

Study guides

This study guide introduces just some of the topics we cover, these and more besides can be found in greater detail at www.plymouth.ac.uk/learn:

Active learning
Critical thinking
Reflection
Reading effectively
Referencing
Notemaking

Report writing
Essay writing
Presentations
Revision and exams
Getting organised

Welcome to Plymouth University ...and congratulations for getting a place on your programme. University might be very different from your previous educational experiences, not only in surroundings but in social, cultural and intellectual aspects too. Plymouth's Learning Development team offers study support online or face to face, in one-to-one or small group tutorials (bookable in the Learning Gateway in the Roland Levinsky Building, 01752 587676) and in the Drop-in Zone in the Plymouth campus Library. You and your lecturers can request workshops designed for groups studying your subject. Writing support is also offered by a professional creative writer, the Royal Literary Fund writing fellow. We hope this taster study guide will start you thinking about your learning development through your course, much more is available on our website.

Active learning

Independence and support

Whilst autonomy is encouraged in Higher Education, this does not mean that you are alone. Other students, lecturers, tutors, advisors and counsellors, as well as family and friends, can offer you support and guidance.

Developing skills

Your programme will provide you with many opportunities to develop a range of skills, from core academic skills to broader life skills, many of which will be valuable for employment. Make the most of these opportunities: put yourself forward and be enthusiastic whenever possible – everything is a valuable learning experience.

Learn to learn

Your current study habits might be challenged, so be adaptable: prepare to experiment with new and

creative approaches, and recognise that we learn different things in different ways - if it doesn't seem to be working, try something different.

Learning and teaching

Whilst lectures and seminars will play a central role in most degree programmes, increasingly diverse teaching methods and technologies are also being integrated into programmes to increase accessibility and to support and improve learning. Examples of these follow below.

Placements, experiential and work-based learning are becoming increasingly common in a number of programmes. They help to give you a deeper understanding of your subject, as well as contacts with and skills for potential employers.

Lectures are not designed to give you everything you need to know: they are extremely valuable as springboards for your further independent study, and offer hints and clarification of debated aspects of your field.

Seminars are a great opportunity for you to practise a number of essential academic and professional skills, such as: discussing your subject with clarity; arguing logically and tactfully; listening to different points of view; making considered criticisms and comments; expressing your opinions and identifying the evidence upon which they are based.

Peer group work is valuable because it helps you practise the many challenging interpersonal life skills to do with communication, co-operation, compromise, organisation and joint effort. A successful vari-skilled team can achieve much more than an individual, and a group can be even greater than the sum of its members. Interaction with others, and especially explaining things to others, is one of the most active ways of learning. A positive and enthusiastic approach, together with setting good ground rules for the group, should help you all achieve and benefit from the task you are set.

Peer support can be incredibly valuable, especially in the most stressful times at university. Even where you are not formally required to work with peers, we highly recommend you set up informal study partnerships or support groups for social, enjoyable study and moral support. Although you mustn't collaborate on assignments that are supposed to be individual pieces of work, exchanging favours such as proofreading will enhance your own and your peers' skills both at once. (See our study guide on essay writing for tips on how to proofread, and A Guide to Referencing, www.plymouth.ac.uk/refman, for notes on plagiarism.)

Reflect

...on your learning regularly: think about how things are going and where improvements could be made. An ideal time to do this is when you get feedback on your work; see this as a way of improving for next time rather than as a criticism of the previous piece.

