Postgraduate study skills

Key concepts and terms

- *Flash card*
- *Learning style*
- *Qualitative research*
- *Quantitative research*
- *Triangulation*

LEARNING OUTCOMES

On completing this chapter you should be able to define these key concepts. You should also know about:

- Learning styles
- Basic study skills
- Making the most of lectures
- Getting the most out of reading
- How to revise
- How to write essays and reports
- The principles of good writing
- Referencing

Introduction

Postgraduate study skills are concerned with what those studying for postgraduate degrees or for professional qualifications need to know and be able to do to learn effectively. The skills are those associated with the learning acquired from lectures and reading and those concerned with accessing,

evaluating and conducting research. They are linked to essay and report writing and the skills required to revise for and take examinations. Most significantly, they are an essential aspect of continuing professional development and lifelong learning. This chapter deals with the conditions required for effective learning, the study skills involved, preparing for and taking exams and writing essays and reports.

Effective learning

Effective learning is partly dependent on the context – the quality of teaching and the educational resources available. But it is primarily a matter of what learners do – how they make use of or adapt their learning style.

Learning styles

Learners have different styles – a preference for a particular approach to learning. Kolb et al (1974) identified the following learning styles:

- Accommodators, who learn by trial and error, combining the concrete experience and experimentation stages of the cycle.
- Divergers, who prefer concrete to abstract learning situations and reflection to active involvement. Such individuals have great imaginative ability, and can view a complete situation from different viewpoints.
- Convergers, who prefer to experiment with ideas, considering them for their practical usefulness. Their main concern is whether the theory works in action, thus combining the abstract and experimental dimensions.
- Assimilators, who like to create their own theoretical models and assimilate a number of disparate observations into an overall integrated explanation. Thus they veer towards the reflective and abstract dimensions.

Another analysis of learning styles was made by Honey and Mumford (1996). They listed the following four styles:

- Activists, who involve themselves fully without bias in new experiences and revel in new challenges.
- Reflectors, who stand back and observe new experiences from different angles. They collect data, reflect on it and then come to a conclusion.
- Theorists, who adapt and apply their observations in the form of logical theories. They tend to be perfectionists.
- Pragmatists, who are keen to try out new ideas, approaches and concepts to see if they work.

However, none of these four learning styles is exclusive. It is quite possible that one person could be both a reflector and a theorist and someone else could be an activist/pragmatist, a reflector/pragmatist or even a theorist/pragmatist.

It is useful for learners to identify which style or mix of styles they prefer as this will affect the way they set about learning. But they must be prepared to flex their style in different situations.

Study skills

Study skills are concerned with absorbing, classifying, evaluating and recording ideas, concepts and information and reflecting on the meaning and significance of what has been absorbed. They cover learning from lectures and reading, and revision. More pragmatically, they prepare people to pass examinations. At professional or postgraduate level it is probable, even in a taught master's programme, that students will be left to their own devices much more than when they were taking their first degree (although undergraduates from some universities may question the extent to which they were ever taught a lot during their course). It is to be hoped that students honed their study skills at undergraduate level but they will need to exercise those skills even more effectively when they are postgraduates. And those who are studying for a professional qualification at postgraduate level such as that offered by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (the CIPD), who have not attended a further or higher educational establishment, will need to give careful thought to the approach they adopt. Both categories of postgraduate student need to apply study skills such as those described below.

By the time you get to a postgraduate level of studies you should have become familiar with the best ways of getting to know your subject. But it will do no harm to be reminded of the basic principles you should adopt when pursuing your studies. These are concerned with making the best use of lectures (including note taking), your reading, and the information available on the internet, reflecting on what you have learned and revising.

