

# Essential Skills for Postgraduate Study and Beyond

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## OVERVIEW

Critical thinking, reading and writing are the pillars of postgraduate study, managerial work and continuing professional development (CPD). While critical in other domains of our life, many of us find it difficult to critique teachers, scholars and other perceived experts at university or at the workplace. In this chapter, you will learn to understand critical methods in an educational context and to apply them to your work at university and beyond. In particular, you will learn the characteristics of an argument so that you can read and write critically, which is the basis for independent thinking, the creation of knowledge and the improvement of professional and managerial practice. Moreover, you will get useful background information on how to study smartly by following a structured process for approaching tasks during your postgraduate study and other CPD measures. You will also learn why your university tutors expect certain things from you and what the rationale behind these, at first glance perhaps strange, expectations is. The information, activities and checklists provided in this chapter will help you build a stronger foundation for your postgraduate study, managerial work and continuing professional development.

## LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this chapter, provided you engage with the activities, you should be able to:

- understand the qualitative difference between undergraduate and postgraduate study skills
- understand the importance of critical thinking for postgraduate study and CPD
- apply critical thinking to your studies and beyond
- access high-quality information for study tasks
- analyse and evaluate written and oral materials
- develop and justify original arguments
- apply strategies to improve your writing.

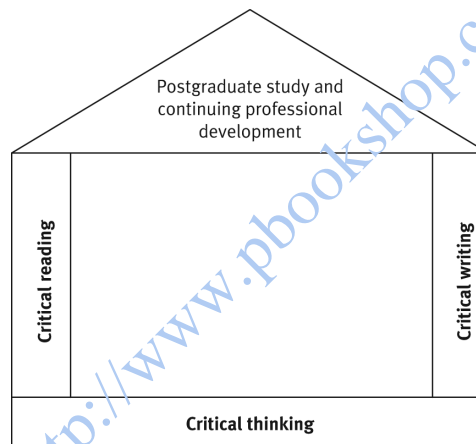
## 2.1 INTRODUCTION

If you are about to skip this chapter thinking that you have done all of this before, stop! Yes, the content will sound very familiar to you. Yes, you will have had plenty of practice (and perhaps even study skills training) while studying for your degree (what we call

'undergraduate degree' is a British bachelor's degree, which corresponds to Level 6 of the European Qualifications Framework (QAA 2008)). And yes, you may wonder what the point is of doing it again. Let me assure you that this chapter is *not* a repetition of what you may already know, even though its content may look very similar. Postgraduate study (what we call 'postgraduate degree' is a British master's degree, which corresponds to Level 7 of the European Qualifications Framework (QAA 2008)) and continuing professional development (CPD) differ *qualitatively* from undergraduate study, and in order to be successful as a postgraduate student you will need to hone the skills that you may already possess, particularly critical thinking.

Critical thinking is a meta-skill, that is, a skill that subsumes and enhances many other skills that competent professionals possess (Paul and Elder 2002). Metaphorically speaking, if postgraduate study and CPD is a house, critical thinking is its foundation. The application of critical thinking to other aspects of postgraduate study and professional practice, such as reading and writing, are the wall of this house (see Figure 2.1). Your aim as a postgraduate student and smart professional should be to build a strong foundation and solid walls, and this chapter seeks to help you with that.

Figure 2.1 Critical thinking in postgraduate study and CPD



You may not be convinced yet, perhaps recalling your undergraduate student days in which critical thinking may already have featured strongly. Indeed, critical thinking, analysis and synthesis are key skills of any business and management student (QAA 2007a), but they have an even more central role for postgraduate studies (QAA 2007b). The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) in the United Kingdom, for instance, puts it at the fore of their official subject benchmark statement for master's awards in business and management:

[Skills] include: being able to think critically and be creative: manage the creative processes in self and others; organise thoughts, analyse, synthesise and critically appraise. This includes the capability to identify assumptions, evaluate statements in terms of evidence, detect false logic or reasoning, identify implicit values, define terms adequately and generalise appropriately. (QAA 2007b, p6)

So, critical thinking and appraisal as well as self-management and the organisation of thought are the official minimum requirements for postgraduate study (QAA 2007b). This means that as a postgraduate student you are expected to work at a more advanced and independent level than as an undergraduate. You will not only manage yourself and your studies more independently and professionally (see also Chapter 5), but you will also

gain deeper understanding of the subject matter by scrutinising any materials through a more critical approach.

In addition, by becoming a postgraduate student, you will also become a member of a community of knowledge and scholarly activity in your chosen field. You are expected to think independently and contribute to the knowledge of your field of study by engaging in research and other thought experiments (Hart 1998). You may wonder what this actually means for you as a postgraduate student, so let me try to illustrate this qualitative difference with the following example.

Imagine that you have been given an assignment asking you to analyse the human resource function in a country of your choice. Such an assignment may feature both in undergraduate and postgraduate courses, but your tutor would expect a more advanced approach at postgraduate level, which is outlined in Table 2.1.

**Table 2.1 Undergraduate and postgraduate approaches to study**

Undergraduate approach	Postgraduate approach
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Collecting information about the country (probably from the Internet).</li> <li>● Using some theory to understand the different aspects of the human resource function.</li> <li>● Describing your understanding of the human resource function employment practices in the country in question.</li> <li>● Identifying good and bad practice, possibly followed by some basic recommendations.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Collecting information about the country from more than one reputable source and scrutinising it for quality and veracity.</li> <li>● Using (and possibly integrating) different theories to understand the different aspects of the human resource function, looking at the situation from different angles and evaluating the theories for their suitability.</li> <li>● Describing your understanding of the human resource function in the country with the help of theory and with a clear argument and concise language, eliciting the meaning of the situation.</li> <li>● Identifying and evaluating practices, taking the country's wider context into account, possibly offering some thoughtful recommendations with consideration to the consequences.</li> </ul>

Sounds difficult? Well, it may not be easy at first to approach such a seemingly simple task critically. To some extent, this is the point of postgraduate education; in the words of QAA again (2007b, pp1–2):

The overall objective of master's level business and management degrees is to educate individuals as managers and business specialists, and thus to improve the quality of management as a profession. Master's degrees add value to first degrees by developing in individuals an integrated and critically aware understanding of management and organisations, and assist them to take effective roles within them.

With some practice and guidance to hone your critical skills, however, you should be able to make good progress (Hughes 2000). This chapter will provide you with exercises, activities, tips and tricks to support your learning journey towards becoming a more critical student and professional. Practice is famously the first step to mastery, so let us start off with an activity.



## REFLECTIVE ACTIVITY 2.1

### Analysing an assignment

If you have kept any previous assignments from your undergraduate student days, look at them again and analyse your approach in the light of what you have been reading so far. (For those of you who have not kept any assignments, please use the sample assignment 'HRM in Russia' provided on the companion website.) Read through the assignment and ask yourself the following questions:

- 1 What is the main argument of the assignment?
- 2 What does the reader learn about the topic under investigation?
- 3 What kind of sources does this assignment draw on?
- 4 How much detail is provided about the topic under investigation?
- 5 What is the structure of this assignment and what kind of language is used?
- 6 How sensible and original are the conclusions and recommendations?

I recommend you write down your answers and discuss them with a peer or in a small group, if possible. Asking such questions about a written piece of work is the first step to a more critical approach to your studies (Wallace and Wray 2011). Exercises such as this allow you to view your work with the eyes of a third party, so I expect this to be an eye-opening exercise for you. Just a few hints with regard to your answers to these questions:

- 1 If you cannot identify a main argument, there probably is none. Any assignment should have something to say, and it is your task to work it out before you start writing. There is a range of techniques that can help you identify your argument and present it in an effective manner; see Sections 2.3 and 2.4 below for details.

- 2 If you cannot answer this question, there is probably not much new or original in the assignment. Again, any assignment should have something in it that the reader can take away – and that does not have to be groundbreaking new knowledge! A well-developed argument can help you elicit the key learning points of your assignment; see Sections 2.3 and 2.4 below for details.

- 3 If you have used academic journal articles, conference papers, research monographs – well done and keep up the good work! If you have relied heavily on websites and textbooks, Section 2.3.1 will be of utmost importance to you. Postgraduate students are expected to draw on high-quality sources for their work to gain in-depth understanding, and your reading should reflect this.

- 4 The question really is whether you are looking at the topic under investigation in a superficial manner or whether the analysis digs deeper about what is going on. A superficial assignment will lack numbers and figures as well as specific examples to illustrate the main argument.

- 5 A good assignment has a clear structure that builds the main argument. It uses formal yet simple language and provides clear definitions of the key terms and issues. See also Chapter 3, Section 3.2 for the characteristics of effective writing.

