



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH
School of Social and
Political Science

Learning and Academic Skills Handbook for MSc students



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About this handbook

The Learning and Academic Skills Handbook is a tool for MSc students in the School of Social and Political Science (SPS) to prepare for the course and make the most of their postgraduate learning experience. It provides students with information about key terms and skills. It addresses the questions of how to become a critical thinker and reader, how to write at postgraduate level, and provides tips on how to plan and organise.

The Learning and Academic Skills Handbook is a practical **pre-course** preparation source **and on course reference resource** for SPS MSc students. They are encouraged to read and engage with it before the MSc programme starts.

Structure

The Learning and Academic Skills Handbook is divided into three broad categories:

- Part 1: Thinking and reading
- Part 2: Writing
- Part 3: Organising

Students will find the following elements:

- Definition and explanation
- Examples
- Exercises
- Tips
- Key points
- Literature in the library
- Training workshops
- Further information links

In **Part 1**, students are introduced to skills to help them learn to think and read critically. What is meant by 'critical', critical thinking and reading is explained. The exercises should kick-start a habit of questioning, challenging and reflecting on what students hear and read. Exercises do not take up much time and can and should be repeated to become routine. Students are encouraged to read and engage with part 1 **pre-arrival**.

Part 2 focuses on writing. It goes through the writing process, how find and review literature, how to build an argument in the essay, the use of academic English, and how to cite and reference to avoid plagiarism. Students should read part 2 **pre-arrival** and consult it during their MSc programme.

Part 3 offers practical advice on how to plan studying and become more organised, and where to find further guidance.

1. Critical thinking and reading

1.1. Becoming a critical thinker

In everyday language being 'critical' is often synonymous with being negative about something. In academia being 'critical' means approaching ideas and arguments questioning the information provided, assumptions, perspectives and arguments.

A critical learning tradition builds on the assumption that **knowledge is contestable** and only represents what is or can be known at any given time and from a certain perspective. Students should always challenge and question what they hear and read. Moreover, they are encouraged to debate and build their arguments based on analysis, reasoning and evidence.

Students should analyse the information, concepts and arguments presented to them in lectures, tutorial and readings. This means that students should ask a **series of questions** when they hear or read something, and reflect on how the answers affects their thinking and understanding of the information.



Exercise 1.1.

- Read a book chapter, journal article or a newspaper commentary carefully.
- Ask questions, for example:
 - What is the argument of the author?
 - What is the purpose of the text? Who is the text for?
 - What is the supporting evidence? How do they gather and use this evidence?
 - Whose voice is represented in the text?
 - What is the perspective of the author?
 - What are his or her assumptions underlying the argument?
 - How do assumptions, argument and evidence relate to each other?
 - What would make the argument more nuanced? How can it be countered?
 - What is missing from the argument?
 - Is there a different way of interpreting the evidence presented?
 - Do you agree or disagree with the author, and why?
 - How does the argument relate to other texts you read?
 - Write down your analysis of the text.

Tips 1.1.

- Repeat exercise 1.1.
- For more variety, repeat the exercise with an audio or video recording, for example a podcast or an online video of a talk or lecture.



Key points 1.1.

- Always challenge information provided.
- Ask questions: What is the argument, the originator's perspective, their assumptions, the evidence?



Literature in the library

Cottrell, S. 2011. Critical thinking skills: developing effective analysis and argument, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.



Further information

IAD Critical thinking

IAD – a critical approach to learning factsheet (PDF)

1.2. Reading skills

There are **different reading techniques**, for example, scan and skim reading as well as active reading. Each of these ways of reading is useful. The **reading purpose** determines the most useful and appropriate technique.

Scan reading means quickly going over the text to locate specific information and to identify key words or sentences of interest. Students should look at headings and subheadings, content pages, indexes and the body of the text for key words and authors' names. The aim is to decide whether the reading is relevant.

Skim reading means quickly reading the introduction and conclusion to get an idea of the content and the first sentence of each paragraph to locate the main points. The purpose is to get the general idea or 'gist' of the text and the structure of the argument, and to decide whether to read the text more thoroughly. In many cases, skim reading and grasping an author's argument and key points will be enough.

Active reading means reading the text with the series of questions in mind and taking notes. Students will have scanned and skimmed the text first and decided to read it in more detail, for example, because it appears to be a key text in their field or for their course. They will read with a purpose or goal, for example a particular question. At any point, they should be able to summarise what they read and explain how it relates to the question.



Exercise 1.2.

