

УДК 811.111

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DEVELOPING READING AND WRITING SKILLS FOR POSTGRADUATES

Students undertaking postgraduate research degrees are expected to write a major thesis and publish conference and journal articles.

If they have started studying at postgraduate level they probably already have good undergraduate-level skills, but these will be developed further and assessed

more stringently in postgraduate study. Therefore, they will need new skills for post-graduate study. They will be expected to:

1. read core materials in order to get a broader perspective on their specialism;
2. demonstrate academic judgment by gathering appropriate published evidence or data, which they then critically evaluate and use as the basis for logical argument and discussion;
3. gather their own data and consider its significance, by using methodologies such as questionnaires and statistical analysis;
4. present their findings in a professional manner as a written assignment, a dissertation, or an oral presentation to others.

They will also need to read large quantities of text quickly, accurately and critically. In this context, 'critical' means discerning the strengths and the limitations of the work they are studying, so they can engage with it at an appropriate level.

Through studies students acquire an understanding of the theories and concepts of their subject. In gaining an understanding, rather than simply 'learning' the theories, their thinking evolves and they are able to form well-reasoned judgments about the theory.

The textbooks are the first source of information. They tell the students the names of key theorists and they can also follow up on the references, the bibliography or further reading lists provided. By selecting those that are relevant and expanding their reading to them, they are led on to other relevant materials with their own lists of references.

Before starting a search for material to read, the students should identify the key themes they are looking for. Also think about what type of literature would be most useful to them. If the subject is new to students a generic text book might be a good starting place. If this is a subject area they know something about then they may wish to refine their knowledge on the academic or professional literature.

They can use the OU's online library to find source material (it has links to journals, articles, e-books and more), sign in to listen the audio content available to OU students.

When searching online they can use: a Google Scholar search; an OU library search; a web search; Wikipedia.

Once they've found some promising material, they are to assess whether or not it is relevant so they are not to waste time reading material of little value.

Some of the sources the students might use: text books; academic journals; professional journals; government literature; organisational literature.

Once the students have identified the sources that they think they want to read, they are to go through them briefly to make sure that they are indeed relevant to their studies. There is no point in reading a source comprehensively until they are sure the material fulfils their requirements.

Scanning is the technique used, for example, when trying to find a name in a phone book. It usually involves running your finger across and down the page to try and identify salient words. By scanning the papers you have accessed you should soon be able to see whether or not they are relevant to your studies. So, the students shouldn't discard those that aren't relevant at this stage. They may be useful later.

Skimming is the next stage of the process in deciding whether or not a particular piece is worth reading more thoroughly, as it requires the students to engage with the text a little more. There are two levels of skimming. At the basic level they should read the abstract, summary or overview to get an insight into the purpose and the findings of the document, then read the headings and the subheadings to see how the information is organized. By reading any conclusions they can make sure that the outputs from the piece can contribute to their understanding. They may still feel that they need a better understanding of what the authors are trying to do before they read the text in its entirety. Here it may help to read the first paragraph of each section, or even to read the first two lines of each paragraph. Doing this will make it easier to decide whether or not to read the entire text.

Once the students have selected something to read comprehensively it is important that they engage effectively with the text. Before starting, there is a need to be sure that they have thought about why they are reading it and what they want to find out.

Critical reading can be seen as a three-stage process: understanding, questioning, evaluating.