- 6 The answer to this question will tell you a lot about the quality of your assignment and is closely linked to points 1, 2 and 4. It is not difficult to conclude that 'organisation A needs to improve their employment practices', but more so to specify what that improvement could look like, how it might be achieved, how much it may cost and what potential downsides are.

I encourage you to engage with Reflective Activity 2.1 and identify any areas of the assignment that you are either particularly happy or unhappy with. If you are working

with a peer, tutor or in a small group, you may want to compare your notes and discuss any discrepancies of opinion. In that way, you will find out how this piece of work can be approached differently, which will give you new ideas about how to approach and develop future assignments. Reflective Activity 2.1 provided you with an opportunity to learn about your own writing (or my early student writing if you used the sample assignment 'HRM in Russia'); you may now want to look ahead to your postgraduate study with Reflective Activity 2.2.



## REFLECTIVE ACTIVITY 2.2

### Alternative approaches to the assignment

Consider alternative approaches to tackling the assignment that you have analysed in Reflective Activity 2.1. Again, it will be beneficial if you do this with a peer, tutor or in a small group. Here are some questions that may help you, and there are no answers apart from the ones that you come up with:

- 1 What could be done differently?
- 2 What other points could be raised?
- 3 What other sources could the assignment draw upon and of what quality are they?  
(See also Section 2.3.1 below.)

- 4 What level of detail could be added to the text?
- 5 How could the assignment be structured differently?
- 6 What other conclusions could be added?

Following discussion of the answers to these questions, you may wish to rewrite the assignment putting them into practice.

This exercise will allow you to step back from your own knowledge and understanding, to question it and to see it differently. It will also tell you much about your approach and your way of working and will highlight any areas for development. By knowing both your strengths and weaknesses, you can target any intervention to where it is needed most, thereby helping you study more effectively and efficiently and to enhance your capacity as a smart professional. You may also want to consider any assessment feedback in the light of these questions throughout your studies to help you develop your academic practice continuously.

The remainder of this chapter will elaborate on many of the issues raised so far. In particular, Section 2.2 will examine critical methods with a focus on critical thinking in an educational and professional context. It will provide questions commonly used to scrutinise written and oral materials in order to understand the argument comprehensively. Section 2.3 will apply critical thinking skills to reading, including the analysis of texts such as research reports and other academic literature. It will also distinguish between different sources of literature and outline how to access them. Section 2.4 will apply critical thinking skills to writing with a focus on the development and justification of original arguments. The activities and exercises will help you hone your current study skills for postgraduate study and beyond, and checklists will help you along the way.

## 2.2 BEING CRITICAL – THE MOTHER OF POSTGRADUATE SKILLS

Before delving into critical methods in more detail, I would like you to consider the following excerpt from an advert of a promise of extra income; it is of the kind you

sometimes find on the windscreen of your car after a shopping trip. Ask yourself whether you would respond to it or what might prevent you from responding:

Is your monthly income enough? Supplement your income by £250 – £500+ immediately and develop a passive stream of income of £2,000+ every month with no boss, control over the hours you work, no targets, no fuss and no hassle. We are looking for motivated people aged 18 or over who want freedom and control of their life to take up this fantastic opportunity.

So, what would your reaction be? Would you respond straight away? My guess is that you would not. You would probably either discard it, thinking that this offer sounds too good to be true (which it probably is), or you would scrutinise it by using questions such as ‘what kind of work is this?’, ‘what is the risk?’, ‘who is behind this?’, ‘what is in it for them?’, ‘is this legal?’, ‘where is the catch?’, ‘do I have to put funds into this?’ to find out more. So, if you would be cautious in this instance, you already have a critical mindset.

Unfortunately, such everyday criticality will not be enough to turn you into a critical student and professional. It does not come naturally to most of us to critique our teachers and other people whom we consider to be experts (Cottrell 2005), probably because most of us were brought up to respect them (meaning: not to question). And there may also be a fear of making a fool of ourselves to critique someone who may know better than us after all. It does not help that most scholars are experts in their fields, knowing more about a particular subject than most other people. Then there is a strong value of academic truthfulness (Wallace and Wray 2011) and quality assurance processes such as peer review to ensure that academic sources meet high standards (Oxford Dictionaries 2013). However, despite academic authors’ expert status and stringent quality checks in the publication process, educational and academic materials may contain untrue assumptions, flawed reasoning, conflicting information and may even use evidence selectively to emphasise a particular point (Wallace and Wray 2011). Hence, we ought to be equally sceptical in educational and academic matters as we are in other domains of our life, asking more critical questions such as:

- Why?
- To what extent?
- For what reasons?
- How do we know this is true?
- Is there sufficient evidence for the claim?
- Does the evidence add up?
- What do we not know about the topic?
- Is there any bias?
- How reliable is the source of evidence?
- What are the authors’ credentials?
- Is there a hidden agenda?
- What are the implications?

This means that as a postgraduate student you are not only allowed but *expected* to think independently, which includes scrutinising the materials that you are exposed to or working with, such as lecture and seminar content, case studies, papers and presentations – both other people’s and your own (Cottrell 2005). This includes asking critical questions about the content of the material, the key terms and definitions, the underlying assumptions, the methods used to gather information, the process and approach of writing as well as the author’s credentials. It also means identifying the key elements of an argument, the key learning points, benefits and advantages, but also omissions, pitfalls and disadvantages.

Hence, a critical mindset means that you do not take materials at face value and accept every point that is being made – even though the author of a text might be a well-renowned expert in their field. Neither does a critical mindset mean to reject everything that you are presented with and to be negative, bitter and disgruntled. A critical mindset means being open to accept the valuable points the author makes while being sceptical about content and approach; it ‘integrates a controlled sense of scepticism or disbelief about claims, assertions and conclusions ... [and] involves interrogating existing information for strengths, weaknesses and gaps’ (Borg 2008, p13). Hence, it is about a reasonable balance between ‘uncritical acceptance’ and ‘overcritical rejection’ (Wallace and Wray 2011, p5), which Paul and Elder (2002) call ‘fair-mindedness’. ‘What a task’, you may think, ‘how am I ever going to finish reading or writing anything at all?’ Yes, it will take you some time to get into the habit of thinking critically, scrutinising and questioning what you are hearing, reading or writing, but it will be worth it for your postgraduate studies and further professional development as the quality of your work will improve considerably. In Bowell and Kemp’s (2009, p5) eloquent words:

If you develop your ability to analyse people’s attempts to persuade you so that you can accurately interpret what they are saying or writing and evaluate whether or not they are giving a good argument ... then you can begin to liberate yourself from accepting what others try to persuade you of without knowing whether you actually have a good reason to be persuaded.

In other words, the perceived expert status of academic authors does not mean that you have to be persuaded by everything they say; indeed, many scholars do not agree with one another, and a key task for postgraduate students is to make sense of different perspectives on a subject of study, as you will find out in due course (if you have not done so already). The following activity will help you apply critical thinking to a short text, using the critical questions above.



### REFLECTIVE ACTIVITY 2.3

#### Critical analysis of an assignment

Print a copy of the sample assignment ‘Is knowledge the only source of competitive advantage today?’ provided on the companion website and scrutinise it using the critical

questions listed above. Alternatively, you may prefer to work with a text that you have been asked to critically evaluate as part of your studies. You may find it useful to discuss your findings with a peer or in a small group.

Let us delve more deeply into critical methods now, beginning with critical thinking. The term ‘critical thinking’ has become commonplace in higher education over recent years and is sometimes seen as one of the pillars of the educational trinity of *knowledge*, *intelligence* and *thinking* (De Bono 1976). It is fruitfully defined as ‘the process of hunting assumptions – discovering what assumptions we and others hold, and then checking to see how much sense those assumptions make. ... We do critical thinking so we can take informed actions – actions that are grounded in evidence, can be explained to others, and stand a good chance of achieving the results we desire’ (Brookfield 2012, p24). By engaging in critical thinking, we can improve its quality (Fisher 2001).

Hence, critical thinking is a deep, reflective and independent form of thinking that seeks to understand the assumptions and thought structures behind a statement or argument. In other words, critical thinking is about recognising and analysing arguments, which in this context are not disagreements or verbal fights (as often referred to in

everyday language), but ‘attempts to persuade us – to influence our beliefs and actions – by giving us reasons to believe this or that, or to act in this way or that’ (Bowell and Kemp 2009, p1). According to Hughes (2000), critical thinking involves the application of the following three key skills:

- 1 *interpretive skills* to identify the *meaning* of a statement
- 2 *verification skills* to determine the *veracity* of a statement
- 3 *reasoning skills* to analyse the *inferences* made in an argument.



## REFLECTIVE ACTIVITY 2.4

### Applying critical thinking skills

Again working with the sample assignment ‘Is knowledge the only source of competitive advantage today?’ provided on the companion website (or any other text of your liking), identify:

- the meaning of the text (that is, what does the author want to persuade the reader of?)

