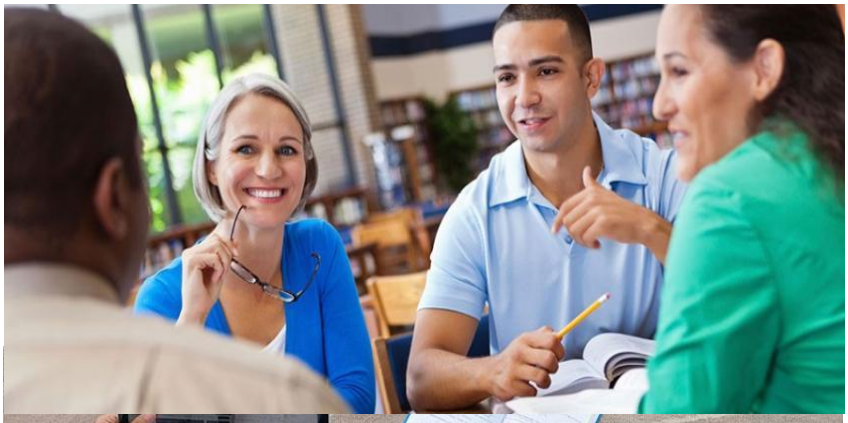
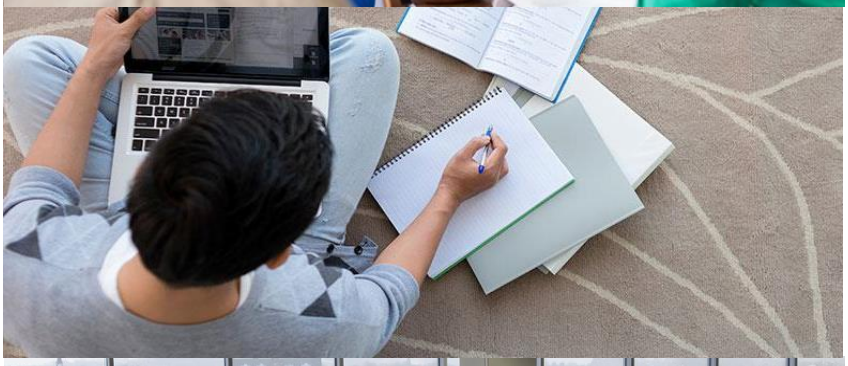
THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH
School of Social and Political Science

Learning and Academic Skills Handbook for MSc Students





Content

About this handbook

The Learning and Academic Skills Handbook is a tool for MSc students in the School of Social and Political Science (SPS) to prepare for their programme and make the most of their learning experience. It provides students with information about key requirements and skills, addresses how to become a critical thinker and reader, how to write at postgraduate level, and provides tips on how to plan and organise studying and learning.

The Learning and Academic Skills Handbook is a practical **pre-course** preparation source **and on course reference resource** for SPS MSc students. They are encouraged to read and engage with it before the MSc programme starts.

Structure of this handbook

The Learning and Academic Skills Handbook is divided into three broad categories:

- Part 1: Thinking and reading
- Part 2: Writing
- Part 3: Organising

Students will find the following elements:

- Definition and explanation
- Examples
- Exercises
- Tips
- Key points
- Literature in the library
- Training workshops
- Further information links

Part 1 introduces students to thinking and reading critically. It explains what it means to be 'critical'. The exercises aim to kick-start a habit of questioning, challenging and reflecting on what students hear and read. Exercises do not take up much time and should be repeated to become routine. Students are encouraged to read and engage with part 1 **even before they arrive.**

Part 2 focuses on writing. It outlines the writing process, how to find and review literature, how to build an argument in essays, use academic English, and cite and reference to avoid plagiarism. Students should read part 2 **pre-arrival** and consult it throughout their programme.

Part 3 offers practical advice on how to plan study work and become more organised, and where to find further guidance if needed.