Critical Thinking

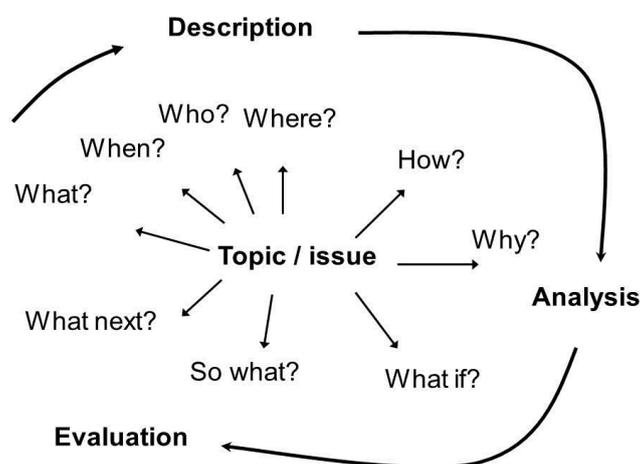
Criticality is one of the things that makes a good academic – and that's you! Critical thinking is the attempt to ask and answer questions systematically. Critical thinkers look for evidence and for good reasons before believing something to be true – even a peer-reviewed published article by a world expert. This is at the heart of what it means to be a student, scientist, researcher, scholar, analyst or professional in any field. It becomes increasingly important in your work as you progress through the years, whatever your subject. In practical terms, there are three key steps in thinking and writing:

Creative and active learning

In both lectures and seminars, learning actively involves not just concentrating and listening attentively, but also making meaningful, creative notes. Raise questions, out loud or in your head and notes, to develop your understanding. This involves making decisions yourself about what is to be learnt, and then making sense of it, looking for connections and relationships between ideas, and understanding concepts and principles. In practice this might involve, for instance, rather than just copying and making notes in your revision, presenting the material to a class mate as well. Use as many senses as you can when learning: audio, visual, mental, physical...

You can learn actively outside of contact (taught) hours by revisiting and reformulating your notes, alone or with friends, and preparing for the next session by reading and ensuring you have all the relevant details and hand-outs.

Study guide '**Starting University**' addresses expectations, skills development, making the most of feedback, and issues around work/life balance. '**Learning Settings**' goes into more depth on the topics under 'Learning and Teaching', above.



Description introduces a topic by defining clearly what the point or issue is, stating what is involved,

where it takes place, who it affects and under what circumstances. To make description more analytical, justify and explain things. For example, rather than simply stating when something happened, make the fact more meaningful by contextualising it (e.g. pointing out what else of relevance was happening at the same time) and highlighting the significance of the timing. This makes your work more meaningful as more complex description becomes analytical.

Analysis examines and explains how parts fit into a whole and why they do what they do, giving actual, likely and possible reasons. It compares and contrasts different elements, and shows how relationships such as cause and effect can be

understood. When you start to consider the pros and cons of these effects, analysis becomes critical analysis.

Evaluation judges the success or failure of something, its implications and/or value. Evaluating such implications leads us to conclusions, often raises subsequent issues and recommendations and is usually found at the end of a piece of academic work.

See '**Critical Thinking**' for examples, suggestions and more practical tips for making all your work critical, and for how to differentiate between description and analysis.

Reflection

The purpose of reflecting is to increase your awareness in order to generate new understandings and perspectives on the things you do. One of our favourite descriptions of reflecting comes from J. K. Rowling's novel, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, where Dumbledore introduces the 'pensieve': 'One simply siphons the [...] thoughts from one's mind, pours them into the basin, and examines them at one's leisure. It becomes easier to spot patterns and links, you understand, when they are in this form.' On your course, you may be asked to reflect on projects, research and work placements, on the way you study, learn, and progress - as an individual and in relation to others. Reflection often draws on felt experiences, and you will be invited to analyse the feelings, values and beliefs that influence your personal, professional and/or academic development. This disclosure can be daunting but honesty is important for your learning so that you undergo a true mental exploration of the relevant issues. Showing your reasoning will help you in this process of deepening your understanding and constructing knowledge, as well as serving to explain and contextualise your responses to others. Addressing questions like the ones below (adapted from Johns, 1995) should help you reflect:

- **What was I trying to achieve?**
- **What internal and external factors were influencing me?**
- **How did my decisions match with my beliefs?**
- **What factors made me act in an incongruent way?**
- **What knowledge did or should have informed me?**
- **What if I had made different decisions?**
- **Could I improve on this?**
- **How do I now feel about this?**
- **How does this connect with my past experience, my reading and my learning?**

'**Reflection**' offers more thoughts and tips on becoming reflective in your studies, reflective writing and assessment.