- Take a journal article.
- Put a timer on 5 minutes.
- Scan the journal article. Does the article seem relevant or interesting?
- Put aside 10 minutes.
- Skim through the article. What points or arguments stood out to you?
- Summarise the main points, or points that are relevant to your research.
- Re-read the article more actively.

Tips 1.2.

- Practice speed-reading to help with skim reading.
- Use your finger to quickly scan through the text and see if any paragraphs jump out at you. If they do, slow down and read these sections more carefully.
- Think about adopting a 'read for' strategy – think to yourself, why am I reading this text? What question am I looking to answer? What topic am I studying?
- This will help you orientate yourself to look for certain phrases or concepts when you skim read.



Key points 1.2.

- Ask yourself: why am I reading this text? What am I reading it for?
- Scan the text to find relevant information.
- Skim the text for an overview.
- Read the text more actively if it appears to be relevant.



Literature in the library

Wallace, M. and Wray, A. 2011. Critical Reading and Writing for Postgraduates, London: Sage.

Buzan, T. 2000 The speed-reading book London: BBC.



Courses and workshops

English Language Teaching – Pre-session Language Courses



Further information

IAD Critical reading form method (PDF)

Critical reading techniques (external link: The Open University)

SQ3R Reading method – Using SQ3R to understand and comprehend written material (external video)

ELE - Reading and discussing academic texts

2. The Writing Process

Essay writing is not only about the end product. It is about the **process**. It is through the essay writing process that **learning** takes place. The aim is to **build an argument** (2.3.)

There is no one way of planning and writing an essay, but below is a systematic way students may find useful. Students usually first choose one of several essay prompts or questions. Part of the learning process is to challenge preconceived answers or opinions.

The next step is **essay planning**. Students should carefully read the instructions, consider the topic and its issues, and sketch an **initial plan**. It may be helpful to ask the following questions:

- What are the assumptions in the prompt or essay questions?
- What is missing from the prompt? Is the prompt taking something for granted?
- What are the key concepts and definitions?
- What different perspectives and approaches are there to the topic and issues?
- What material and supporting evidence am I expected to use?

Reflections on these questions may feed into the introduction.

Introduction

The introduction usually consists of two key elements: a general statement about the area or topic and the focus of the essay, and a thesis statement which states the argument, outlines the structure of the argument and the essay plan. Moreover, it is in the introduction that students provide some background information, an overview of the field and provide definitions of the key concept(s).

Next, students **locate literature** (2.2.) and **read**. Then, they plan the structure of their argument and write a **first draft** of the essay body in academic English (2.4.). Afterwards, students read and **re-draft** the essay to make sure that the argument makes sense.

Body

The body of the essay comprises several paragraphs sometimes combined into several larger sections or parts. Each paragraph should only address one point or idea. In other words, it should develop a subdivision of the topic. Each paragraph should start with a statement sentence, followed by the explanation, justification and reasons for the point

and its supporting illustration or example, potentially a contrasting or alternative point of view, and end with a concluding sentence that opens up to the next paragraph.

The **final draft** includes a conclusion in which students sum up their argument, answers the essay question or shows how they have addressed the prompt. The conclusion can point toward the wider implications of the essay question or prompt.

Conclusion

In the conclusion, students summarise the main points discussed in the body of the essay, and summarises the essay's argument in a concise (and not repetitive) way.

The next step is **revising and editing** the essay. Students should do this a few hours to a day away from the final draft. Then, they should **proofread** it looking for flaws in the argument, for spelling errors and grammar mistakes. They should check that they did what they said they would, built a sound argument, made all key points and connections clear, provided the necessary supporting evidence, considered alternative perspectives and counter-arguments, and finished with a strong conclusion. In a final reading, students should ensure that they **cited and referenced** correctly and consistently (2.5.).



Exercise 2.1.

- Take a journal article. Ask yourself:
 - What is the author's argument? Can you identify their thesis statement?
 - How do they make their argument?
 - Note in the margin what the author is doing – are they summarising or evaluating?
 - How do they provide supporting evidence? What kind of evidence do they use?
 - How do they address counter-arguments?
 - How does the conclusion speak to the article as a whole? Does it address the questions or research problems set out in the introduction?

Tips 2.1.

- State your argument clearly and demonstrate how you come to this argument throughout the main body of the essay.
- Write or rewrite the introduction at the end of the writing process.
- Make connections between points clear. Each sentence should follow from the last, and each sentence should have a purpose. Use adverbs, conjunctions and phrases such as indeed, however, therefore, as a consequence etc.