- the veracity of the text (that is, to what extent can the author be believed and why?)
- the inferences made in the text (that is, what is its conclusion?).

Through the application of such skills, critical thinking can (or should) lead to informed and thoughtful decision-making by constantly challenging the status quo in both the theory of a field of study and its professional practice (Paul and Elder 2002). Critical thinking will give you a more independent mind that is able to appreciate both sides of an argument (Wallace and Wray 2011) and that can engage in thought experiments to create new knowledge. Critical thinking will also help you approach tasks in your studies or at work in a more strategic fashion (Moon 2007). As such, it permeates many other fundamental skills that you will need as a postgraduate student and competent professional, such as advanced reading, writing, evaluation and analysis skills. The process of critical thinking contains the following elements (drawing on Brookfield 1987, Fisher 2001, Cottrell 2005, Wallace and Wray 2011):

- identifying and challenging assumptions, arguments and conclusions
- evaluating evidence that supports any points made and identifying any unsupported claims
- weighing up opposing arguments and taking supporting evidence into account
- reading between the lines and understanding deeper meaning
- recognising any flaws, hidden agendas or mismatch with other authors’ arguments
- taking context, purpose and values into account
- matching authors’ claims with your own knowledge and experiences
- reflecting on issues in a structured, logical and insightful way
- drawing conclusions based on evidence and reasonable assumptions
- clarifying expressions, claims and meanings
- producing logical arguments
- presenting a viewpoint clearly and with good reasoning
- exploring alternatives in a creative and reflective manner.

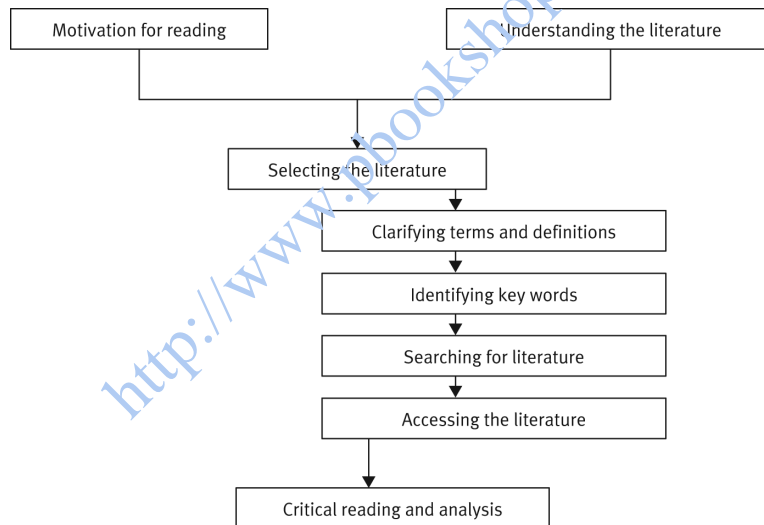
So, what does this mean for postgraduate study and continuing professional development? It means to be more sceptical about what you hear, read, say and write in the classroom, in

independent study and in the workplace. It means to step back from taken-for-granted knowledge, question it and reflect on it, both in your own work and in the work of others. While it may not come naturally to you to be critical in such contexts, you will be able to hone your critical skills and apply them if you follow the guidance in this chapter and pursue independent study of other, specialist resources. Critical thinking will emancipate you and help you improve your work in postgraduate study and professional practice.

### 2.3 APPLYING CRITICAL THINKING (1): READING

Reading is an integral part of postgraduate study because you will need to build in-depth understanding of a topic to write about for assessment purposes. However, you will not have time to read everything that sounds interesting or relevant to a particular task or project. Instead, you will need to select appropriate materials for your study, access them strategically through your library, read them critically and evaluate them in the light of any claims made and any evidence presented. This process requires some thought and preparation every time you approach a new task, but it will not be a waste of time. Thorough preparation is famously half the work, and reading for academic purposes is no different. I propose the following six-stage process (see Figure 2.2), through which the remainder of this section will guide you.

Figure 2.2 The process of critical reading



Critical reading can be time-consuming (Cottrell 2003), particularly if you do not have the necessary knowledge and skills to do it effectively and efficiently. The following headings will guide you through this process, giving you background knowledge and introducing you to smart strategies for critical reading as well as the evaluation and analysis of texts.

#### 2.3.1 KNOWING WHY YOU READ

Before opening a book or accessing any other written source, you need to establish your motivation for wanting to read that item. Do you want to find out more about a new subject area? Are you more interested in methods and approaches? Or are you searching for the practical application of knowledge? So the very first question should be 'what do I want to get out of reading this item?' and then bear this question in mind when reading (Cameron 2007). Knowing in what way a text will inform your understanding will

determine what sources will be most appropriate, and it is useful to distinguish between the following types of literature:

- *reference literature*, which provides definitions and explanations of terms and concepts
- *theoretical literature*, which develops and reports theoretical advances in a field
- *research literature*, which reports original research to deepen the understanding of a topic of interest or to test theory
- *review literature*, which reviews current theory and research in a field of study
- *methodological literature*, which suggests advances in methods of study
- *practice literature*, which focuses on practical aspects (for example of managerial work)
- *policy literature*, which reviews policies and suggests amendments.

So, if you seek to learn more about a topic, the theoretical, research and review literature is likely to provide you with the necessary information. If you seek to learn more about current practice in your field of study, the practice or perhaps policy literature will be more relevant. If you seek to learn more about approaches to gathering and analysing data in your field of study, the methodological literature will be the place to start. Hence, knowing your motivation for reading will help you search specifically for a particular type of literature. It is smart to target your reading and read different types of literature for different purposes and at different stages of your studies. For instance, an assignment in the early stages of your studies may draw on a limited number of types, while your project or dissertation is likely to draw on most if not all of them. The difficulty is that not all sources belong in only one category; a research paper, for example, will contain sections on theory, methods and original data. A better understanding of different types of literature may help you judge what category an item may belong in and which elements of the item will be most suitable for your purposes.

### 2.3.2 UNDERSTANDING DIFFERENT SOURCES OF LITERATURE

You will need to know your literature to make the most of your literature search for your postgraduate studies and beyond. You may have worked with many sources of literature before, but what you know from your undergraduate student days or work experience does not necessarily apply to postgraduate study. Table 2.2 outlines the nine most common sources of literature on which you will draw for your studies to find out what is already known in a subject area. Not all sources are of appropriate quality, however, which means that you will have to make an informed judgement about which materials to select for which aspect of your studies.

You need to be aware of the limitations of free materials available on the Internet, which can be accessed through everyday search engines. As a postgraduate student, you are expected to access high-quality sources that are recognised by the experts in your field of study because they have been published following peer review (Oxford Dictionaries 2013). These are usually sources that draw on original theory or research and the content of which can be trusted; examples include reference materials, journal articles and specialist books. You should always be able to identify the author and/or editor of a source as well as their affiliation and ensure that the information is still up to date (Fink 2010); this is a great challenge for web-based materials that do not come from a university's or other trustworthy organisation's website (Wallace and Wray 2011). You also need to bear in mind that *all* sources will, to a greater or lesser extent, reflect the personal choice of the author(s) or editor(s) of what is important enough to be included in that particular item. Nothing that you will read in the social sciences will represent a universal truth or a complete account, and as a postgraduate student you will be encouraged to look for different viewpoints and alternative interpretations and juxtapose them. Your critical thinking skills will help you in this process.

Table 2.2 Common sources of literature, their use and quality

Type	Definition and examples	Use in postgraduate study	Quality of information	Accessibility	Category
Reference materials.	Dictionaries, encyclopaedias.	Good starting point to learn more about a new subject area and its language	Print and licensed online versions are usually very reliable. Beware of free web-based dictionaries and encyclopaedias (such as Wikipedia) as entries can contain false information.	Reference section of your library or online portals. Also available for purchase in hard copy or e-book version.	Reference literature.
Skills textbooks.	Focus on building transferable skills, usually practical and process-oriented.	Valuable resource for any student and professional to complement their studies and work.	Contents can usually be trusted, but level of detail may vary considerably.	Hard copies in library, increasingly also as e-books.	
Subject textbooks.	Introduction to a field of study through summary of prevalent knowledge in that field.	Useful support for course or module, good starting point for research because of detailed reference list. Generally not suitable for assignments or projects.	Contents can usually be trusted but is only an abbreviated interpretation of knowledge. Level of detail may vary.	Hard copies in library, increasingly also available as e-books.	
Journal articles.	Academic papers reporting on current research and academic debates.	Peer-reviewed academic journal articles should be the staple diet of your reading. Special issues offer debates on a particular topic.	Up-to-date information published after scrutiny by peer-review panels.	Mostly available as e-journals; some older issues may be available in hard copy in the library.	Theoretical, research, review, methodological or practice literature.