Making the best use of lectures

A lecture has been defined as 'a system whereby the lecturer's notes are transferred to student's notes without passing through the minds of either' (Horn, 2009: 28). To achieve more than that during the lecture you should:

- carefully track the structure of the lecture from introduction to conclusion – follow the train of the lecturer's thoughts, which should have been made clear, although this may not always be the case and you might have to work hard during or after the lecture to make sense of it;

- listen actively – engage with the topic, relate the content of the lecture to what you already know, think about how it ties in with your experience;
- be critical – challenge in your mind any statements or assumptions made by the lecturer and if you feel strongly about them, challenge the lecturer – politely;
- follow the lecturer's PowerPoint slides and read the notes, but do not rely on them – do your own thinking and pay attention to your own note taking as suggested below.

Note taking during lectures

- Do not write too much – focus on key ideas, words and phrases. You can't get everything down.
- Avoid taking detailed notes on something you could easily get out of a textbook.
- Record the key points in brief paragraphs or notes.
- Number paragraphs for easy reference.
- Record any recommendations made on further reading or references.
- If you miss something, leave a space – it may be covered later in the lecture or in the conclusion and you can always refer to the lecturer's notes.

After a lecture

Following the lecture:

- Read through the notes.
- Tidy them up.
- Fill any gaps.
- Label and file the notes.
- Consider transcribing your notes onto a computer file – this is a good way of reinforcing the learning and will make them easier to access and read when using them as the basis for an essay or paper or revising; you can keep them in a portfolio alongside notes you make from your reading and any other information you need to record about your studies (some establishments require students to keep a portfolio).

Getting the most out of reading

The first thing to do is to decide what to read – there is plenty of choice. Your tutor should help by recommending key texts and referring to significant journal articles. Any good textbook will refer to supporting material. If you

are studying human resource management it is obviously a good idea to read *People Management* and take a look at the information available on the CIPD website, which includes CIPD research reports and fact sheets. But you should also at least refer to the main British HR journals to spot relevant articles and identify useful research. These include the *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, the *British Journal of Management*, *Employee Relations*, the *Human Resource Management Journal* and the *International Journal of Human Resource Management*. If you cannot reach them in a library, they can be accessed if you are a member of the CIPD in EBSCO on the CIPD website. You can also use Google Scholar. Additional material is available from the publications of Income Data Services and Industrial Relations Services.

In reading such material, especially any that refers to current research, you should subject the contents to the tests of critical evaluation as set out in Chapter 19. Your own understanding will be increased if you analyse the positions, arguments and conclusions the author reaches to establish the extent to which they are based on sound logical reasoning.

Whatever you read, it is up to you to spot what is relevant. Lectures and general reading may help you to do this by providing the background to the subject matter. But it is ultimately up to you to extract what you think is significant in the shape of ideas, concepts, references to research, useful quotes and prescriptive material. Record these (this is the best way of concentrating the mind on complex material) or at least indicate where they can be found when wanted.

Make sure you are up to date with information which has appeared since your favourite textbook was published. This means collecting press cuttings, articles and in-company case studies and materials (from other organizations as well as your own).

Ensure that your notes are easily accessible when wanted for an essay or paper or for revision. They should be indexed and they can be sorted in a concertina file whose compartments reflect the major content themes. Alternatively, they can usefully be stored in a computer file. They can also be recorded on flash cards – A5 index cards which contain a summary (often in bullet points) of the main points concerning a topic and which can be referred to quickly, especially if they are indexed.

Revising

Revising for an exam can be a daunting task – 'Where do I start?' 'Where do I end?' 'What do I do in between?' Answers to these questions are provided in the lists of dos and don'ts listed below. There are more dos than don'ts; revision is a positive process. See Table 22.1

Taking exams

Table 22.2 sets out the dos and don'ts of taking exams.

