

Get the results you want! Essential learning skills for international students

Welcome to the University of Bristol! We want you to have the best chance of succeeding in your studies during your time in the UK, so we have produced this handout to help you understand the requirements of the British academic system and achieve the results you want.

Critical thinking skills

In the UK, we award marks based on your ability to *analyse information and concepts and then present your own evaluation of them*. We want to know what *you* think about what you have learned. You will not achieve the grades you desire if you simply reproduce information and tell us what you know, as this does not require the critical thinking skills you need to demonstrate.

Ask yourself:

- What are the questions I need to answer?
- Do I agree or disagree with this? Why?
- Where is my evidence? Where did I find it? Have I recorded my source?
- How does this relate to what I already know?
- How will I use this in my assignment?
- What is *my* interpretation of this topic?

If you want to achieve deeper-level learning, build context by making connections between the different components of your programme. Take the time to ask your own questions; don't just take in lots of information without a purpose and then struggle to work out what to do with it. This makes the writing process much harder than necessary.

Getting your reading and note making right

Most students do not target their reading and research, taking in far too much unnecessary information and wasting valuable time. If you are reading in a second or third language then this will obviously take more effort, so choose what you intend to read carefully. It is a myth that you need to read every word of every book or article you come across; instead, learn to be selective and read only what you need if you are very busy and make economical notes. Again, this makes the writing process easier.

Save time by deciding what you are looking for and then reading abstracts, introductions and conclusions to identify the key aspects of the research. Compare this to the questions you have and then decide if you need to read the entire article or chapter. Don't waste time reading a pile of journals only to find that they didn't answer your questions.

Ask yourself:

- What are the questions I need to answer?
- How is this relevant to my argument? How can I *use* this?
- Do I need to read all of this chapter/article or just relevant sections?
- What do I really need to write down and record?

Get into the habit of regularly reviewing your notes and writing down how you intend to use what you have found out in your assignment. This builds good critical thinking skills and encourages you to evaluate and not just reproduce your findings.

What is good academic writing?

A lot of the writing you will find in journals and academic books will be dense and complex. This is because academics write for their peers and not for a student audience. Do not aim to imitate some of these convoluted styles in your assignments. Instead, aim for clarity in your structure and in your writing, as this will prove to the marker that you understand the topic and have communicated your evaluation of it effectively.

Try to:

- Write as if you were presenting your paper at a conference, so that it flows naturally
- Avoid using unnecessary jargon or too many words in each sentence
- Be very clear about the structure of your argument and its progression
- Offer an introduction that explains your argument and intention
- Ensure that each paragraph is a complete unit of your argument
- Maintain a critical approach that reflects your interpretation of the topic
- Submit work that has been carefully checked and is free from errors of any kind
- Leave extra time to carry out this detailed checking and review
- Ensure that you have acknowledged all your sources in line with your School's handbook

Further reading

Stella Cottrell, *The Study Skills Handbook* (Palgrave Macmillan)

Stella Cottrell, *Critical Thinking Skills* (Palgrave Macmillan)

Colin Neville, *How to Improve Your Assignment Results* (Open University Press)

Colin Neville, *The Complete Guide to Referencing and Avoiding Plagiarism* (Open University Press)