Type	Definition and examples	Use in postgraduate study	Quality of information	Accessibility	Category
Readers.	Edited book containing research reports and essays about a particular subject area.	Focused reading of sources that the editors regard as classic or topical sources. Some chapters may have been published as a journal article in their own right.	Content can usually be trusted but is only a selection of knowledge in a particular area.	Hard copies in library, occasionally also available as e-book.	Theoretical, research, review, methodological or practice literature.
Research monographs.	Report on original research with great detail about results and interpretations provided.	Detailed information about a research project.	Content is usually reliable because of peer-review procedures.	Hard copies in library, increasingly also available as e-book.	Research literature.
Conference and working papers.	Report on original research at an early stage of development.	Up-to-date knowledge in concise format and easily accessible.	Content tends to be assessed through peer review before publication.	Through university websites or specialist databases.	Theoretical or research literature.
Government and other reports.	Report on policy or other relevant issues.	Useful for background and contextual knowledge.	Content is usually reliable but may represent a particular political ideology.	Through government departments or the Internet.	Practice literature.
Internet.	Websites, often commercial.	Use Google Scholar (scholar.google.com) to search for academic sources. Otherwise, use websites sparingly, eg for company or industry information. Avoid sites that provide basic subject information and also free encyclopaedias.	Content is freely publishable without any quality procedure; hence it requires careful scrutiny. There are subject gateways, which can help you find suitable online sources; please ask your librarian for details.	Everywhere and at any time.	

The ability to develop and share knowledge within your community of scholars or practitioners depends on organised collections of knowledge – a library. Hence, your university's library will be your closest ally in your studies as a portal from which to access a wide range of high-quality sources. If you have not been to a university library for some time and think about dusty volumes stacked high on shelves – think again. Although the concept of the library as an organised collection of knowledge remains unchanged, the way in which libraries operate has altered significantly over recent years and continues to develop in accordance with technical advances. Modern libraries provide a range of services that are invaluable to twenty-first-century students, particularly at postgraduate level. In addition to the traditional hard-copy books and academic journals, you will find a wide variety of audio-visual, digital and increasingly online resources to support your study, and your library is the portal from which to access these increasingly virtual resources that are not accessible through other means. The best thing you can do at the beginning of your studies is to attend the library tour that your institution is likely to offer and spend some time in the library to familiarise yourself with the facilities and what is on offer. Moreover, Easterby-Smith et al (2002) recommend that you build a good relationship with your subject librarian, who is a highly trained specialist that will select the materials provided in the library on recommendation of teaching staff. Librarians will be able to advise you on the availability of sources and help you get materials from other libraries through a system called 'inter-library loans' (ILL). The following activity will help you get to know your library at bit better.



## REFLECTIVE ACTIVITY 4.5

### Library checklist

Take the following checklist to your university's library and complete it (a blank is provided on the companion website) if you have not done so yet as part of your university's induction programme.

What are the opening hours of the library?	Most university libraries are open until late and also on weekends. However, there is not always a member of staff at hand, so check staffed hours (for example, when you need help or have to pay a fine) and access to the library outside of staffed hours.
What do I have to do to join the library?	Some universities will register you automatically for the library; in others you may have to go there and register with your student card.
Where is the helpdesk?	The helpdesk is the first point of enquiry if you need help or encounter any problems. Staff are there to help, so do ask them if necessary.
Where is the library catalogue?	Modern university libraries will have an electronic library catalogue, so identify where the computer terminals are.
Where is the reference section?	This is a section where there are books for reference purposes only (this means that any items in this section can be consulted in the library but cannot be taken out on loan). You will usually find dictionaries and encyclopaedias there together with the key textbooks of a field of study.

Is there a short loan section?	Most libraries will have a section with key resources that can be taken out on loan for a few hours or overnight. This is a great resource when revising for exams.
Where are the computers, printers and photocopyers?	Universities will give you access to their online resources via computer terminals as well as to printers and photocopyers. You may also want to check if acetate, large paper and colour printing/photocopying is available.
What do I have to do to connect my computer to the university's intranet when working in the library?	Most libraries will have the facilities to provide you with access to online resources when working on your own computer in the library. There may be specialist areas for this.
How much does it cost to print and photocopy?	You will probably be charged a small sum for each page printed or photocopied. Check for charges and the procedure on how to pay for printing and photocopying.
How many books can I take out at any one time?	There will be a maximum number of books that you can take out, so check how many they are. You may also want to check how long you can take a book out for and if it can be recalled at any time.
How often can I renew books and how do I do that?	Most libraries will restrict the number of renewals on your books, so check how often you can renew. You should also make a note of how to renew any items on loan (most libraries will offer online or telephone renewals).
How can I reserve a book?	If the source you need is out on loan or at another site, you may be able to reserve it. Check with your librarian how this works at your institution.
What are the fines for not returning books?	Most libraries will fine you if you fail to return a book on time. The amount may differ for different types of loans (for example a short loan tends to be more expensive than a standard loan).
Who is the subject librarian?	This is the specialist librarian for your subject and they are there to offer specialist guidance and advice.
Which are the relevant classification codes for my field of study?	There are different classification systems in libraries, so check which ones are likely to apply for your field of study.
Where are the relevant resources held (which site, which floor, which shelf mark)?	Many university libraries are spread over more than one floor and often more than one site. So check where you can expect to find the resources you need.
Where is the quiet study area?	Most libraries will offer an area or a room in which you can study quietly.
Can rooms be booked for group study?	Some libraries offer small rooms that can be booked for group study. So if you would like to study with your peers, this may be the place to do so.

How can I access online resources?	The availability of online materials – both academic journals and books – is increasing and for a good reason: they are easy to access when and where you want. It will be worth checking with your library how you can access these resources (the most common access systems in UK further and higher education are Athens and Shibboleth).
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In addition to your university library, your local library may also stock relevant materials and is worth checking, too. If there is another university nearby, you may want to enquire what level of access is offered to visitors. There are different arrangements: some will only allow you to study on site, while others will allow you to take out a limited number of sources (online materials are usually exempt from any such arrangement, though). Members of a professional body such as the CIPD may have access to online resources as part of their membership. Working in and with libraries will give you access to a wide range of print sources and will keep down your expenses on books.

### 2.3.3 SELECTING AND ACCESSING ACADEMIC LITERATURE

Once you know your motivation to read and which type of literature will be most appropriate for your purposes, you can start searching for materials. ‘What?’ you may ask, ‘I am still not reading yet? I really cannot afford to waste more time!’ I know how tempting it is to roll up your sleeves, get stuck in and play things by ear, but my long years of being a student have taught me that it is more effective and efficient in the long term to be strategic and follow a logical process. Thorough preparation is the key to success in postgraduate study and beyond.

You may find it useful to focus your selection of literature early on. Currie (2005), for instance, suggests you look at the research field (for example human resource management), followed by the parent discipline (for example human resource planning), sub-discipline (for example recruitment) and research subject (for example interviewing). While in some instances you will be able to identify them relatively easily, you may wish to ask your tutor or librarian for help if you are stuck. That said, I would also encourage you to follow your tutor’s guidance as sometimes insights from cognate disciplines such as sociology, psychology or philosophy may be relevant to the topic that you are studying. Effective literature search and reading often strikes a balance between focus on a field, discipline and subject and openness to insights from cognate areas.

#### 2.3.3.1 Clarifying terms and definitions

If you are new to a field of study (or if you are a non-native speaker exposed to subject vocabulary for the first time), you may want to start browsing the reference literature. You may find that a specialist dictionary and a subject textbook in a particular area are good starting points for getting to know the subject-specific language of your field of study (this is sometimes called ‘jargon’). The dictionary will provide you with key definitions and the textbook will give you a broad overview of the subject, indicating how different aspects of a field of study are related. Textbooks also feature detailed reference lists, which can point you in the right direction for your literature search. Both sources will introduce you to the prevalent terminology of the field of study, which is the basis for the identification of key words and a focused search for literature.

### 2.3.3.2 Identifying key words

Key words describe your area of interest and may even reflect the title of an assignment, project or dissertation (Cottrell 2003); they are sometimes called 'descriptors' or 'identifiers' (Fink 2010). Key words are the terms that you will type in the library catalogue or online database to search for literature. According to Easterby-Smith et al (2002), a good set of key words is the greatest asset for your literature search, but you need to be aware that a term may refer to different things in databases originating in other (English-speaking) countries and also in different subject areas. If your search is unsuccessful, remember alternative spellings and identify synonyms of the terms you are searching for; a thesaurus will be of great help (Fink 2010).