- Illustrate your points with evidence: use examples and explain how they relate to the points.
- Proofread aloud and/or have a native speaker proofread for you.
- Use course convenors' and tutors' guidance and feedback hours to get advice.

2.1 Essay feedback

Essay feedback includes a mark (see below the link to the mark descriptors) and a comment box. Markers highlight **strengths and weaknesses** of the essay and point towards practical **ways to improve**. The comments are not a sign of failure but rather should be taken as constructive and helpful pointers to students work on their next assignment.

If the feedback is unclear or students want more help, they are encouraged to speak to their tutor, lecturer or course convenor during their **guidance and feedback hours**, which can be found in the course guide or on the Learn page for their course.



Key points 2.1.

- The aim of the essay is to build an argument.
- The structure of the essay reflects the structure of your argument.
- There are key elements to a good essay, such as an introduction and a conclusion.
- Revise, edit and proofread.
- Speak to your teacher to clarify feedback and ask for guidance.



Literature in the library

Buzan, T. 2003. The mind map book, London: BBC.

Davies, M. 2011. Study skills for international postgraduates, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Elbow, P. 1998. Writing with power: techniques for mastering the writing process, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Fowler, A. 2006. How to write, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Greetham, B. 2013. How to write better essays, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Godfrey, J. 2013. How to Use Your Reading in Your Essays, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Ridley, D. 2012. The literature review: a step-by-step guide for students, London: Sage.



Courses and workshops

[IAD open workshops](#) (assignment planning and writing, critical reading skills, practical proofreading and editing, revisiting structure, and writing boot camp.)



Further information

[IAD Academic writing](#)

[IAD Developing your critical writing factsheet \(PDF\)](#)

[IAD Use your reading critically factsheet \(PDF\)](#)

[IAD Getting your ideas in order](#)

[IAD Literature review](#)

[ELE Independent study materials \(link to PDFs\)](#)

[Academic essay writing for postgraduates Supplementary Materials \(PDF with exercises\)](#)

[Improving your essay marks](#)

[SPS Marking Scheme](#)

[Enhancing Feedback](#)

[Developing writing skills \(external link: The Open University\)](#)

Information about assessment in SPS

[Assessment regulations \(link to PDFs\)](#)

[Extensions and special circumstances process for MSc students](#)

2.2 Finding literature

The first stop for finding literature is the **reading list in the course guide or Learn page**. Students are often expected to 'go beyond' this reading list for their essays or dissertation.

Students can look for additional literature in the **bibliographies of the texts** listed in their course guides reading lists. There may also be an additional reading list in the course guide or Learn page. Students can also locate articles in the relevant **peer-reviewed journals**. These are often listed in the course guide and key readings will be drawn from them. If relevant journals are *not* in the course guide, students may also ask the course convenor, lecturer or tutor for advice. Another way of locating books and journal articles is to type key words into the library's search engine DiscoverEd or on Google Scholar.

Most academic books will be in the **university library** and most journals will be accessible through the **library's website**.

The types of literature students will mostly be drawing from are **articles in peer-reviewed academic journals, academic books or edited academic books**. Peer-review means that the content has been evaluated by other academics to guarantee the arguments and supporting materials meet the standards of academic research. However, this does not mean these articles cannot be critiqued or that their data cannot be scrutinised!

There are other sources of knowledge students can draw on, for example **websites, blogs and news articles**. They are mostly not peer-reviewed. These sources represent different voices outside of academia, so can still be useful knowledge that may be appropriate for your assignments. These sources can also hold institutional data, such as government institutions (.gov.) or international organisations (.org) for statistical data. Academic staff are also increasingly expected to make their research available to a wider audience to meet public funding bodies' conditions, and many reputable scholars write for newspapers, publish on collaborative blogs or are TV commentators.

Websites and other non-peer-reviewed sources should, however, undergo a thorough **evaluation of reliability**. Criteria for this assessment include authority, affiliation, audience and date. Students may ask questions to assess content accuracy and reliability:

- Who is the author? What else has he or she written?
- What website is it? What else do they publish?
- Who is the author affiliated with?
- What are the interests of the author and the website?
- Who finances the website?
- Who is the target audience?
- Is the website and/or text targeted at a general or specialised audience?
- When was the text published? Is there an indication that the text has been updated?



Key points 2.2.

- There are different types of academic literature.
- There are several ways of finding literature beyond a course-reading list.
- Apply quality criteria to sources, in particular to non-peer-reviewed materials.



Literature in the library

Mann, T. 2015. The Oxford Guide to Library Research How to Find Reliable Information Online and Offline, Oxford: Oxford University Press.