T A B L E 22.1 Dos and don'ts of revision

Dos and don'ts of revision	
Do	**Don't**
• Refer to the syllabus to identify the main subject areas. • Study previous exam papers to find out how examiners cover the syllabus and what are the most typical questions they ask in each area. Identify recurring questions. • Define your revision priorities – draw up a list which sets out priorities, starting with the important and simple topics, continuing with the important but complex (and time-consuming) topics and finishing with the lowest-priority topics – those that are complex but not vital. • Select the topics you need to revise (covering the main areas in which questions are frequently asked in examinations). • As a rule of thumb, know at least 50% of the content of the syllabus in detail and the rest more superficially so that if necessary you can say something sensible about any topic at all. • Break up what you need to revise into short, easily absorbed pieces. • Draw up a timetable, listing the topics you want to revise in order of priority.	• Leave revision to the last minute before the exam. • Simply keep on reading your notes – focus on the material you need to help answer exam questions. • Ignore your timetable. • Revise your timetable unnecessarily simply because you are bored with it. • Allow yourself to be diverted – set aside times for revision and do not permit interruptions. • Pile up too much revision material – concentrate on the key issues, possibly recorded in flash cards. • Overdo it – there is a limit to what anyone can absorb, hence the need to pace yourself and avoid 'burning-the-midnight-oil' spells of revision.

TABLE 22.1 (continued.)

Dos and don'ts of revision	
Do	**Don't**
• Set short-term goals for revision. • Identify where you can find the revision material – ideally it should all be in your notes, which you may need to reduce and reclassify for ease of reading and in accordance with priorities. It can usefully include a set of flash cards covering the most important topics, which provide a quick and easy way to revise key points. • Pace yourself – track your progress against the timetable and readjust if necessary. • Check your learning. Record the key things you have learned and refer to your revision priorities and timetable to ensure that you are up to speed. • Work out answers to a range of questions for each topic. • Practise answering sample questions in each area in handwriting to check that you can produce persuasive and legible answers in the time available (this is very important). Refer to your notes and if they are not sufficiently helpful, revise or expand them.	

TABLE 22.2 Dos and don'ts of taking exams

Dos and don'ts of taking exams	
Do	**Don't**

• Answer the question – this is very familiar advice but it is remarkable how, in the experience of most examiners (including this one), many candidates fail to do so.
• Pay particular attention to what you are asked to do in the question and do it. You will lose marks if you don't. Typically, you may be asked to:
  – *critically evaluate* a concept, notion or idea: this means that you are expected to show that you can use critical thinking to make informed judgements about the validity, relevance and usefulness of ideas and propositions, weighing arguments for and against them, assessing the strength of the evidence and deciding which are preferable;
  – *discuss*: write about the key aspects of the subject, critically evaluate it and assess the implications;
  – *refer to recent research* (recent usually means within the last five years but it can be stretched to 10 years for important projects): you need only summarize the main messages and give the name of the researcher and the date;
  – *refer to examples from within your own organization or one known to you*: show that you understand the practical issues by reference to actual practice;
	• Answer the question you would have liked to ask yourself (because you know all about it) rather than the one put by the examiner.
	• Spend too much time answering the questions you know about, leaving insufficient time to deal with the remaining questions.
	• Put down everything you know, rather than what the examiner asked you to do.
	• Try to get away with not providing examples or research evidence if asked to do so.
	• Present the examiner with undigested hunks of prose – set out each section clearly and ensure that they follow one another logically.
	• Produce an unstructured and confusing document – ensure that the examiner knows where you are coming from, where you are going and where you have got to.
	• Write illegibly – think of the examiner, who is only human and will tend to mark you down if your prose is virtually unreadable.
	• Rely on bullet points, simply listing headings without exploring the issue (in desperation you might use bullet points for the final answer if you are short of time but you will lose marks).

TABLE 22.2 (continued.)