Some search engines allow you to search for more than one term using the AND function or for alternative terms using the OR function to make your search more specific to your needs. Some search engines also allow you to search for subject areas and to exclude a term using the NOT function. So check with the search engine that you are using how to improve your searches and consult your librarian if in any doubt. Key words can feature in the title of a book or paper, in the list of key words provided in most journal articles, in the table of contents of a book or in the text as such. As a rule, if the key words feature in the title or list of key words of a source, the more relevant it tends to be.

Hart (2002) suggests that you also think about the boundaries of your topic, that is, what is relevant and needs to be included in a particular piece and what is not. Considerations such as this may be the last thing on your mind when starting a project, but it is something to be aware of from the outset. Any assignment or project will have a word limit and will therefore be limited in scope; yet, a characteristic of postgraduate assignments is their open-endedness. Many of my students complain that the word count of an assignment or project is insufficient, but in my experience even 100,000 words would not be enough for everything that could be said or that you may want to say! Hence, you will not be able to include everything that might be relevant and you will have to choose carefully what to include and what to leave out. Let me illustrate this.

Imagine you have been given a 2,000-word assignment asking you to discuss theories of motivation that are relevant to explain employee behaviour in twenty-first-century organisations. On the one hand, there are myriad theories that seek to explain motivation in employees, the earliest being Maslow's and Herzberg's, for instance. On the other hand, there is a wide range of behaviours in modern-day organisations, both desired and unacceptable. It is beyond the scope of any piece of work, let alone a 2,000-word assignment, to deal with all of that. It makes sense to focus on a small number of behaviours (for example the recent phenomenon of employees engaging in social networking during working hours) and a small number of theories to explain why this may be the case. This will allow you not only to focus your literature search and reading, but also to deal with the theories and behaviours in sufficient depth to create a critical argument in your writing and to contribute to the knowledge in your field of study in that way.

### 2.3.4 SEARCHING FOR LITERATURE

Once you have identified the key words of your assignment or project, you can start searching for relevant materials. Wallace and Wray (2011) recommend that you draw up a long list of possible sources, comprising items from reading lists past and present, one or two key textbooks and the names of a few journals that publish relevant papers. It is a good idea to do an initial appraisal of each item before adding it to your long list. Your long list should include both the seminal works by the key authors of your subject area and more recent work that builds on them. The question will be, however, what constitutes a seminal work and how to recognise it. As a rule, the more often you hear

about an author or a book or journal article, the more important this item is regarded in the subject area. For instance, Herzberg and Maslow are widely recognised as the key authors on motivation and therefore their names will be frequently mentioned in that context. Another clue can be found in the library catalogue: the more copies of a particular book that are available and the more editions of a particular book that have been published, the more important it is regarded by those teaching the subject.

When producing your long list of potential sources, make sure you note down the full reference (that is, author, date of publication, title of book or journal article, publisher or name of journal plus volume, issue and page numbers; for details on referencing please refer to Chapter 3) together with information on how to access it. The latter includes the name of the library or library site (where applicable), the floor and the shelf mark. You may want to check availability of these items using the library catalogue and the main databases containing journal articles and conference proceedings (in business and management, these are currently *Business Source Premier*, *Emerald*, *Science Direct* and *Web of Knowledge*; in addition, the big academic publishers such as Sage, Taylor & Francis and Wiley operate databases of the books and academic journals that they publish).

Keeping track of your library search is vital as we all think that we can do without it but never quite manage. You can keep a manual log of sources that you have accessed (for instance a simple spreadsheet or database) or you may wish to use bibliographic software packages. Most universities offer access to such specialist software, and there are also free, web-based programmes available (a commonly used one is Zotero). I would encourage you to find a system that works for you early on in your studies as there is nothing more stressful than hunting for references in the last few hours before an assignment or project is due!

Currie (2005) proposes eight criteria that can be used to determine the relevance of any source you may wish to include in your written work (see Table 2.3).

Table 2.3 Evaluating the relevance of literature

Question	Guidance
1 How recent is the item?	This question does not mean that all of your data should be recent. In fact, many tutors like you to draw on seminal work in the area, which can be 20, 30, 40 years or even 100 years old and are still valid, relevant and important. However, you are expected to demonstrate your awareness of up-to-date thinking (within the last 5–10 years, for example).
2 Is the item likely to have been superseded?	To find out, compare the item with other similar items of data, note the dates and assess the degree to which they all match up. If the item is the oldest, does not match up and other theories may be taken as modern alternatives to those in the item, the likelihood is that it has been superseded.
3 How relevant is the item for the purpose of reading?	Evaluate the degree to which the item is central to your motivation for reading. If it is only marginally relevant, make a note of its details and location, and decide later whether to include it.
4 Have you seen references to this item (or its author) in other items that were useful?	If you have, study those other items to see if this one should be integrated with them. How does it relate to them? Is the item relevant enough to justify inclusion? At the early stages of your literature search, it is not advisable to discard marginal material.

Question	Guidance
5 Does the item support or contradict your arguments?	If the item supports your argument and is central to what you have to say, it will serve as evidence for your case. If it is contrary to your argument, you may still decide to use it when you are comparing and contrasting what others have said.
6 Does the item appear to be biased? Even if it does, it may still be relevant.	While not all published material provides a balanced view of the subject, what is said may be relevant to the questions you are answering. You have to decide if it fits into your argument and, if so, where. Depending on your task, you may have to justify why you included this item despite its bias.
7 What are the methodological omissions from the work? Even if there are any, it may still be relevant.	Does the item include sufficient evidence to support what is being said? Should the researcher have used different research methods and, perhaps, further methods so that the data could be cross-checked? How valuable is it to your task? Depending on your task, you may have to justify why you included this item despite its methodological omissions.
8 Is the precision sufficient? Even if it is imprecise, it may be the only item that you can find, and so may still be relevant.	Lack of precision may have occurred in the application of the data-gathering and analytic techniques. Before you use imprecise data, you have to check their validity. If you decide to use something you should point out where you think the imprecision lies. If it is the only item you could find when you did the search, try searching further for other items that support the claim. Depending on your task, you may have to justify why you included this item despite its imprecision.

Source: adapted from Currie 2005, p78

### 2.3.5 ACCESSING THE LITERATURE

Once you have identified how to access what sounds like the most appropriate sources, you can access them through your library or any other information portal. Where possible, scan an item before taking it out (in the case of a hard-copy book or journal article) or before printing it (in the case of an e-book or online journal article) to ensure that the item is indeed what you are looking for. It can be frustrating to locate an item that sounds exactly what you were looking for, just to find that the title is misleading and that the item is not suitable for your purposes after all. The earlier you come to realise this, the better.

One common myth among my students is that you need to start reading at the beginning of a book or paper and finish at the end. Well, it is really just a myth. The key to postgraduate study and CPD is strategic and selective reading (Cottrell 2003), always bearing in mind your motivation for reading a particular item. So, when accessing a written source for the first time, start with the **summary information**. In the case of a book, this will be the back flap, table of contents, index and list of figures. In the case of a journal article or other paper, this will be the abstract or executive summary and the list of key words. If the information there sounds promising, progress to **introduction** and **conclusion** to learn more. You may find that you have already got enough information for your purposes or that the item is not as relevant or useful as expected; if this is the case, discard it. It is a good idea to make a note of it in your literature database, though, as it is frustrating to take out an unsuitable item more than once simply because you have lost track.

If the source is relevant and suitable, you will need to select the most relevant **parts, headings and subheadings** of the book or paper. Buzan (1977) suggests that scanning the item with a focus on headings and anything that is highlighted (with figures, colour, bullet

points, bigger font, bold or italic print and so on) will give you the gist of the text. Once you have selected the most relevant parts, read the **first paragraph of a section** (Cottrell 2003) as well as the last, which should contain the most important information (Buzan 1977). Bearing in mind your motivation for reading that particular item, you need to decide how you can use what you are reading and how much detail you need; this may vary from source to source. More often than not, you will read for content relating to a particular theory or research. Sometimes, it will be enough to mention briefly a particular fact, but sometimes you will have to discuss large parts of it in great depth. However, you may also wish to adopt a particular research approach used in your source or borrow elements of style that are particularly effective in your field of study. Once you have decided which elements of a source to read, you can start to read critically and in depth. But what does this mean, you may wonder?

### 2.3.6 CRITICAL READING AND ANALYSIS

Critical reading means to apply your critical thinking skills when selecting, reading and analysing written materials. This means to identify and evaluate the main argument of the text, asking questions such as ‘what is this text about?’, ‘what is the purpose of this text?’, ‘what is the author trying to say?’ (Wallace and Wray 2011). It will be useful to bear in mind the different types of literature here. As the names suggest, a theoretical piece will be written to advance theory, while a practical piece will focus on practice. Hence, you cannot expect a theoretical piece to tell you much about practice and vice versa, and you will need to bear this in mind when analysing that piece.