Further information

[Literature searching: Academic support librarians and subject guides](#)

[The University of Edinburgh library](#)

[The University of Edinburgh – finding resources](#) (different resources on the website and in the library)

[The University of Edinburgh library - DiscoverEd](#) (search engine)

[Help finding information online](#)

[Virtual library tour](#)

[Google Scholar](#) (search engine)

2.3 Building an argument

Arguments are **central** to all academic writing. If students have not completed the reading exercises above, they should do so now because the exercises will help students identify arguments in scholarly writing.

Arguments generally **respond to a question** – whether an essay question, or a research question. Sometimes the author will clearly state this question but sometimes they do not make the question explicit or students may have to look quite hard for it. Students generally work with an explicit question for their assessments.

Academic questions **rarely** have **black-and-white answer** and can rarely be fully or universally resolved. An argument **does not need to come down on one side or the other** of an academic debate. This means students do not just have to defend one side against another. Instead, students may look at aspects from multiple sides or they may favour one side but adapting it in response to criticism. They may choose a configuration of existing and new perspectives. The key is to bring out nuance within the essay question. Sometimes this can mean critiquing and ‘calling into question’ the question itself.

All arguments have **limitations, caveats or empirical specificities**. A good essay addresses the limitations of its own argument, often through some combination of adaptation of the argument and noting where its limits are irresolvable – whether this is due to the nature of the issue or the scope of the essay.

A good way to **start planning an essay** is to **summarise the argument** in a single sentence, and in **direct response** to the essay question. Once a student has established an argument or ‘answer’ to the question, they should then think about how to **show** the reader **why the argument is convincing**. An argument is not an assertion and does not simply state a belief or view. An argument must be supported by **evidence and reasoning**.

These elements may help convince the reader:

- a structure of the argument that builds cumulatively;
- the use of evidence and empirical examples;
- an engagement with counter-perspectives;
- the recognition of limitations;
- the explicit 'sign-posting' of the argument being built.

It is normal to **rethink** an argument during the writing process – but then the student must go back and make sure this is clear from the outset of the essay and amend the introduction.



Exercise 2.3.

- The Open University has an excellent series of podcasts on essay writing.
- It includes short audios on the main body and giving both sides of the argument.
- Practice detecting authors' arguments.
- Take note of how they build their arguments.



Key points 2.3.

- Arguments are central.
- An argument responds to an explicit or implicit question.
- An argument is more than a statement. It needs *building*.
- The question the argument responds to will be explicit in your essays and dissertation.
- You must convince the reader of the point you are trying to make.
- If you change your argument, make sure the structure and supporting evidence match and to change your statement of the argument in the introduction.



Further information

[Essay and report writing skills \(external link: The Open University\)](#)

[The Open University's start writing essays \(external link: itunes.apple.com\)](#)

2.4 Academic English

Students should write in academic English. They should use a **range of phrases and vocabulary**. They should also be aware of how academic **texts and paragraphs** within are **structured** (2.1).

The use of academic English helps students show that they **engaged with** and **evaluated** authors' arguments, and that they did not only reproduce other authors' text in different words. The vocabulary of academic English aids with **reflecting on** and **challenging** authors' contentions.

Examples of phrases and vocabulary

Phrases in academic English
General statements Hunger striking has a long ... history in Ireland. The sceptical paradox is well known: ... There has been much interest recently in the concept of ... and its relevance Research and speculation on ... have been growing at a rapid rate... In recent years the study of ... has focused on...
Gap in the literature Surprisingly, only one extensive article has been published. This aspect of ... has not been given much attention. The limitation of all these interpretations is that.... But ... is still not fully appreciated. ... but information relating to ... is scarce Studies of ... are rare <u>Negative</u> expressions (few, little, not much, hardly, etc.) are very common here You can also <u>imply</u> there is a gap, by pointing out that previous work has focused on other aspects: The literature on ... has concentrated principally on ... Most of the data on ... which can be found in the literature pertain to ... Most existing research on ... has been based on relatively small samples ... which has made it impossible to carry out satisfactory statistical analyses to explore....
Indicating a question or problem Either <u>direct or indirect</u> questions: Would an analysis of ... bear out their claims? ...requires clarification. Is it ..., or is it...? But the question remains whether.... Yet several basic questions remain unanswered ...

Importance of another approach

Highlight the positive value or advantage of further consideration of the topic:

His elegant model merits testing as a macro sociological theory.

The article deserves careful analysis....

Content and aims

My primary purpose is to...