Reading

Burns and Sinfield (2004) helpfully recommend that reading should be 'proactive, creative and reflexive'. So rather than being a passive recipient of information, a good reader is an active interrogator of material, with high concentration levels. Because you have a lot of reading to do but cannot cover everything, you need to focus and prioritise carefully. Some material will require in-depth reading, and some you can read much more quickly. Plan your reading so as not to waste time finding and reading too much or too little:

Step 1: What are you looking for? (e.g. background, history, main debates, particular facts, quotes,

opinions, evidence, or answers to specific questions?)

Step 2: Which materials will give you that?

Step 3: How, and how fast, do you need to read them?

Step 4: How will you get what you need out of them?

Step 5: How will you make best use in your writing of the material you've read?

What you are looking for	Reading technique	Physical and mental activity
Facts and specifics	Scanning	Searching the text looking for key words and phrases, moving your eye fast and not lingering on single words or attempting to take in whole sentences, with a fairly empty mind (like using a telephone directory); highlighting the desired information.
To gain, consolidate or revise overview, background knowledge, or broad understanding	a) Skimming b) Ladder reading	a) Moving your eye quickly over the text, not necessarily from top left to bottom right, perhaps with a pointer to keep your eye moving at speed; b) Reading subheadings, beginnings and endings of paragraphs and/or sections; Forming mental images of the main issues and 'big picture', which you might draw, mindmap or otherwise summarise in notes.
To develop a full understanding of principles and details, assessing and evaluating evidence and ideas	Critical in-depth reading	Reading carefully, slowly, and possibly repetitively while raising questions to analyse and interrogate the text; making notes; requires a high level of concentration

For more suggestions on method and technique, see '**Reading Effectively**', on our website.

Referencing

Referencing gives credit to those whose ideas and materials have informed yours, and it shows that you have informed your opinions from wide reading and drawn your conclusions from robust evidence and research. Keeping in mind why referencing is important makes it much more meaningful. Referencing can be complex, time-consuming and fiddly, but keeping track of what material came from where when you first encounter it makes the task much more manageable. Referencing conventions can vary greatly in the detail, even though the underlying principle is universal: that another person's idea should always be attributed to them, no matter how you come across it.

This is a very brief introduction to referencing. Always follow the guidelines given to you on your course, or if there are none, use the latest edition of *Cite them right: the essential referencing guide* (Pears and Shields).

At Plymouth University many students are expected to use the 'Harvard' system of referencing. There is no one universally agreed format for Harvard – rather it is a set of principles that make up what should better be called an **author/date** system, as follows:

In your text include:

Surname (or organisation name) + year

e.g. 'As Lovelock (2006) suggests...'

or 'According to the WHO (2010) guidelines...'

or 'This is problematic because... (Jones, 2011).'

There should be an alphabetical **reference list** of sources at the end of your assignment such as:

Surname, Initial. (year) 'Title of article', *Name of Journal*. Volume number (part number), pages.

e.g. Zandonella, C. (2001) 'Is it all just a pipe dream?' *Nature*, 410 (6830), pp. 734-738.