1. Critical thinking and reading

1.1. Becoming a critical thinker

In everyday language, being 'critical' is often synonymous with being negative about something. In academia being 'critical' means approaching ideas and arguments questioning the information provided, assumptions, perspectives and arguments.

A critical learning approach builds on the assumption that **knowledge is contestable** and only represents what is or can be known at any given time and from a certain perspective. Students should always challenge what they hear and read. Moreover, they are encouraged to debate and build their arguments based on analysis, reasoning and evidence.

Students should analyse the information, concepts and arguments presented to them in lectures, seminars and readings. This means that students should ask a **series of questions** when they hear or read something, and reflect on how the answers affect their thinking and understanding.

Exercise 1.1.

- Take a book chapter, journal article or a newspaper commentary.
- Read it carefully.
- Ask questions, for example:
- What is the argument of the author?
- What supporting evidence does he or she provide?
- How is the evidence gathered?
- How is the evidence used?
- What is the perspective of the author?
- What are the assumptions underlying their argument?
- How do assumptions, argument and evidence relate to each other?
- How could the argument be countered?
- Is there a different way of interpreting the evidence presented?
- Do you agree or disagree with the author, and why?
- How does the argument relate to other texts you have read?
- Write down your analysis of the text.

Tips 1.1.

- Repeat exercise 1.1 with all your course readings.
- For more variety, repeat the exercise with an audio or video recording, for example a podcast or an online video of a talk or lecture.

Key points 1.1.

- Always challenge information provided.
- Ask questions: What is the argument, the originator's perspective, their assumptions, the evidence?

Literature in the library

Cottrell, S. 2011. Critical thinking skills: developing effective analysis and argument, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Further information

IAD Critical thinking especially the critical thinking 'stairway'

IAD – a critical approach to learning factsheet (PDF)

1.2. Reading skills

There are **different reading techniques**, for example, 'scan- and skim' reading as well as 'active reading'. While each of these ways of reading is useful, the **reading purpose** often determines the most appropriate technique.

Scan reading means quickly going over the text to locate specific information and to identify key words or sentences of interest. Look at headings and subheadings, content pages, indexes and the body of the text for key words and author names. The aim is to decide whether the reading is relevant.

Skim reading means quickly reading the introduction and conclusion to get an idea of the content and the first and last sentence of each paragraph to identify the main points. The purpose is to get the general idea or 'gist' of the text and the structure of the argument, and to decide whether to read the text more thoroughly. In the early stages of researching a topic, skim reading and grasping an author's argument and key points is often enough.

Active reading means reading the text with a series of questions in mind and taking notes. Students will have scanned and skimmed the text first and decided to read it in more detail, for example, because it appears to be a key text in their field or for their course. This kind of reading is with a purpose or goal, for example a particular question. After reading an article this way a summary of the main argument should emerge and a clear understanding of how it might relate to the question or research aim.

Exercise 1.2.

- Take a journal article.
- Give yourself 5 minutes to scan the journal article.
- Put aside 10 minutes. Skim through the article.
- Re-read the article more actively. Summarise the article.

Tips 1.2.

- Practice speed reading to help with skim reading.
- On paper: use a ruler or your student card to move your eyes across quicker.
- On screen: scroll through quickly.
- Do not read every word.
- Focus on key words and key messages.

Key points 1.2.

- Ask yourself: why should I read this?
- Scan the text for relevant information
- Skim the text for an overview.
- Read the text more actively if it appears to be relevant.

Literature in the library

Wallace, M. and Wray, A. 2011. Critical Reading and Writing for Postgraduates, London: Sage.

Buzan, T. 2000. The speed reading book, London: BBC.

Courses and workshops

ELE - Reading and discussing academic texts

Further information

IAD a critical approach to reading (PDF)

Critical reading techniques (external link: The Open University)

SQ3R Reading method – Using SQ3R to understand and comprehend written material (external video)

2. Writing

2.1. The writing process

Essay writing is not only about the end product; it is as much about the **process**. Essay writing and independent essay research is as much **part of learning** as are guided classroom activities takes place. The aim is to **build an argument** by discussing arguments presented in the literature and processing them critically.