I will discuss ...In ... I shall argue that....

In this essay I will claim...

In this essay I will present results of a pilot study....

The aim of this essay is to demonstrate that ...

This essay investigates/describes ...

The object of this essay is to look critically at....

This study attempted to explore ...

Structure

This essay will first ..., and then ...

Having analysed ..., I will go on to....

First, brief definitions of ... will be offered; second, the language data and the analysis will be presented; third, an attempt will be made...; finally, ... will be discussed.

Contribution

... offers a possible explanation for

While not exhaustive, this study offers new proposals ...

Restrictions

Since ... is beyond the scope of this study....

It is not the purpose of this study to ..., but rather to ...

I will not attempt here to....

Rather than focus upon ..., my intention is....

I do not attempt to describe or compare ... Instead, I seek to ...

Only the data from ... are considered here

Methodology and methods

Our approach is characterised by two assumptions.... Therefore we have based our research on....

The data on which the discussion is based comprises....

The present essay uses and extends those concepts and is based on ...

Evaluation phrases

Language of evaluation

This study would have been (better) if it had (included) [X]

My (only) criticism is that there is not more [X]

[X] should have received more attention

I have reservations about [X]

I have doubts about [X]

This has little / nothing to do with [X]

Their attitude to [X] is ambiguous

The authors seem to have misunderstood / distorted what Y said about [X]

[X] is not relevant / seems irrelevant / has no obvious relevance to..

Their conclusion seems out of place / unfounded

It is disappointing that...

Neither [X] nor [Y] was considered / addressed (in sufficient depth)

The authors omitted to mention / did not explain how...

It is not clear how [X] was established / measured / identified

It is/remains doubtful / a matter for debate whether...

The authors seem to have forgotten / to disregard / to be unaware of

There is no / inadequate explanation of [X]

One unsatisfactory aspect of the study is [X]

There are grounds for serious doubts as to whether [X]

It is not clear whether...

I was disappointed with..

[X] could have been better expressed

At first sight this appears reasonable, but on further reflection...

Little attention has been paid to [X]

Balance in evaluation

This study has a direct bearing on... [Y]

This study is directly relevant to... [Y]

[X] is central to / suitable for / an important element in... [Y]

[X] plays a key / crucial / pivotal role in...

The authors make a forceful / strong / cogent case for/against... [X]

Their argument is clear / persuasive / succinct / effective

Academic English vocabulary

Justifications

Reason

Because (of) / as / since /

Given the (fact that...)

In the light of the (fact that...)

As is shown / implied / suggested by...

Due to / owing to

Consequences

Therefore / so / consequently

As a result / consequence

Hence / Thus (very formal; more common in sciences than humanities)

For this (these) reason(s), we can say that...

This leads / points to

This suggests / implies / indicates / shows / proves that...

From this we can see / conclude / deduce that...

It can be assumed / inferred / argued that...

Counter-arguments

Anticipating

Opponents/Critics of this position (may, might, etc.) argue that...

Another argument against X is ...

It may be objected that...

One possible objection is that...

Several questions come to mind: ...

One might ask/wonder whether...

Certain objections must, of course, be considered: ...

X (yyyy) has recently argued against...on the ground(s) that...

It is true that...

Refuting

But.... On the other hand...

However, ...

Nevertheless...

While this may be true in cases where..., it does not apply to...

While this is valid for part-time staff, it surely does not apply in the case of full-time workers'

Concluding

Restatement of purpose

The aim / purpose / objective of this study was to...

This study was intended / designed to...

Among the aims of this study was the (investigation) of...

Our research investigated / examined / explored whether...

Summary of findings

The results showed /were that...

We found that... (X) increased / decreased significantly when..

We found that the majority of British parents are in favour of....

The findings do not support the hypothesis that...

Our findings lend support to the hypothesis that...

These findings are (in)consistent with previous research

The findings run contrary to the conventional view that...

Possible explanations and speculation

It may be that the findings were affected / influenced by...

(X) may be due to...

It could be that adolescents are less susceptible to advertising than has been assumed

If these results are confirmed by other studies, we may have to adjust our current view that...

Limitations

We need to be cautious about these findings, because...

... there was no control group

... the study was based on a limited number of ...

... the survey was conducted only among inexperienced lawyers

It has to be emphasised / acknowledged that the study was exploratory

Implications

The present study offers clear evidence for

The study supports the view / claim that...

There is therefore some evidence that...

This leads us to believe that...

This suggests that (X) may be an important (factor) in (Y)

Our research investigated / examined / explored whether...