Dos and don'ts of taking exams	
Do	**Don't**

– *justify*: supply evidenced reasons which support your argument;
   – *outline*: set out the main points or general principles relating to the topic;
   – *review*: explore the meaning and significance of a topic.
• Develop your arguments logically.
• Give practical examples wherever possible.
• Seize every opportunity to display your knowledge by citing authors, sources, research, your own organization, other organizations, case study scenarios, benchmark achievements elsewhere, etc.
• Structure your answers so that your material is easy to read and easy to follow. This means: following a logical progression from introduction to conclusions, underlined side headings to separate one part of your answer from the next (especially where a question has two or more sections); lists of itemized points; clear differentiation between your introduction and your conclusions.
• Write legibly and articulately. Your presentation skills make a difference, especially at the margin.
	• Deliver glib statements with no real explanation of what they mean in practical terms.
	• Forget that examiners prefer candidates who analyse the subject critically and conduct systematic reviews of the subject matter and its implications.
	• Pepper answers with dubious assumptions or grand over-generalizations which result in unconvincing arguments.
	• Try to get away without incorporating properly identified evidence into material, to support assumptions and views.
	• Simply lift standard prescriptions wholesale from textbooks and apply them without any real understanding of their meaning.
	• Recommend so-called 'best practice' in a few words that are insufficient to convey its real content and meaning and for use in situations for which it has no apparent relevance.

Essay and report writing

As a postgraduate student you will be required to produce essays and re-ports on any research projects you carry out. Report writing is also an important skill for practitioners who may be involved in dealing with a problem (troubleshooting). The approaches you should use, which are applicable to essays as well as research and business reports, are given below.

1 Define the task. Decide what you are setting out to achieve (your objective) and, broadly, how you intend to achieve it. In a research report, note any basic propositions or assumptions that you are likely to put forward or adopt or any theories or concepts that you will evaluate. Decide on a provisional title and the likely scope of the essay or report.

2 Decide what information you need. This depends on the range of subject matter to be covered and whether it is a simple essay, an extended dissertation, a research project or a business troubleshooting report. Information for academic essays and reports will be obtained from your notes, additional reading of books, journals and other sources such as e-learning material and Wikipedia, blogs, or research. Troubleshooting business reports will rely on an identification of the facts required and a systematic process of getting and analysing those facts.

3 Obtain the information. If you are a postgraduate student preparing an essay or a dissertation, trawling through your lecture and reading notes should be straightforward if you have recorded and filed them properly. Reading round the subject means a little more work. Don't overdo it – trying to absorb too much information will only confuse you. Information for research reports is obtained from literature reviews, surveys, interviews and the assembly of case studies.

4 Analyse the information. Reflect on the information you have obtained. Check what you have found out and decide if you have enough. Establish the extent to which it will enable you to achieve your objective and support and clarify a convincing argument. If it doesn't, get more data.

5 Plan the structure of the essay or report. It is essential to structure an essay or report so that the reader can follow your line of reasoning readily. You have to consider, first, how you will introduce the essay or report setting out what it is about, your aim and any propositions or assumptions you are making; second, how you will present your views or evidence (which might include research findings) and develop your argument ; and finally, how you will reach a conclusion.

An essay or report should have a beginning, a middle and an end. If a report is lengthy or complex it will also need a summary of conclusions and recommendations. There may also be appendices

containing detailed data and statistics. A report should be structured as follows:

- Beginning. Your introduction should state why the report has been written and why it should be read. A problem-solving report should define the problem and explain the circumstances. The sources of any evidence that will be referred to in the report should be identified and details of how that evidence was obtained should be supplied. The structure of the report should be described.
- Middle. The middle of the report should contain the facts you have assembled, your analysis of those facts and your observations on how they illuminate your proposition or support your argument. In a business problem-solving report the analysis should lead logically to a diagnosis of the causes of the problem.
- End. The conclusions and recommendations included in the final section should flow from the analysis and diagnosis. One of the most common weaknesses in reports is that the facts do not lead naturally to the conclusions; the other is for the conclusions not to be supported by the facts.
- Summarize the facts and your observations. In a problem-solving business report in which you have identified alternative courses of action, set out the pros and cons of each one, but make it quite clear which one you favour and why. Don't leave your readers in mid-air.
- The final section of a business report should set out your recommendations, stating how each of them would help to achieve the stated aims of the report or overcome any weaknesses revealed by the analytical studies. The benefits and costs of implementing the recommendations would be explained after the conclusions. A plan should be set out for implementing the proposals – the programme of work, complete with deadlines and names of people who would carry it out. The recipient(s) of the report should be told what action, such as approval of plans or authorization of expenditure, you would like them to take.
- This structure of a business report can be used when dealing with a problem case study question in an examination.