There is no one way of planning and writing an essay, so this section only presents one possible method to guide students through the process. Students usually get to choose essay topics from a list of prompts. It is not normally permissible to change the wording of the prompt or phrase an alternative question, so choosing the right topic and addressing it directly is important. It is advisable to discuss the choice of topic with the course organiser to ensure there is a clear understanding of what is expected.

The next step is **essay planning**. Carefully read the instructions, identify the main theme and any possible case studies, and sketch an **initial plan** that answers questions such as:

- What are the assumptions underlying the prompt?
- What are the key concepts and their definitions?
- What different perspectives and approaches are there to the topic?
- Which examples could be relevant to illustrate an argument?

Reflections on these questions may eventually feed into the introduction of the essay.

Introduction

The introduction usually consists of three key elements:

- a general statement of the topic and the focus of the essay,
- a thesis statement which posits the main argument,
- an outline of the structure of the essay.

Moreover, an introduction provides some background information, an overview of the field and presents definitions of the key concept(s).

NOTE Part of the research and learning process is to **challenge** any preconceived answers or analytical propositions and not just to present supporting evidence for what the prompt seems to suggest. Ideally, an essay presents a dialogue between competing explanations that are critically evaluated against each other.

While developing their argument for an essay, students should make use of the weekly guidance and feedback hours offered by teaching staff.

Next, **locate literature** (see section 2.2.) and **read**. Then, plan the structure of the main argument and write a **first draft** of the essay body in academic English (section 2.4.). Afterwards, read and **re-draft** the essay to make sure that the argument makes sense.

Body

The body of the essay comprises several paragraphs sometimes combined into several larger sections or parts. Each paragraph should only address one point or idea. In other words, it should develop a subdivision of the topic. Each paragraph should start with a statement sentence, followed by the explanation, justification and reasons for the point and its supporting illustration or example, potentially a contrasting or alternative point of view, and end with a concluding sentence that opens up to the next paragraph.

The **final draft** includes a conclusion in which students sum up their argument and can point toward the wider implications.

Conclusion

In the conclusion, summarise the main points discussed in the body of the essay, and repeat the argument in a concise way.

The next step is **revising and editing** the essay. Students should take a few hours to a day away from the final draft. Then, they should **proofread** it looking for flaws in the argument, for spelling errors and grammar mistakes. They should check that they did what they said they would, built a sound argument, made all key points and connections clear, provided the necessary supporting evidence, considered alternative perspectives and counter-arguments, and finished with a strong conclusion. In a final reading, students should ensure that they **cited and referenced** correctly and consistently (see section 2.7.).

Exercise 2.1.

Take a journal article and ask yourself:

- How did the author structure his or her argument?
- How does he or she make the argument?
- Note in the margin what the author is doing and how:
- Is he or she summarising or evaluating?
- How does he or she provide supporting evidence?
- How does he or she make a positive or negative point?
- Underline the verbs and adjectives the author uses to express negative views.
- Circle the verbs and adjectives the author uses to express positive points.

Tips 2.1.

- State your argument clearly at the beginning and throughout the essay.
- Write or rewrite the introduction at the end of the writing process.
- Justify your points: use conjunctions such as ‘because’.

- Make connections between points clear: use adverbs, conjunctions and phrases such as indeed, however, therefore, as a consequence etc.
- Illustrate main points with evidence: use examples and explain how they relate to the main argument.
- Proofread and/or have a native speaker proofread for you.
- Use staff's weekly guidance and feedback hours to get advice.

Key points 2.1.

- The central aim of an essay is to build an argument.
- The structure of the essay should reflects the structure of the argument.
- There are key elements to a good essay, such as an introduction and a conclusion.
- Revise, edit and proofread.
- Speak to your teacher to clarify feedback and ask for guidance.