Critical reading is a slow process (Cottrell 2003) because you will need to read, scrutinise what you have read using the questions listed in Section 2.2 above, think over what you have read, make notes of both content and your thoughts, and maybe go back to the text to re-read a particular passage and go through the above steps again, perhaps several times. However, only such a thorough process will give you the depth of understanding that is required for the majority of tasks that you will encounter during your postgraduate studies and beyond. You are expected to know your stuff, and the type of material you will be dealing with can be difficult to grasp!

Critical reading focuses on the argument of a text and you will therefore need to understand the components of an argument and how to analyse it. It is widely recognised that an argument consists of a *claim* and a *justification* and that an unjustified claim is nothing but an *opinion* (for example Fisher 2001, Wallace and Wray 2011, Lapakko 2009). Let us take the following sentence, which I have seen in many student assignments: ‘Organisation A is an innovative organisation.’ This is an opinion. If we add a justification, such as ‘because it has adopted the latest human resource management techniques’, we have created a very basic argument. So, an argument is essentially a causal relationship between two pieces of information (the claim and the justification), and this causal relationship is often highlighted by the use of the following language indicators (Fisher 2001, Wallace and Wray 2011):

because, since, for, so, hence, thus, consequently, therefore, it follows that, x demonstrates that, it must be concluded that.

This list is not exhaustive, of course, but intended to serve as a starting point for your critical analysis of text. You may want to look out for such language indicators when reading and analysing a text, but you may find that the causal relationship that you are looking for is implied in the text (Lapakko 2009). The logical strength of an argument depends not only on the extent to which the claim is justified (Hughes 2000), but also by what means – whether by facts, data or other evidence, by definitions or principles, or by causal explanations, recommendations and value judgements (Fisher 2001). Claims justified by facts, data or evidence tend to be strong (Lapakko 2009), so be aware of value

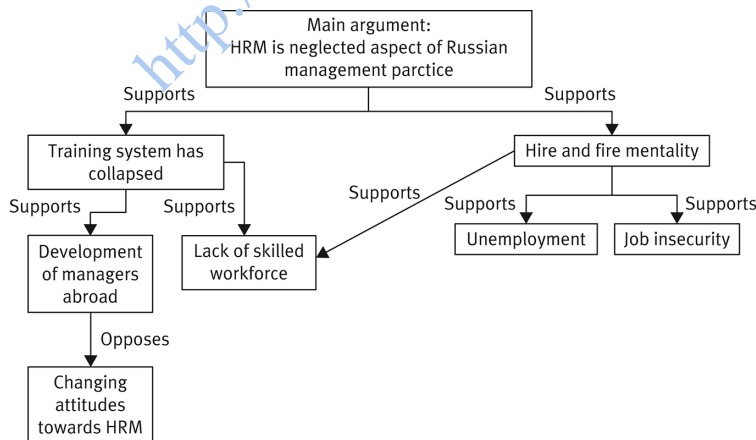
judgements and unfounded recommendations, particularly if they are well presented through persuasive rhetoric (Bowell and Kemp 2009).

When engaging in critical reading, your prime task will be to determine how convincing the argument is by evaluating the claim, the accompanying justification and any evidence presented against the background of its purpose. It will be useful to identify which evidence is essential to prove a point (necessary conditions) and whether there is a range of conditions that must be met if a point is to be proven (sufficient conditions). Cottrell (2005) distinguishes the two as follows: a necessary condition can be identified through the statement ‘without this, then not that...’ (p109) and a sufficient condition can be identified through the statement ‘if this, then that’ (p110). For instance, a university degree is a sufficient condition for access to postgraduate study, while a particular degree classification, a relevant degree, finance and work experience may be necessary conditions to be admitted to the programme of your choice.

It is also the reader’s task to identify the critical assumption behind an argument and to determine if it is reasonable (Lapakko 2009, drawing on Toulmin 1958). So, in the above example about the innovative organisation, the critical assumption (that is, the assumption on which the link between claim and justification depends) is that an organisation that has adopted the latest human resource management thinking can be regarded as innovative. As the term ‘innovative’ is defined as ‘featuring new methods’ (Oxford Dictionaries 2013), the argument that ‘Organisation A is an innovative organisation because it has adopted the latest human resource management thinking’ is probably reasonable. In contrast, the absence of such a critical assumption is often called *non sequitur*, which is Latin for ‘does not follow’ and which suggests that the assumptions do not support the claim part of the argument.

You can see that scrutinising a text in that way answers many of the questions outlined in Section 2.2 above. Importantly, however, you need to be in a position to take a stance about the text (Brookfield 2012). To help you with that, you may want to track the claim and justification(s) of an argument graphically through an **argument map** (Cameron 2007), which identifies the claim, justifications and evidence as well as any supporting or opposing links, as illustrated by Figure 2.3.

Figure 2.3 Argument map for sample assignment ‘HRM in Russia’



An argument map can also help you identify any flaws in the argument, of which there are many different types. Firstly, if you are left with questions like ‘why?’ or ‘so what?’ while reading a text in detail (Wallace and Wray 2011), there is likely to be something missing. So, if you are left asking ‘why’, the justification is weak or missing. If in the above example

the argument would consist only of the claim, that is, that ‘Organisation A is an innovative organisation’, you would quite rightly ask why that was allegedly the case. If you are left asking ‘so what?’, the claim is weak or missing. If in the above example the argument would consist only of the justification, that is, that ‘Organisation A has adopted the latest human resource management thinking’, you may rightly wonder why this is important. In addition, it will be beneficial to examine the evidence that is provided for the justification (Lapakko 2009). In the above example, you may want to determine if the management thinking that has been adopted by Organisation A is indeed as recent as claimed or if these allegedly new ideas have indeed been applied to their human resource processes. Sometimes, a text does not provide us with clear answers to such concerns, and we may have to look for additional details or infer information that helps us assess the quality of the argument.

Other flaws in the argument are more difficult to detect, and some authors can be very good at masking a flaw in the argument through the use of deflective language (Cottrell 2005). Deflective language includes words that suggest that a claim is so obvious that it does not need to be proved, such as ‘naturally, of course, clearly, obviously’. It also includes attempts by the author(s) to collude with the audience through phrases such as ‘everybody knows/believes, as we all know, anyone with any sense’ and so on. Such tactics tend to make the audience feel inadequate, assuming that they are not in the know or that they have not understood something properly, thereby not readily challenging or questioning the author. Critical reading will help you identify such tactics.

It is crucial that you take detailed notes about what you are reading as well as your thoughts about the text. Cameron (2007) suggests that note-taking enhances both your concentration and understanding, helps you retain what you have read and aids you with revising content. Perhaps more importantly, writing supports your thinking (Huff 2002) and allows you to create new knowledge. To support your reading and note-taking, you may want to photocopy or print relevant sections of a book or journal article so that you can highlight, cross-reference and comment on the most important parts of the text (this is also called annotation, Cameron 2007) or use a voice recorder to record your thoughts. It may be a good idea to build a comprehensive note system to keep track of what you have read and what you learned from each item (Hart 2002).

In order to enhance your understanding of what you have read, you may find it particularly beneficial to create a **knowledge web** for each subject about which you are reading. It is a collection of information that you already know about the subject and that helps you integrate (or ‘trap’) other pieces of information like a spider’s web. A good starting point for a knowledge web is the creation of an alphabetical list (Birkenbihl 2007) at the beginning of your project, and this is how to do it. Divide a plain sheet of paper into two columns. Write the alphabet from top to bottom in the first column. Then take a minute or two to fill in the second column with relevant words, terms and concepts that you already know about the subject in question. It is important to write anything down in the order you think of it rather than alphabetically to get as full an account of your previous knowledge as possible. Feel free to write down more than one word per letter if necessary. Why not give it a try?



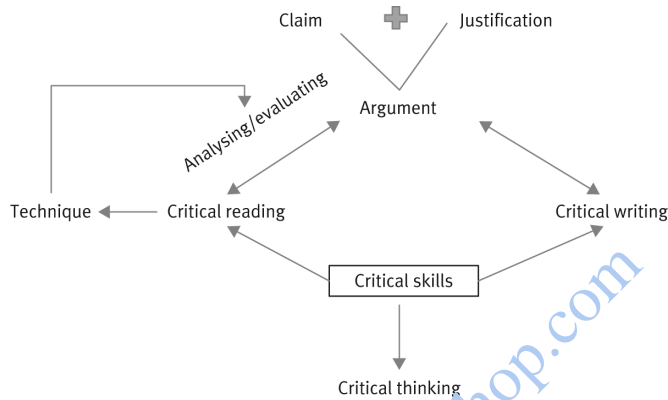
## REFLECTIVE ACTIVITY 2.6

### Creating an alphabetical list on a certain topic

Take a plain sheet of paper, fold it in half to create two columns and write the alphabet from the top down in the first column. Then allow yourself 90 seconds to jot down anything you know about ‘coaching’ or a subject that is close to your heart. Your time starts now.