6 Draft the essay or report. When you draft your essay or report, bear in mind that the way in which you present and write it will considerably affect its impact and value. High-quality content is not enough; it must be presented well.

The reader should be able to follow your argument easily and not get bogged down in too much detail. The information you provide and your ideas should be grouped together so they can be presented in separate paragraphs. Paragraphs should be short and each one should be restricted to a

single topic. Headings should be placed before sections to enable the reader to follow your ideas and arguments to your conclusion. Textbooks (like this one) and business reports tend to have more headings to guide readers than do essays, dissertations and journal articles. If you want to list or highlight a series of points, tabulate them or use bullet points but don't sacrifice meaning to clarity by omitting important material. Your arguments and proposition need substance; bullet points can make them look superficial.

Read and reread your draft to cut out any superfluous material, repetition, grammatical errors or flabby writing. Ensure that the argument is clear, convincing and flows from start to finish. Reorganize the structure of the report, including how it is paragraphed and its headings, to increase clarity.

Do not clutter up the main pages of a detailed report with masses of indigestible figures or other data. Summarize key statistics in compact, easy-to-follow tables with clear headings. Relegate supporting material to an appendix.

In a long or complex report, especially a business report, it is helpful to provide an executive summary of conclusions and recommendations. It concentrates the reader's mind and can be used as an agenda in presenting and discussing the report. The abstract at the beginning of a journal article serves the same purpose.

Good writing

Table 22.3 sets out the dos and don'ts of good writing.

Source references

In academic essays, dissertations or reports and in journal articles and textbooks it is essential when quoting someone or referring to something they have written to give the source. The normal conventions for referencing are:

- In the text of the essay or article give the name of the author or authors (if there are more than two authors, give the name of the first author followed by 'et al') and then the date in brackets. If it is a direct quotation give the page number(s), eg Gowers (1962: 37).
- If in an essay or article you refer to more than one publication by an author in the same year, attach 'a', 'b', etc to the name, eg Ulrich (1997a).
- Place references at the end of the essay or article and list them by author in alphabetical order. In a book, put them either at the end of the chapter or the end of the book.
- A reference to a book should state, in order, the family name of the author or authors, their initials, the date of publication in brackets, the title of the book in italics, the place of publication and the name of the publisher, eg Ulrich, D (1997) *Human Resource Champions*, Boston MA, Harvard Business School Press.

TABLE 22.3 Dos and don'ts of good writing

Do	Don't:
• Keep language simple and direct, eg use *begin* not *initiate, buy* not *purchase, find* not *locate*, *go* not *proceed*, *use* not *utilize*.	• Use more words than are necessary to express your meaning (avoid verbosity or padding).
• Prefer the short word to the long.	• Use jargon unless a technical term is unavoidable; in which case define it.
• Prefer the familiar word to the unusual or stylish.	• Use superfluous adjectives or adverbs.
• Use words with a precise meaning rather than those that are vague.	• Use clichés.
• Prefer concrete words or phrases to abstract ones, eg *This material is scarce* rather than *The availability of this material is diminishing.*	• Write long meandering sentences.
	• Write *alternatively* when you mean *alternately*.
• Use active verb forms where possible rather than passive, eg *You should ensure…* rather than *It should be ensured…*	• Write *less* when you mean *fewer*.
	• Write *refute* when you mean *deny* or *repudiate*.
• 'Use the short expressive phrase even if it is conversational' (Winston Churchill, cited by Gowers, 1962: 37).	• Write *mitigate* when you mean *militate*.
	• Write *practical* when you mean *practicable*.
• Use short sentences to help you think clearly and gain the understanding of your reader. Express separate points or ideas in distinct sentences.	• Misspell eg *accommodate*, *accessory*, *confident* (assured), *confidant* (person trusted with knowledge), *consensus*, *dependant* (as a noun), *dependent* (as an adjective), *desiccate*, *embarrass*, *liaise*, *stationary* (at rest), *stationery* (paper), *superintendent*, *underlie*.
• Remember that *each* demands a singular verb when it is the subject, eg *Each of the proposals has merit.*	
• Split an infinitive if it reads better.	
• Start a sentence with a conjunction, eg *and*, *but*, *or,* if it makes sense and reads well. But don't overdo it.	
• Use prepositions at the end of sentences whenever you like.	
• Say what you mean and mean what you say (after Lewis Carroll).	