Literature in the library

Buzan, T. 2003. The mind map book, London: BBC.

Davies, M. 2011. Study skills for international postgraduates, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Elbow, P. 1998. Writing with power: techniques for mastering the writing process, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Fowler, A. 2006. How to write, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Greetham, B. 2013. How to write better essays, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Godfrey, J. 2013. How to Use Your Reading in Your Essays, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Ridley, D. 2012. The literature review: a step-by-step guide for students, London: Sage.

Courses and workshops

IAD open workshops (just write, practical proofreading and editing, revisiting structure, and writing boot camp.)

ELE Essay writing for postgraduates

eWriting online course

Further information

IAD Writing at postgraduate level

IAD Developing your critical writing factsheet (PDF)

IAD Use your reading critically factsheet (PDF)

IAD Assignments: planning and drafting

IAD Literature review

ELE Independent study materials (link to PDFs)
Academic essay writing for PG Supplementary Materials (PDF with exercises)
Top tips for essay writing (videos)
SPS Marking Scheme
Enhancing Feedback
Writing for university (external link: The Open University)

Information about assessment in SPS

Marking scheme
Assessment regulations (link to PDFs)
Extensions process for Taught MSc students
Special circumstances process

2.2. Finding literature

The first stop for finding literature is the **reading list in the course guide**. Students are often expected to 'go beyond' this reading list. But where is this 'beyond' literature and how can students to evaluate the quality of the sources?

Students can look for additional literature in the **bibliographies of the texts** listed in their course reading lists. They can also locate articles in any relevant **peer-reviewed journals**. These are often listed in course and/or programme handbooks and key readings will be drawn from them. Another way of locating books and journal articles is to type key words into the library's search engine or Google Scholar.

Most academic books will be in the **university library** and most journals will be accessible though the **library's website**.

The types of literature students will mostly be drawing from are **articles in peer-reviewed academic journals, academic books or edited academic books**. Peer-review means that the content is curated and has been evaluated by other academics to guarantee the arguments and supporting materials meet the standards of academic research.

But there are other sources of literature students can draw on, for example **websites**. They are mostly not peer-reviewed. This does not mean that students cannot use them as sources, for example government institutions (.gov.) or international organisations (.org) for statistical data. Academic staff is also increasingly expected to make their research available to a wider audience to meet public funding bodies' conditions, and many reputable scholars write for newspapers, publish on collaborative blogs or are TV commentators.

Websites and other non-peer-reviewed sources should, however, undergo a thorough **evaluation of reliability**. Criteria for this assessment include authority, affiliation, audience and date. Students may ask questions to assess content accuracy and reliability:

- Who is the author? What else has he or she written?
- What website is it? What else do they publish?
- Who is the author affiliated to?

- What are the interests of the author and the website?
- Who finances the website?
- Who is the target audience?
- Is the website and/or text targeted at a general or specialised audience?
- When was the text published? Is there an indication that the text has been updated?

Key points 2.2.

- There are different types of academic literature.
- There are several ways of finding literature beyond course reading lists.
- Apply quality criteria to sources, in particular to non-peer-reviewed materials.

Literature in the library

Mann, T. 2015. The Oxford Guide to Library Research How to Find Reliable Information Online and Offline, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Further information

IAD Literature searching
The University of Edinburgh library
The University of Edinburgh – finding resources (different resources on the website and in the library)
The University of Edinburgh library - DiscoverEd (search engine)
Help finding information online
Virtual library tour
Google Scholar (search engine)

2.3. Building an argument

Arguments are **central** to all academic writing. Complete the reading exercises above as they help identify arguments in scholarly writing.

Arguments generally **respond to a question** – be it an essay question, or a research question in a dissertation or placement project. Publications do not always clearly state the research question they seek to answer although it would generally be good practice to do so. In assessed coursework it is definitely advisable to be explicit about the central question.