What does your list look like? How many terms and concepts have you come up with? How many blanks are there? You may want to compare results with a peer or in a small group and fill in any more terms and concepts that you are learning in this process. You will be surprised at how quickly your alphabetical list will fill up and how easy it is to add any other terms, which can then be put into a knowledge web, as demonstrated in Figure 2.4.

Figure 2.4 Example of a knowledge web on critical skills



Other techniques to map your knowledge include the **Post-it note technique** for which you write each key term and concept of your subject of study on an individual Post-it note and then use a big sheet of paper (or a whiteboard, where available) to determine the relationship between the different elements. In that way you can move terms and concepts around until you are happy with how they relate to each other. This will help you develop deep understanding about the subject in question and link anything you read to information that you already know. If you work with differently coloured or shaped Post-it notes you can create a complex picture of theory, practice, examples, and so on. Such techniques work particularly well with predominantly visual or kinaesthetic learners, so don't worry if they are not for you; there are other techniques which help you develop clarity, abstraction and theorising; a learning and teaching specialist at your institution may be able to give you further advice.

In conclusion, critical reading is an in-depth way of engaging with written materials that helps you enhance your understanding of a subject and your ability to make informed decisions. Critical reading will enable you to analyse both written and oral materials for their quality and their relevance, allowing you to make informed judgements on which sources to draw on and to what extent. This will have a major impact on your studies, particularly the way in which you approach any new task, access written texts and select materials to include in your writing. Critical reading is also the foundation for critical writing in postgraduate study and beyond. Admittedly, it is a somewhat time-consuming process if done properly, but what counts in postgraduate study is depth of your analysis, which you can only gain by working with text in great detail. Engaging with the process of critical reading will enable you to work more efficiently and effectively as you will be more thoughtful about the decisions you make and more careful in approaching your work. As a result, you will waste less time on unproductive ad hoc reading and writing.

## 2.4 APPLYING CRITICAL THINKING (2): WRITING

### 2.4.1 CRITICAL WRITING

Critical writing means to apply your critical thinking skills to your writing, which is a vital process for the creation and communication of knowledge in the social sciences. Critical writing is best perceived as the continuation of the critical reading process outlined in the previous section since you will be applying the basic understanding of argumentation that you will have built there. Critical writing is about carefully crafting the argument of your writing by determining the claim, justification and any supporting evidence in the light of the intended audience (Wallace and Wray 2011). The analysis and evaluation of arguments is at the heart of critical writing (Moon 2007), which also involves asking further questions, such as:

- 1 What is the critical assumption I am making? How reasonable is it?
- 2 Are all claims I am making supported by evidence? How credible and appropriate is the evidence supporting my argument?
- 3 Are my conclusions based on evidence and reasonable assumptions?
- 4 Have I clarified expressions, claims and the meaning of key terms and concepts?
- 5 Does my argument follow a logical line of thought?
- 6 Have I considered alternative arguments?

The point of scrutinising your work with such questions is to enhance the clarity of your writing. Asking critical questions about your work will enhance its clarity and, indirectly, its quality in various ways. Firstly, it will allow you to develop what Moon (2007) calls ‘academic assertiveness’, which comprises notions of challenging other authors’ work, acknowledging alternative viewpoints, finding your voice and developing confidence in your writing. Secondly, your writing will be more logical and convincing because claim and justification of your argument can be clearly identified and supported by high-quality evidence. Thirdly, your writing will be more concise if you approach it in a critical fashion because you will be more thoughtful in the way you work (see also Chapter 3, Section 2). In Armstrong’s (2011, p8) eloquent words: ‘A useful thing to remember when you’re composing your own writing is that ... your audience can’t immediately interact with you in the present moment, so above all you should strive for clarity.’

### 2.4.2 DEVELOPING ORIGINAL ARGUMENTS

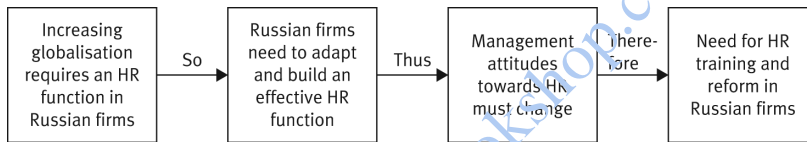
One of the biggest let-downs I encounter in student work is a lack of argument: it is not clear what the student wants to say (lack of claim) and/or why this is important (lack of justification). Hence, it is fundamental that you establish the claim and justification of your argument at the outset of a new writing project. This is often easier said than done but the analysis of text through critical reading will have given you a sound understanding of your subject and the development of a knowledge web or other techniques will have supported this. You may also wish to map out your emerging argument using an argument map (Cameron 2007, see Figure 2.3 for an example) as part of your own writing.

When thinking about an assignment or project, most of us will initially go through an unstructured thought process looking at different observations, experiences, theories and models that will lead us to a conclusion. This conclusion will then constitute the claim of our argument. For instance, in the example of the presentation on HRM in Russia (Klose and Reissner 2000), my colleague and I reflected upon what fellow students (Russian managers studying for a British MBA) told us about their work and organisation. We

looked at the literature on human resource management in different countries to see if our fellow students' experiences have been validated by other sources. We developed our argument by discussing our observations and our understanding from the literature. A similar process can be applied individually by using a knowledge web, argument map, Post-it note technique or by simply writing down your thoughts in a first draft that is aimed at developing your understanding.

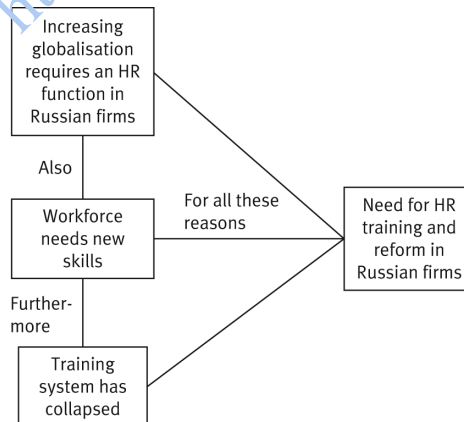
Fisher (2001) argues that there are two approaches for the structure of reasoning which allow you to check whether your argument is logical. The first approach is about the development of a *chain of reasoning*, which consists of at least four elements that are linked by the words 'so – thus – therefore': firstly, a statement which leads to claim 1 ('so'), which is the justification for claim 2 ('thus'), which leads to the overall conclusion or claim ('therefore'). Going back to the above example, this chain of reasoning could look as follows: 'increasing globalisation requires an effective HR function in Russian firms, so Russian firms need to adapt and build an HR function, thus attitudes of Russian managers towards HR need to change, therefore there is a need for HR training and reform in Russian firms'. This chain of reasoning can be graphically presented as shown in Figure 2.5.

Figure 2.5 Arguing through a chain of reasoning



The second approach is to list a series of *side-by-side justifications* which lead to the overall claim and which are linked by 'also – furthermore – for all these reasons'. Again, going back to the example of HRM in Russia, the argument could be structured as follows: 'globalisation requires an effective HR function in Russian firms, also the previous training system has collapsed, furthermore the workforce needs new skills, so for all these reasons, there is a need for HR training and reform in Russian firms'. This structure of reasoning is graphically represented in Figure 2.6.

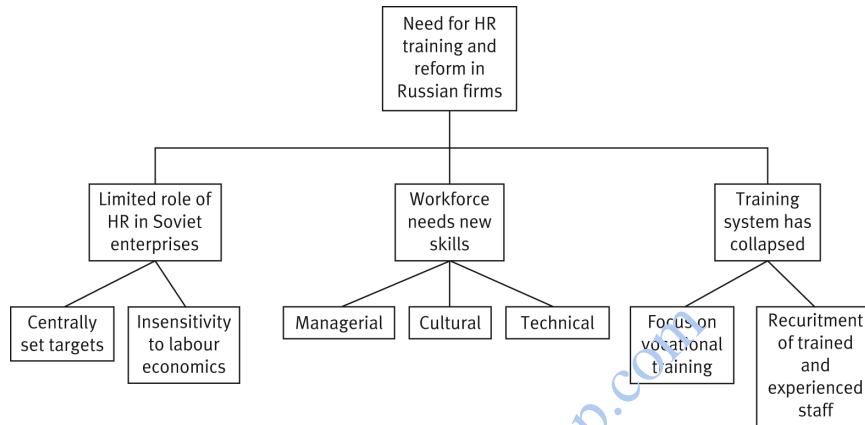
Figure 2.6 Arguing through side-by-side justification



An alternative approach to developing your argument and structuring it logically is the use of pyramids (Minto 2002). Every piece of writing should have one key thought (claim) which summarises other ideas (justification and evidence). Each idea will receive its own

box, and all boxes will be structured to form a pyramid, in which the claim is at the top. The pyramid can consist of an indefinite number of layers, which are linked by the question ‘why’. Find it difficult to picture? Again, going back to the example of HRM in Russia, our argument pyramid could look like the one in Figure 2.7.