Recommendations

Likely areas for further research / work are...

Future research should focus on...

One avenue for further study would be to...

Future investigation will no doubt reveal whether...

Further research is needed into...

It is important / relevant to investigate (whether)...



Exercise 2.4.

- Take a copy of an academic text.
- Read it not for content, but for how the author:
 - makes general claims;
 - stresses the gap in the literature;
 - challenges or questions;
 - presents research aims;
 - introduces the structure of the text and argument;
 - argues for a specific issue or viewpoint;
 - refers to methodology and methods;
 - uses words and sentence structures to present the work of others, his or her work, justify, anticipate and refute counter-arguments;
 - concludes.
- Repeat with several academic texts and compare.



Literature in the library

Benesch, S. 2001. Critical English for academic purposes theory, politics, and practice, Mahwah, N.J.: L. Erlbaum Associates.

Burton-Roberts, N. 2016. Analysing sentences an introduction to English syntax, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.

Greenbaum, S. 1996. The Oxford English grammar, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Huddleston R.D. and Pullum G. 2008. The Cambridge grammar of the English language, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hyland, K. and Shaw, P. 2016. The Routledge handbook of English for academic purposes, London: Routledge.

Zinsser, W. 1990. On writing well: an informal guide to writing nonfiction, New York: Harper Perennial.



Courses and workshops

[ELE – Online pre-sessional academic language course](#)

[ELE– Grammar for academic writing](#)

[ELE – Independent study materials](#)

[A beginner’s guide to writing in English for university study \(external link: free access to course materials\)](#)



Further information

[IAD Developing your English \(link\)](#)

2.5 Citing, quoting and referencing

Students have to show that they build on the knowledge and arguments of other scholars, because the ideas of others influence students’ perspectives on issues. It is **good academic practice** and a matter of **intellectual honesty and integrity** to make these influences explicit and to engage with the work of others who researched and wrote about a topic.

There are **different ways** to cite and reference. Your discipline will likely follow a specific citation style. Disciplines in the humanities often use the Harvard referencing style, which is shown below.

Citing means naming the source of an idea or argument. Students can choose to quote directly or indirectly. A **direct quotation** is the word for word replication of an extract from a text. It must be put in quotation marks, indent for long quotations, and acknowledges the source (author, date and page number). It is a good idea not to over-use these!

Examples of direct quotations

In text quotation

Harnisch (2012) notes that ‘[...] interaction between individual citizens, parties, and political institutions may reshape the domestic institutional roles that inform the process of foreign policy role taking and making.’ (2012, p. 51)

Long quotation

'A *national role conception* includes the policymakers' own definitions of the general kinds of decisions, commitments, rules and actions suitable to their state, and of functions if any, their state should perform on a continuing basis in the international system or subordinate regional systems. It is their "image" of the appropriate orientations or functions of their state toward, or in, the external world.' (Holsti 1970, pp. 245–246)

Alternatively, students can choose to use **indirect quotations**. Students can summarise the idea or argument by writing a shorter version of the original or they can paraphrase it by restating the section in other words. Paraphrasing shows an understanding of the text. Students must acknowledge the source by adding author and date.

Examples of indirect quotations

Mentioning the author in the text

Rathbun (2007) contends that domestic and foreign policy positions are often based on the same principles and mirror each other.

Acknowledging a source

Foreign policy decision makers increasingly take domestic issues, such as the economy or the electoral cycle, into consideration (Harnisch 2009; Oppermann 2012).

Students list all references in a **bibliography** at the end of the essay:

Example of a bibliography

- Harnisch, S., 2012. Conceptualizing in the Minefield: Role Theory and Foreign Policy Learning. *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 8(1), pp.47–69.
- Harnisch, S., 2009. "The Politics of Domestication": A New Paradigm in German Foreign Policy. *German Politics*, 18(4), pp.455–468.
- Holsti, J.K., 1970. National Role Conceptions in the Study of Foreign Policy. *International Studies Quarterly*, 14(3), pp.233–309.
- Oppermann, K., 2012. National Role Conceptions, Domestic Constraints and the New "Normalcy" in German Foreign Policy: the Eurozone Crisis, Libya and Beyond. *German Politics*, 21(4), pp.502–519.
- Rathbun, B.C., 2007. Hierarchy and Community at Home and Abroad : Evidence of a Common Structure of Domestic and Foreign Policy Beliefs in American Elites. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 51(3), pp.379–407.