Academic questions **rarely** have **black-and-white answers** and can rarely be fully resolved. An essay **does not need to take side for one side** of an academic debate. In fact, students should not just defend one side against another as that often runs the risk of overstating one particular perspective. It is best to look at various perspectives and evaluate them against each other. It is permissible to favour one side but this needs to be adapted in

response to criticism. Essays can combine existing approaches with new ones but there should be evidence of engagement with research already published.

All arguments have **limitations, caveats or empirical specificities** and it is good practice to acknowledge those explicitly. A good essay addresses the limitations of its own argument, often through some combination of adaptation of the argument and noting where its limits are irresolvable. Limitations can arise from the the nature of the issue or the scope of the essay or dissertation but it is not advisable to openly exclude key parts of a discussion with reference to word count or time constraints.

A good way to **start planning an essay** is to **summarise the argument** in a single sentence, and in **direct response** to the essay question. Once an argument or 'answer' to the question is established, **present an explanation that supports the argument**.

An argument is not an assertion and does not simply state a belief or view. An argument must be supported by **evidence and reasoning**.

These elements may help convince the reader:

- a structure of the argument that builds cumulatively;
- the use of evidence and empirical examples;
- an engagement with counter-perspectives;
- the recognition of limitations;
- the explicit 'sign-posting' to the argument being built.

It is normal to **rethink** an argument while writing, which is why **rewriting** is an important part of the process of finalising an essay. The finished product should have a clear line of argument from the outset.

Key points 2.3.

- Arguments are central to academic analysis.
- An argument responds to an explicit or implicit question.
- An argument is more than a simple statement. It needs *building*.
- The essay or dissertation needs a main argument.
- You must convince the reader of the point you are trying to make.
- If you change your argument, make sure the structure and supporting evidence match and to change your statement of the argument in the introduction.

Exercise 2.3.

The Open University has an excellent series of podcasts on essay writing. It includes short audios on the main body and giving both sides of the argument (see links below).

- Pick a podcast and practice detecting the author's main argument.
- Take note of how they *build* their argument.

Further information

Start writing essays (external link: The Open University)
The Open University's start writing essays (external link: itunes.apple.com)

2.4. Academic English

Students should write in academic English **using a variety of phrasing and vocabulary** and **avoiding colloquialisms and contractions** (NOT don't, hasn't, isn't but do not, has not, is not etc.). They should also be aware of how academic **texts and paragraphs** within are **structured**.

The use of academic English helps students show that they **engaged with** and **evaluated** authors' arguments, and that they did not only reproduce other authors' text in different words. The vocabulary of academic English aids with **reflecting on** and **challenging** authors' contentions.

Examples of phrases and vocabulary

Phrases in academic English

General statements

… has a long history in...

The sceptical paradox is well known: ...

There has been much interest recently in the concept of ... and its relevance

Research and speculation on ... have been growing rapidly…

In recent years, the study of ... has focused on...

Gap in the literature

Few articles have been published on…

This aspect of ... has not been given much attention in the scholarly literature.

The limitation of these interpretations is that....

Despite its salience in ...this aspect of the debate is still not fully appreciated.

... but information relating to ... is scarce

Studies of ... are rare

Negative expressions (few, little, not much, hardly, etc.) are very common here. One can also imply there is a gap by pointing out that previous work has focused on other aspects:

The literature on ... has mainly concentrated on ...

Most of the data on ... which can be found in the literature pertaining to ...

Most existing research on ... is based on relatively small samples ... which has made it impossible to carry out satisfactory statistical analyses to explore....

Indicating a question or problem

Direct or indirect questions:

- Would an analysis of ... support their claims?
- ...requires clarification. Is it ..., or is it...?
- However, the question remains whether....
- Yet, several fundamental questions remain unanswered ...

Importance of another approach

Highlight the positive value or advantage of further consideration of the topic:

- His elegant model merits testing as a macro sociological theory.
- The article deserves careful analysis....