Figure 2.7 Example of an argument pyramid



Bear in mind that writing is a creative process in which your understanding of different elements, groupings and links as represented in a pyramid is likely to change. You can build your pyramid from the top down or from the bottom up. Minto (2002) suggests that the former is usually more effective if you already know what you want to say as you can map out your claim, justifications and supporting evidence to keep you on track. The latter is usually more effective if you are unsure of your argument because you can list all the points that should feature in your writing, establish the relationship between them and draw conclusions from that. You may find it useful to build a skeleton pyramid and fill in any gaps as your reading progresses and understanding develops. If you feel restricted by writing down your pyramid on paper, try the Post-it note technique again. If you find it difficult to determine the top of your pyramid – that is, the central idea of your text – ask yourself what it is that you want the reader to learn from your writing. It is often useful to write this down and simplify it until you have reached a basic sentence or question; this will be the claim part of your argument. In addition, you may want to consider how much the reader is likely to know and may want to learn as well as how much you know and may want to tell (Kaye 1989). It may also make sense to check your plan against the assignment title to make sure that you answer all the elements of the assignment question.



## REFLECTIVE ACTIVITY 2.7

### Practising ways of arguing

Take an assignment question; this can be from a previous assignment, a real assignment that you are working on or a fictitious, practice assignment that your tutor has given you.

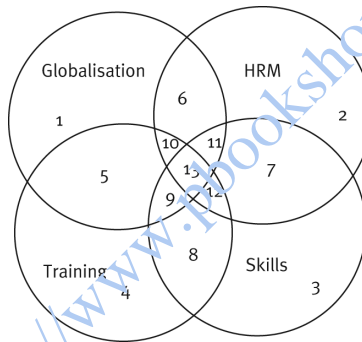
Construct one or more possible arguments in response to that assignment question using a chain of reasoning, side-by-side justification and/or an argument pyramid.

### 2.4.3 STRATEGIES FOR SMART WRITING

Writing is an integral part of enacting logical thinking and creativity, and it is therefore a smart move to make writing a regular habit. Contrary to your first reaction, you will not be writing for the sake of it but to explore ideas and search for answers. Writing will help you express what you are thinking, deconstruct your ideas on paper and confront them in small thought experiments. Clear writing reflects clear thinking, and this is what examiners are looking for in postgraduate work. Admittedly, this sometimes is easier said than done, but there are a number of creative techniques that you can use if straightforward 'writing things down' does not work for you. Often, you will be able to use large parts of what you have written in such an exploratory fashion for your final piece with only minor rephrasing required, and it is in these instances that regular and disciplined writing pays off.

The **bubble technique** is a good tool to think (and write) about the relationship between different aspects of a field of study or the elements of an argument or theory in a structured manner. Once you have identified the key aspects or elements of what you are going to write about, put each of them into a bubble and let the bubbles overlap. Then assign a number to each bubble and each area of overlap, as represented in Figure 2.8.

Figure 2.8 The bubble technique applied to HRM in Russia



Now you can think about the different areas and relationships (there are 13 in this example) in a structured and logical manner, writing down your thoughts as well as any evidence that you may wish to provide for support. For example, number 4 will help you take stock of what you know about training in the context of your studies in general, a particular module or even a specific task. Number 8 will help you think about the relationship between training and skills, and you may want to explore what skills can be built effectively through training and what the limitations of training as a means of skills-building are. Number 13 will help you explore training and skills development in the wider context of human resource management and a trend towards globalisation. Exploratory writing in such a structured manner can be most beneficial and I encourage you to give it a go – it may well work for you!



## REFLECTIVE ACTIVITY 2.8

### Using argumentation techniques

Experiment with the different techniques discussed in this section to see which ones support your writing best. You may want to use an assignment as part of your study, a report for work or anything else that you are working on at present to practise critical reading and writing.

However, simply following a structured process for academic reading and writing and using different techniques to enhance your engagement with a text does not guarantee success. The vast majority of my students could achieve considerably higher grades if they followed one piece of advice, which I give them early in their studies: never, ever submit a first draft of your assignment or project. The reason for this seemingly strange piece of advice is that the first draft of any writing project serves to help you make sense of what you want to write; it very rarely offers a strong argument in response to the assessment task. Once you have determined this, you can start writing the assignment that you will submit. I know how difficult it can be to devote sufficient time on each of your assignments, ideally leaving some time in between drafts, but rewriting your first draft does not mean to start with a clear page. Thanks to word-processing we are able to move sentences and paragraphs around effortlessly, to amend, add and delete text where necessary.

I would also encourage you to consider additional ways in which to strengthen your argument. As outlined above, providing a strong justification and compelling evidence is an important way to give weight to your argument. In addition, you can make use of counter-arguments to support what you have to say, however paradoxical this may sound. According to Armstrong (2011), acknowledging alternative viewpoints in your writing and discrediting them as part of your argument is a powerful means to persuade your audience of what you have to say. You may be concerned that such tactics distract from your argument, but acknowledging and discrediting alternative viewpoints does not have to use up many words. A good language indicator for this is 'while', which contrasts two or more viewpoints; for example, 'While some discredit the need for training reform in Russian enterprises, emphasising the strong training tradition under communism, recent research reveals the need for new skills among managers and employees.' Such a few extra words can demonstrate to your audience that you are aware of the key debates in your topic of study.

Once you have finalised the second or perhaps even third draft of your assignment, checking your work thoroughly prior to submission will help you avoid the most common faults in student writing as outlined by Barrass (2002): lack of knowledge and understanding, lack of evidence, lack of logic, lack of relevance, lack of balance, lack of order, lack of originality, bias, repetition and poor organisation. These faults are more easily detected in other people's writing, which makes scrutinising your own work particularly important. If you are in doubt that you can do it entirely by yourself, why not ask a peer, a colleague, a friend or a relative to help you? There is bound to be somebody in your network of contacts who is both critical and honest and can help you improve your written work.

I find it useful to check my writing prior to submission using the **PowerPoint technique**. If you are familiar with PowerPoint or a similar computer package, this is quite simple. Put the claim of your argument on the first slide and then map the key points (justification plus evidence) on to other slides as they appear in the text. A few words for each slide are usually enough, so this exercise can be done quickly. This will allow you to check your writing for clarity of structure, causal links, and flow of argument,

repetitions and omissions. Above all, it can give the confidence to submit a piece of writing that is the best that you can master at that point in time.

In conclusion, I cannot stress enough how important it is for you to get your writing just right. The reason is that an examiner cannot judge the extent of your knowledge and understanding *per se*; they can only assess the extent to which your knowledge and understanding is represented in your writing through the strength of your argument, the quality of the supporting evidence and the way in which your text is structured. If your writing is poor, the true extent of your knowledge and understanding cannot be assessed, which results in low marks and, usually, lots of disappointment. We will continue with our consideration of academic writing in the following chapter, so join us there.

## 2.5 CONCLUSION

Postgraduate study and CPD require you to become more independent as a learner as you are expected to think critically and work independently to create and share new knowledge with scholars and practitioners in your field of study. While your tutors will give you guidance and advice, much of your learning will come from the level of engagement in the tasks and the quality of the processes and techniques that you employ in your studies. The one skill that will allow you to do this is critical thinking, the foundation of postgraduate study and CPD. It will allow you to approach any task or project in a structured and thoughtful manner, to make decisions as to which sources to consult and which content to include, to analyse and evaluate arguments and to develop and justify your own. I encourage you to keep honing your ability to be critical when studying the other chapters in this book as your ability as a learner will improve. I also encourage you, in true postgraduate fashion, to delve more deeply into any areas that you feel may benefit from more theoretical understanding or practical application.



### PAUSE FOR THOUGHT

Identify at least three things that you have learned by studying this chapter and engaging with the exercises and activities. How will your newly acquired knowledge and skills support your continuing professional development? What value do you expect your learning to have for your daily routines and your further

career? In what area have you identified a need for further development and how are you planning to fill that gap? Address these issues in your learning journal and/or CPD log. You may also wish to discuss them with a peer, colleague, mentor or coach to aid your further development.



## EXPLORE FURTHER

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FOUNDATION FOR CRITICAL THINKING [website]: <http://www.criticalthinking.org>

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