need to change; therefore, there is a need for HR training and reform in Russian firms. This chain of reasoning can be graphically presented as shown in Figure 2.4.
The second approach is to list a series of side-by-side justifications, which lead to the overall claim and which are linked by ‘also – furthermore – for all these reasons’. Again, going back to the example of HRM in Russia, the argument could be structured as follows: globalisation requires an effective HR function in Russian firms; also the previous training system has collapsed; furthermore the workforce needs new skills; so for all these reasons, there is a need for HR training and reform in Russian firms. This structure of reasoning is graphically represented in Figure 2.5 below.

An alternative approach to developing your argument and structuring it logically is the use of pyramids (Minto 2002). Every piece of writing should have one key thought (claim), which summarises other ideas (justification and evidence). Each idea will receive its own box and all boxes will be structured to form a pyramid, in which the claim is at the top. The pyramid can consist of an indefinite number
of layers, which are linked by the question 'Why?'. Find it difficult to picture? Again going back to the example of HRM in Russia, our argument pyramid could look like Figure 2.6 below.

Figure 2.6 Example of an argument pyramid

Do bear in mind that the creation of your argument pyramid is a creative process in which the different elements, groupings and links are likely to change. You can build your pyramid from the top down or from the bottom up. Minto (2002) suggests that the former is usually more effective if you already know what you want to say as you can map out your claim, justifications and supporting evidence to keep you on track. The latter is usually more effective if you are unsure of your argument because you can list all the points that should feature in your writing, establish the relationship between them and draw conclusions from that. You may find it useful to build a skeleton pyramid and fill in any gaps as you go along. If you feel restricted by writing down your pyramid on paper, try the post-it note technique again or use a computer programme that allows you to shift any boxes (most graphical software will allow you to do that, although this can be cumbersome). If you find it difficult to determine the top of your pyramid, the central idea of your text, ask yourself what it is that you want the reader to learn from your writing. It is often useful to write this down and simplify it until you have reached a basic sentence or question; this will be the claim of your argument. In addition, you may want to consider how much the reader is likely to know and may want to learn as well as how much you know and may want to tell (Kaye 1989). It may also make sense to check your plan against the assignment title to make sure that you answer all the elements of the assignment question.
2.4.3 STRATEGIES FOR SMART WRITING

The act of writing is an integral part of logical thinking and creativity, and it is therefore a smart move to make writing a regular habit as a postgraduate student (Huff 1999). You may wonder how you can write for what seems like the sake of writing when you have many other balls to juggle? Writing has been used for centuries to explore ideas and search for answers, so disciplined writing will enhance the quality of your thinking and therefore the quality of your written work. Writing will help you to express what you are thinking, deconstruct your ideas on paper and confront your own ideas in small thought experiments. Clear writing reflects clear thinking and this is what examiners are looking for in postgraduate work, and it will also support any other CPD measures that you are undertaking. Admittedly, this sometimes is easier said than done and there are a number of techniques that you can employ to start thinking and writing.

The bubble technique is a good tool to think (and write) about the relationship between different aspects of a field of study, or elements of an argument or theory, in a structured and logical manner. Once you have identified the key aspects or elements of what you are going to write about, put each of them into a bubble and let the bubbles overlap. Then assign a number to each bubble and each area of overlap, as graphically presented in Figure 2.7.

Now you can think about the different areas and relationships (there are 13 in this example) in a structured and logical manner, writing down your thoughts as well as any evidence that you may wish to provide for support. For example, Number Four will help you to take stock of what you know about training in the context of your studies in general, a particular module or even task. Number

---

Figure 2.7 The bubble technique applied to HRM in Russia

---

- Globalisation
- HRM
- Training
- Skills

1. Globalisation
2. HRM
3. Skills
4. Training
5. 6
6. 10
7. 11
8. 12
9. 13
10. 11
12. 13
13. 12
Eight will help you to think about the relationship between training and skills, and you may want to explore what skills can be built effectively through training and what the limitations of training as a means of skills-building are. Number Thirteen will help you to explore training and skills development in the wider context of human resource management and a trend towards globalisation. Exploratory writing in such a structured manner can be most beneficial and I encourage you to give it a go – it may well work for you! Often, you will be able to use large parts of what you have written in such an exploratory fashion for your final piece with only minor rephrasing required, and it is in these instances that thorough preparation pays off.

I find it also useful to check my writing prior to submission using the PowerPoint technique. If you are familiar with PowerPoint or a similar computer package, this may well work for you. I put the claim of my argument on the first slide and then map the key points (justification) on to other slides as they appear in the text. A few words for each slide are usually enough, so this exercise can be done quickly. This allows me to check for structure, causal links, repetitions and omissions, and gives me the confidence to submit a piece of writing that is the best that I can master at a particular point in time.

**ACTIVITY 2.7**

**USING MAPPING TECHNIQUES**

Experiment with the different techniques discussed in this section to see which ones work best for you. You may want to use an assignment as part of your study, a report for work or anything else that you are working on at present to practise critical reading and writing.

Following the critical reading and writing processes outlined above and checking your work thoroughly prior to submission will help you to avoid the most common faults in student writing as outlined by Barrass (2002): lack of knowledge and understanding, lack of evidence, lack of logic, lack of relevance, lack of balance, lack of order, lack of originality, bias, repetition and poor organisation. These faults are more easily detected in other people’s writing, which makes scrutinising your own work particularly important. If you are in doubt that you can do it entirely by yourself, why not ask a peer, a colleague, a friend or a relative to help you? There is bound to be somebody in your network of contacts who is both critical and honest and can help you to improve your written work.

**2.5 CONCLUSION**

Postgraduate study and CPD require you to become more independent as a learner, because you are expected to think critically and work independently to create and share new knowledge with scholars and practitioners in your field of study. While your tutors will give you guidance and advice, much of your
learning will come from the level of engagement in the tasks and the quality of the processes and techniques that you employ in your studies. The one skill that will allow you to do this is critical thinking, the foundation of postgraduate study and CPD. It will allow you to approach any task or project in a structured and thoughtful manner, to make decisions as to which sources to consult and which content to include, to analyse and evaluate arguments and to develop and justify your own. I encourage you to keep honing your ability to be critical when studying the other chapters in this book as your ability as a learner will improve. I also encourage you, in true postgraduate fashion, to delve more deeply into any areas that you feel may benefit from more theoretical understanding or practical application.

**PAUSE FOR THOUGHT**

Identify at least three things that you have learned by studying this chapter and engaging with the activities. How will your newly acquired knowledge and skills support your continuing professional development? What value do you expect your learning to have for your daily routines and your further career? In what area have you identified a need for further development and how are you planning to fill that gap? Address these issues in your learning journal and/or CPD log. You may also wish to discuss them with a peer, colleague, mentor or coach to aid your further development.

**KEY LEARNING POINTS**

- Postgraduate study and CPD are more advanced than undergraduate study, and previously built skills will need to be honed to achieve mastery at the required level.
- Critical thinking is a meta-skill that subsumes and enhances other skills. It is the foundation for successful postgraduate study and CPD.
- As a postgraduate student, you are expected to think independently, critique the experts and develop knowledge for the community of scholarly activity in your chosen field.
2.6 REFERENCES


Business Administration, Newcastle Business School, University of Northumbria at Newcastle, 7th December.