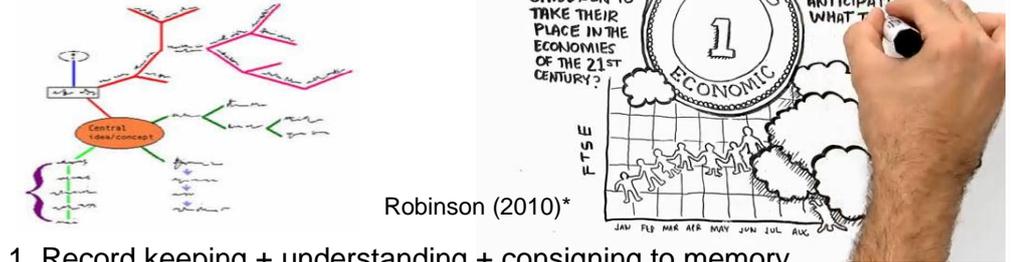
or Inman, M. (2011) 'Earth Getting Mysteriously Windier', *National Geographic News* [online]. Available at: <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2011/03/110328-earth-storms-winds-global-warming-science-environment/>. Accessed on: October 6th 2011.

A **numeric system** (e.g. 'Vancouver') uses superscript numbers¹ in the text that correspond to footnotes either at the bottom of the page or at the end of the document where the full citations appear generally as above.

In our online resource, **A Guide to Referencing**, available to Plymouth University students at www.plymouth.ac.uk/refman, you'll find much more detail on how to: reference many different types of source; use academic language to integrate others' material with your own reasoning; avoid plagiarism; and use Reference Manager and Endnote to store your referencing details.

Notemaking

Taking meaningful notes that later become starting points for assignments and revision, at the same time as listening to a lecture, is fairly challenging. Understanding and learning from what's being said on top of that is quite a tall order – and yet this is the most important bit! For many people (with practice), *making* creative visual notes, as opposed to *taking* linear all-verbal notes, can be the solution. Making picture or pattern notes can involve drawings, symbols and simple lines that can be a quicker, easier and fuller way to express things than finding enough words and sentences to record everything. The process of articulating and illustrating concepts and links supports meaningful learning (and therefore recall too). The general principle is to record less, and participate and understand (and therefore remember) more.

Notetaking	Notemaking
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Plan in advance. Ensure you always have a pen and paper. 2. Experiment with different note-making techniques to see if they work for you. 3. Be selective. Get the main points down, don't get hung up on detail. 4. Note concepts/ideas or terms you don't understand so you can clarify meaning later. 5. Store your notes carefully and always note the bibliographic source or reference. 	 <p>Robinson (2010)*</p>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Record keeping 2. Relatively passive - not always easy to maintain concentration 3. Easy to try to include too much 4. Hard to write fast enough 5. Many identical pages to look through/recall 6. Neat, tidy and manageable 7. Seems safe 8. Familiar 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Record keeping + understanding + consigning to memory 2. Active – forces engagement and aids criticality, thinking on your feet and learning as you go; physical creativity stimulates creative mental activity and vice versa 3. Forces focus and selection 4. Illustrate connections quickly - 'say' more, more quickly and more memorably than in text 5. Offers varied multisensory memory triggers 6. Can get/seem chaotic 7. Generally more challenging (that's why it's effective!), especially at first 8. Creative and fun

Another great way of making lecture or revision notes meaningful is by using metaphor and analogy. Ask yourself, 'What is this issue *like*?' For instance, draw a tree, and label the 'root' of the problem, the 'trunk' that holds the thing up, the 'canopy' that overshadows things, the 'leaves' that come and go like symptoms and change rapidly – and so on. For more practical, visual ideas see this excellent resource:

http://www.visual-literacy.org/periodic_table/periodic_table.html.

You can find more discussion of methods and techniques as well as practical tips in 'Notemaking'.

Report writing

Reports usually report on a process you have undertaken, and its purpose is to convince a reader of a particular finding. So, like other academic or scientific writing, a report contains a hypothesis or central message for a particular audience. As in other writing, this message forms the central thread. This thread should be identified in the abstract or summary at the beginning, explained and justified in the introduction, researched and contextualised in the literature review, tested in the method and results, explored in the discussion, concluded, and then the implications of this message are offered as recommendations. On the right is a generic example of a report outline, which may also contain diagrams and therefore also a 'list of figures' after the contents page.