Content and aims

- The primary purpose of this essay is to...
- I(t) will discuss ...
- In ... I shall argue that....
- In this essay, I will claim...
- In this essay, I will present results of a pilot study....
- The aim of this essay is to demonstrate that ...
- This essay investigates/explores/analyses ...
- The objective of this essay is to look critically at....
- This study attempts to explore ...

Structure

- This essay will first ..., and then ...
- Having analysed ..., I will go on to....
- First, brief definitions of ... will be offered; second, the language data and the analysis will be presented; third, an attempt will be made...; finally, ... will be discussed.

Contribution

- ... offers a possible explanation for ....
- While not exhaustive, this study offers new proposals ...

Restrictions

- Since ... is beyond the scope of this study....
- It is not the purpose of this study to ..., but rather to ...
- I will not attempt to.... here…
- Rather than focus upon ..., my intention is to....
- I do not attempt to describe or compare ... Instead, I seek to …
- Only data from ... to… is considered here

Methodology and methods

Our approach is characterised by two assumptions.... Therefore, we have based our research on....

The data on which the discussion is based comprises....

The present essay uses and extends those concepts and is based on ...

This article uses a major, new, British data set to examine....

Evaluation phrases

Language of evaluation

This study would have been more comprehensive if it had (included)…

My (only) criticism is that there is not more…

… should have received more attention

I have reservations about … because

This has little/nothing to do with…

Their attitude to … is ambiguous

The authors seem to have reinterpreted / distorted what … said about ….

… is not relevant / seems irrelevant / has no obvious relevance to…

Their conclusion seems out of place / unfounded because…

Neither … nor … was considered/addressed in depth…

The authors omitted to mention/did not explain how...

It is not clear how … was established/measured/identified

It is/remains doubtful/a matter for debate whether…

The authors seem to to disregard/to be unaware of…

There is no/inadequate explanation of …

One unsatisfactory aspect of the study is …

There are grounds for serious doubts as to whether…

It is not clear whether…

… could have been better expressed by…

At first sight, this appears reasonable, but on further reflection…

Little attention has been paid to…

Avoid expressions that reflect mere feelings, such as ‘disappointment’, ‘surprise’ etc.

Balance in evaluation

This study has a direct bearing on...

This study is directly relevant to...

… is central to/suitable for/an important element in...

… plays a key/crucial/pivotal role in...

The authors make a forceful/strong/cogent case for/against...

Their argument is clear/persuasive/succinct/effective…

Academic English vocabulary

Justifications

Reason

Because (of)/as/since
Given (the fact) that... [NOTE it is only a fact if evidence is given at the same time]
In the light of the (fact that...)
As is shown/implied/suggested by...
Due to/owing to

Consequences

Therefore/so/consequently…
As a result/consequence…
Hence/Thus…
For this (these) reason(s), we can say that...
This leads/points to…
This suggests/implies/indicates/shows/proves that...
From this we can see/conclude/deduce that...
It can be assumed/inferred/argued that...

Counter-arguments

Anticipating

Opponents/Critics of this position (may, might, etc.) argue that...

Another argument against X is ...

One possible objection is that...

Several questions come to mind: ...

One might ask/wonder whether...

Certain objections must, of course, be considered: ...

… has recently argued against…on the ground(s) that…

Refuting

On the other hand...

However, ... Nevertheless...

This is merely...

While this may be accurate/valid in cases where..., it does not apply to...

… and to strengthen a refutation you can use 'surely':

While this is valid for …, it does not apply in the case of …

Concluding

Restatement of purpose

The aim/purpose/objective of this study was to...

This study was intended/designed to...

Among the aims of this study was the (investigation) of...

Our research investigated/examined/explored whether...

Summary of findings

The results showed/were that...

We found that... increased/decreased significantly when…

We found that the majority of … are in favour of....

The findings do not support the hypothesis that...

Our findings lend support to the hypothesis that...

These findings are (in)consistent with previous research

The findings run contrary to the conventional view that...