Examples of verbs for in-text referencing

Verbs for referencing authors
Form: verb + that + subject + verb X acknowledge, admit, agree, allege, argue, assert, assume, believe, claim, conclude, consider, decide, demonstrate, deny, determine, discover, doubt, emphasize, explain, find, hypothesize, imply, indicate, think, note, object, observe, point out, prove, reveal, say, show, state, suggest etc.
Form: verb + noun X discuss, express, examine, describe, present, evaluate, criticise , define etc.
Form: verb + person or object + for + noun or gerund X applaud, blame, censure, criticise, disparage, fault, praise, ridicule, single out, thank etc.
Form: verb + person or object + as + noun or gerund or adjective X appraise, assess, characterize, class, classify, define, depict, describe, evaluate, identify, interpret, portray, present, refer, view etc.

There are different **citation styles**. Students should check in their course guides about which one is recommended in their discipline. If the information is not available, students may ask course convenors or programme directors for guidance. Students should be **consistent** in the citation style they use and familiarise themselves with how to cite and reference different sources such as journal articles, books etc.

Tips 2.5.
• Use a citation programme to help with being consistent and creating the bibliography at the end. • Zotero, Mendeley and others are available online free.

Plagiarism is the act of copying word-by-word or referring to an author's or own earlier work, ideas or arguments without acknowledging the source. The University of Edinburgh considers intentional or unintentional plagiarism a **serious disciplinary offence** and it can have disciplinary **consequences** for students proven to have plagiarised.

SPS uses **plagiarism software** to routinely detect cases.

 Key points 2.5.
• Always acknowledge where a quote, an idea or argument came from. • Always write down all necessary detail of all your sources, when reading and taking notes.

- Always cite direct and indirect quotations.
- Always include a bibliography.
- Check which citation style is preferred in your discipline.
- Be consistent.
- Do not plagiarise.



Literature in the library

Pears S. and Shields G.J. 2013. Cite them right: the essential referencing guide,
Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Colin N. 2010. The complete guide to referencing and avoiding plagiarism,
Maidenhead: Open University Press.



Further information

The basics of referencing (external link: Palgrave)

IAD Good academic practice

SPS Avoiding plagiarism

Academic Misconduct

Plagiarism student guidance (PDF)

IAD Referencing and avoiding plagiarism

3. Being Organised

3.1 How to prepare – how to succeed

A key element of being organised is to be prepared. Students should carefully read the information available online, in the programme handbook and course guides, and take note of **timetables and deadlines**.

Tips 3.1.1.

- Use a paper or digital diary and make to do lists to keep track and an overview.
- Make a note of timetables and submission deadlines in your diary.
- Schedule in reminders a month, two weeks, and a week before an essay is due.
- Build a monthly, weekly and daily schedule.

Time planning means finding a **structure** that works for the individual student. Some students may prefer working nights or days, working weeks or in blocks. Students should

have an **agenda** for each study period and session. This should include overall **goals** and the breakdown of these into smaller **manageable tasks**.

Tips 3.1.2.

- Set an agenda.
- Have study goals.
- Break down goals into manageable tasks.
- Know at what time you work best and under what conditions.
- Ask yourself: what is the priority for my study session?
- Is the amount of reading or writing reasonable and achievable in this time?

The **study environment** is important. Students may prefer to work in complete silence, with music or background noise. Students may need natural light or windows, or prefer facing a wall. They may work best on their own or in study groups or a combination of both. Study groups can take different forms. They can be groups in which readings and/or topics are discussed or meetings of peers who read and write in silence with short social breaks in between.

Tips 3.1.3.

- Find the best study environment for you.
- Where: at home, library, café, outside etc.
- With whom: alone, peers or both.

Students should **start tasks early** and plan their time **allowing ample time** for reading and writing. They should **be flexible and review study plans** if things do not go as planned or they find that they do not use their time effectively.

Tips 3.1.4.

- Take a few minutes at the end of a studying session or the day, and ask:
- What have I done today?
- It may help to keep a diary of achieved tasks. Think of this as a 'reverse to-do list' and note down every small task you did today. This can be useful on days when you are wondering: what have I done all week/month/semester/year?

Taking **breaks** is important. Time off studying helps **reenergise and refocus**. Working in intervals with short breaks can be beneficial and increases the **attention span**. Taking a day or two off also helps taking the mind of a topic and **revisiting** it afresh.

The links below include practical advice on managing workloads, how to combine family life and free time with studying, and articles on why the human brain needs breaks and how to make to do lists.



Key points 3.1.

- Plan and structure your time.
- Prioritise tasks.
- Revise your study plan.
- Take breaks.