Report writing: a typical report

Abstract/Summary Contents

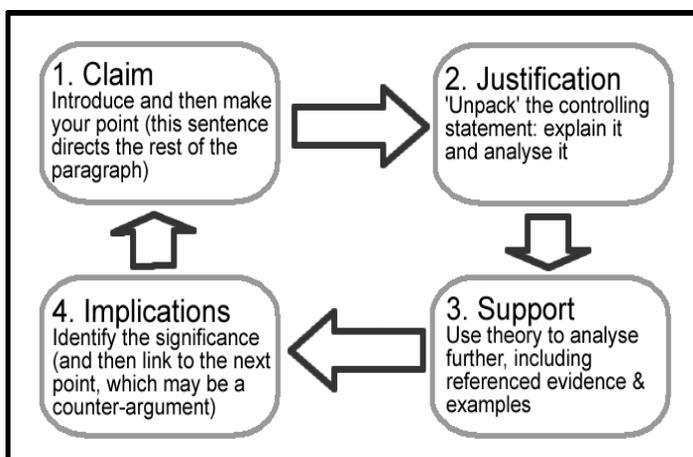
1. **Introduction:** the nature and function of a report
 - 1.1 The nature of a report
 - 1.2 The function of a report
 - 1.3 Types of report:
 2. **Literature review:** reading matter to contextualise and help you develop ideas
 3. **Planning:** purpose and structure
 4. **Method:** writing and presenting the report
 - 4.1 Language
 - 4.2 Presentation and layout
 5. **Results/findings** and presenting them visually
 6. **Discussion/analysis**
 7. **Conclusion and recommendations**
- References
Appendix

'**Report Writing: A Report**' is written in the style of a report and each section offers more detail on how that section might be written. See '**Essay Writing**', for more on how to plan, research and structure your writing.

Essay writing

Essays are a mental exploration of a topic, where you study different people's ideas, discuss opposing arguments, compare differing theories, examine appropriate evidence, and ultimately develop *your* perspective on the issue. There is no one right way of fulfilling an assignment brief: instead part of the challenge is in selecting and analysing the relevant material *you* deem the best for informing *your* thinking, and crafting *your* essay in the way that seems best to *you*, given the parameters of the brief. Consider the following questions to help you decide how to tackle the essay writing process:

- a. How will you organise your time and task?
- b. What is the key question(s) in your brief?
- c. What kind of answer is the brief looking for?
- d. What do you already know about the subject?
- e. What do you need to find out? How? Where? How much?
- f. What do you think of what you've read?
- g. What do you want to tell your reader? Why?
- h. Who is your reader?
- i. How can you convince them?
- j. What evidence and sources will you refer to?
- k. How will you organise your material?
- l. How can you improve on your draft?
- m. How can you do better next time?



The essay writing process not only shows your marker how *you make sense* of your subject, but moreover helps you engage with your subject. Your opinion on its own is insufficient, but your researched, illustrated, reasoned, referenced opinion is the central thread in your work. Use the model above to formulate your overall message and craft the sub-points so that you present a clearly structured piece of writing through which your reader can easily follow the thread of your argument.

'**Essay Writing**' further discusses structure and offers advice on language, proofreading, presentation and layout and a checklist for a good essay. We recommend you spend plenty of time analysing the brief/question, ideally in discussion with peers. It is invaluable to give each other feedback on your work in progress and perhaps exchange proofreading favours (this will improve your own critical eye for good writing as well as help your friend). See our website for more ways in which we too can help.

Presentations

Everyone can get nervous, yet everyone can do well. Use the adrenalin to drive the planning, preparation, rehearsal and performance process. When deciding what to cover, what to say about the topic and how to present it, think about the audience, duration, assessment, and remember that less *is* usually more!