- If the reference is to a chapter in an edited book it should look like this: Boxall, P F, Purcell J and Wright P (2007) Human resource management; scope, analysis and significance, in (eds) P Boxall, J Purcell and P Wright *The Oxford Handbook of Human Resource Management*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, pp 1–18.
- The page numbers of the chapter are sometimes included at the end as in the above example.
- A reference to an article should state, in order, the family name of the author or authors, their initials, the date of publication in brackets, the title of the article in plain lower case, the name of the publication in italics, the volume – which can be just the number – in bold, the issue number – often in brackets and not always included, although it is helpful when tracing the article – and the page numbers, eg: Armstrong, M (2000) The name has changed but has the game remained the same?, *Employee Relations*, **22** (6), pp 576–89.

Note that there may be some minor variations in these styles between publishers, especially in punctuation. This also applies to academic institutions. The examples given above conform to the Kogan Page house style, which minimizes punctuation.

KEY LEARNING POINTS

Postgraduate study skills are concerned with effective learning by those studying for postgraduate degrees or for professional qualifications at that level.

The skills are those associated with the learning acquired from lectures and reading and those concerned with accessing, evaluating and conducting research.

Effective learning

Effective learning is partly dependent on the context – the quality of teaching and the educational resources available. But it is primarily a matter of what learners do – how they make use of or adapt their learning style.

Study skills

Study skills are concerned with absorbing, classifying and recording ideas, concepts and information and reflecting on the meaning and significance of what has been absorbed.

To get the most out of a lecture you should:

- carefully track the structure of the lecture from introduction to conclusion;
- listen actively;
- be critical;
- follow the lecturer's slides and read the notes, but do not rely on them – do your own thinking.

Getting the most out of reading

- Decide what to read.
- Subject what the writer says to the tests of critical evaluation as set out in Chapter 19.
- Analyse the positions, arguments and conclusions the author reaches, to establish the extent to which they are based on sound logical reasoning.

Revising

The dos and don'ts of revising are given in Table 22.1.

Taking exams

The dos and don'ts of taking exams are given in Table 22.2.

Writing essays and reports

The approaches to use are:

- Define the task.
- Decide what information you need.
- Obtain the information.
- Analyse the information.
- Plan the structure of the essay or report.
- Draft the essay or report.

Good writing

The dos and don'ts of good writing are given in Table 22.3.

References

In academic essays, dissertations or reports and in journal articles and textbooks it is essential when quoting someone or referring to something they have written to give the source. The conventions are set out in the final section of this chapter.

References

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Questions

1 What is the significance of the concept of learning styles?
2 What are study skills?
3 How can you make the best use of lectures?
4 What are the best approaches to taking notes?
5 What should you do to get the most out of a lecture?
6 How can you get the most out of reading?
7 What are the key 'dos' of revising?
8 What are the key 'don'ts' of revising?
9 What are the key 'dos' of taking exams?
10 What are the key 'don'ts' of taking exams?
11 How should an essay or report be structured?
12 What are the main points to be considered when drafting an essay or report?
13 What are the 'dos' of good writing?
14 What are the 'don'ts' of good writing?