Literature in the library

Allen, D. 2001. Getting things done: how to achieve stress-free productivity, London: Piatkus.

Covey, S.R. 2004. The 7 habits of highly effective people, London: Simon & Schuster.



Courses and workshops

ELE Listening to lectures and note-taking

IAD Study hub learning resources



Further information

IAD Preparing your studies

IAD Time management (includes self-assessment and time planners to download)

IAD Ways to prioritise your time (PDF)

IAD How to assess your time (PDF)

IAD Reading at University

Time management skills (external link: The Open University)

Information about taking breaks

You've Been Taking Breaks All Wrong. Here's How To Do It Right (external link: The Huffington Post)

Study Breaks and Stress-Busters

Tomato Timer

Information about to do lists

The psychology of the to-do list (external link: BBC)

[Master the art of the to do list \(external link: lifehacker.com\)](https://lifehacker.com/master-the-art-of-the-to-do-list-1826484282)

[Why “To-Do” Lists Don’t Work, and How to Change That \(external link: lifehacker.com\)](https://lifehacker.com/why-to-do-lists-dont-work-and-how-to-change-that-1826484282)

3.2 How do you learn?

The Learning and Academic Skills Handbook is a tool for MSc students to become critical thinkers, and to improve their reading and writing. By **reflecting** on materials, students are more likely to remember ideas and arguments than if they tried to memorise them. It is through **engagement** with materials that more effective **learning takes place**.

There are, however, different ways individuals best absorb information. The Open University has an excellent guide to **making the most of individual learning styles** (link below) including a test to assess individual learning type and suggestions on how to try new ways of learning.

Tips 3.2.1.

- Reflect on your learning style.
- Try a new learning style.

Students should **take notes** during lectures and tutorials as well as while reading and thinking about essay plans. It is essential to keep an **active mind** while taking notes. This means notes should take the form of key words and points or concise **summaries**. They should not be sentence-by-sentence copies. Students should write down their **reactions and thoughts** in their notes and make sure to mark them as such.

When **reading**, students can identify main points in paragraphs and show how they are linked in their notes. For **lectures or tutorials**, students should prepare and know what the topic should be, and come prepared with some questions or reflections on the material. During lectures and tutorials, they should actively listen and write down key points.

There are **different note taking techniques** and the Open University offers a good introduction to them (see link below).

Tips 3.2.2.

- Think while you take notes. Try to take active notes, writing down questions, thoughts, reflections, connections between readings rather than just quotations.
- Structure your notes into headings and/or bullet points.
- Use abbreviations.
- Write down author, title, date etc. in case of reading materials.

- Try different note taking techniques to find your own.
- Capture your reactions and thoughts in your notes.



Key points 3.2.

- Being a 'critical' thinker, reader and writer is *learning*.
- Actively take notes.
- Finding an individual note taking technique can help with processing materials.



Courses and workshops

[IAD Study Hub](#)

[MOOCs](#) (free online courses preparing for a variety of tasks)



Further information

[IAD Reflection \(links to PDFs on what, why and how\)](#)

[IAD LearnBetter essentials - Tips for effective reflection \(PDF\)](#)

[IAD Effective studying](#)

[Making the most of your learning style \(external link: The Open University\)](#)

[Note taking techniques \(external link: The Open University\)](#)

3.3 Further Guidance

Feedback is an important part of **communication** between students and teaching staff. It helps students identify their strengths and the areas that need improvement. Students should view feedback as part of the **process of learning** rather than a final judgement.

Students should make use of their **tutors', lecturers' and course convenors' guidance and feedback hours** to discuss the course, their progress and any additional guidance and feedback they received or wish to get as well as to have follow up discussions on essays, lectures and tutorials.

Students should discuss their **dissertation** progress with their **supervisors**. They can go see them during their guidance and feedback hours or email them to schedule a separate meeting. They should speak with the **programme director** about any other issues they encounter.

Students can seek help about where to go and where to find further information, and can ask about placements, events and development opportunities in the **Student Development Office**.

The **Taught MSc Programme Handbook** and individual **course guides** also offer further guidance.



Key points 3.3.

- Feedback is part of the learning process.
- Get in touch if you need advice or clarification.
- There is help:
 - Teaching staffs' guidance and feedback hours
 - Contact or go to the Student Development Office
 - Contact or go to the Graduate School Office
 - Taught MSc Handbook, MSc Programme Handbooks and course guides



Further information

[Student Development Office](#)

For general enquiries: ssps.student-development@ed.ac.uk

Chrystal Macmillan Building, room 1.14