Structure:

- Introduction = outline the content and aims (explain, justify and contextualise) + 'hook' (to get audience interested and listening, e.g. a relevant topical issue).
- Body = develop main arguments concisely and in a logical order (highlight the significance to the central theme).
- Conclusion = identify significant findings or results and sum up main underlying issue.
- Closure = thank the audience for their attention.
- Questions = repeat what the audience members say so that the whole group can hear. If you don't understand a question, ask the speaker to clarify. If you don't know the answer, say so - you are not expected to know everything. You could ask if anyone else in the room has any suggestions, and/or advise where they might find the answer, and/or offer to look it up for them.

Visual aids: be moderate so as not to distract from the content. *You* are the show – PowerPoint (or whatever tool you choose) is only a prop for you that provides the audience with illustrations.

Rehearse: what you are going to talk about and why it is important.

Remember: keep your audience engaged by talking *to* them, not *at* them; make eye contact, and use friendly but non-distracting body language.

'Presentations' on our website offers more advice on these issues and also some basic tips for using PowerPoint, a checklist for a good presentation, and advice on poster presentations.

Revision and exams

The exam process helps you to consolidate and further your learning as well as giving you an opportunity to demonstrate it to your assessor and to yourself.

When should I start preparing for exams?

NOW! Start by finding out the date, time and place of the exam; the type of exam; organisation of the paper; timing; marks and their weighting; any supporting material and equipment required or allowed.

Remember to:

- make revision meaningful
- keep focused
- condense your course material and reading using index cards, audio and visual notes
- brush up on your reading skills
- practise the art of taking exams
- be positive: have confidence/create a nice study environment/look after yourself/reward yourself when you meet targets
- treat time as a resource

What should I revise? Check past papers. Prioritise the topics that seem to have been central to the course and the ones that interest or challenge you most. Take hints from lecturers - notice what they emphasise in class.

How do I revise? Learn general rules and principles more than details. Use all your senses to help you to remember. Revise actively, creatively, sociably and *enjoy it!*

What if...

- ...I don't understand what I am revising?
- ...I'm late starting my revision?
- ...I can't keep to my revision timetable?
- ...I don't cope well with stress?
- ...I'm afraid I might panic and go blank during the exam?

Then see '**Revision and Examinations**' for more strategies on revision, recall, preparing and sitting exams, and/or contact us.

Getting organised

Managing your time

...is the starting point for any serious activity and one of the keys to success. Develop an effective approach to time management so that you can meet all your deadlines and commitments: consider using long-term yearly wall planners as well as weekly timetables and/or a sizeable diary to help distribute your workload relatively evenly throughout the day, week, term and year.

Motivation

...is best when you feel good and confident, so always begin by clarifying the task. The hardest part is often getting started - then just start writing! It may not be perfect first time but you will have something to build upon. Being aware of what it is that tends to distract you most will help you manage your time more effectively.

Suit yourself

Think about when and where you are most effective at studying. Are you a morning person who enjoys the working atmosphere of the library, or do you prefer to study in the evening at home? Take notice of your own personal preferences, styles and rhythms when planning your study.

	Morning	Afternoon	Evening	Deadline
Mon				
Tues				
Wed				
Thu				
Fri				
Sat				
Sun				

Stress

...can be thought of as mental, emotional, or physical strain or tension, and a normal part of everyday living. Experiencing stress as a student at university is extremely common. However, although a mild degree of stress can be helpful in keeping you motivated, excessive levels over a long period of time can damage your health, so do make an effort to manage things, and seek support if you need it. Learning Development can help with study-related stress, and you can use other PU support services such as studentcounselling@plymouth.ac.uk.

'Getting Organised' is available on our website, and expands on the above topics with additional advice on procrastination and creating a study environment that's right for you.

References

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Learning Development
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Learning Gateway, RLB 011
01752 587676

Tutorials
Drop-in Zone
Taught sessions
Online writing feedback
Peer Assisted Learning Scheme
Email support