Possible explanations and speculation

It may be that the findings were affected / influenced by...

(X) may be due to...

It could be that adolescents are less susceptible to advertising than has been assumed

If these results are confirmed by other studies, we may have to adjust our current view that...

Limitations

We need to be cautious about these findings, because...

... there was no control group

... the study was based on a limited number of ...

... the survey was conducted only among inexperienced lawyers

It has to be emphasised/acknowledged that the study was exploratory….

Implications

The present study offers clear evidence for

The study supports the view / claim that...

There is therefore some evidence that...

This leads us to believe that...

This suggests that …. may be an important (factor) in …

Our research investigated/examined/explored whether...

Recommendations

Likely areas for further research/work are...

Future research should focus on...

One avenue for further study would be to…

Future investigation will no doubt reveal whether...

Further research is needed into...

It is important / relevant to investigate (whether)...

Exercise 2.4.

Take a copy of an academic text.

- Read it not for content, but for how the author:
  - makes general claims;
  - stresses the gap in the literature;
  - challenges or questions;
  - presents research aims;
  - introduces the structure of the text and argument;
  - argues;
  - refers to methodology and methods;
  - uses words and sentence structures to present the work of others, his or her work, justify, anticipate and refute counter-arguments;
  - concludes.
- Repeat with several academic texts and compare.

Key points 2.4.

- There are academic English writing conventions that students are expected to apply in their coursework and dissertation.
- Read extensively paying attention to the specific academic writing style.
- Practice writing and seek feedback.

Literature in the library

Benesch, S. 2001. Critical English for academic purposes theory, politics, and practice, Mahwah, N.J.: L. Erlbaum Associates.

Burton-Roberts, N. 2013. Analysing sentences an introduction to English syntax, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.

Greenbaum, S. 1996. The Oxford English grammar, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Huddleston R.D. and Pullum G. 2008. The Cambridge grammar of the English language, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hyland, K. and Shaw, P. 2016. The Routledge handbook of English for academic purposes, London: Routledge.

Zinsser, W. 1990. On writing well: an informal guide to writing nonfiction, New York: Harper Perennial.

Courses and workshops

The SPS Academic writing course: the School of Social and Political Science runs an academic writing course which targets non-native speakers in particular. The course is largely held online and builds on material similar to the one provided in this handbook. Students will also get to meet with a language teacher and receive feedback on a training essay they will be asked to write in the first three weeks of the semester.

Places on this course are limited. To reserve a place, please send a note of your name, UUN, Programme, country of origin and native language to academic.writing@ed.ac.uk by early September.

ELE – Online pre-sessional academic language course
ELE– Grammar for academic writing
ELE - English language support – International students (link includes course, workshops and materials)
A beginner's guide to writing in English for university study (external link: free five weeks online course)

Further information

IAD Developing your English (link)

2.5. Citing, quoting and referencing

Students have to show that they build on the knowledge and arguments of other scholars, because the ideas of others influence learned perspectives on issues discussed in courses and conveyed in course readings. It is **good academic practice** and a matter of **intellectual honesty** to make these influences explicit and to acknowledge the work of others. **Citing** means naming the source of an idea or argument including when this is not reproduced literally.

There are **different ways** to cite and reference and there is no one standard and binding citation style in the Graduate School. However, citations have to come in a consistent format. Once adopted in a piece of writing, the same style has to be maintained.

Both direct and indirect quotations are permissible and should be used routinely in academic writing. A **direct quotation** is the word-by-word replication of an extract of a text. It is put in quotation marks (indented for long quotations), and acknowledges the source (author, date and page number).

Examples of direct quotations

In text quotation

Harnisch (2012) notes that "[...] interaction between individual citizens, parties, and political institutions may reshape the domestic institutional roles that inform the process of foreign policy role taking and making." (2012, 51)

OR

"Interaction between individual citizens, parties, and political institutions may reshape the domestic institutional roles that inform the process of foreign policy role taking and making." (Harnisch 2012, 51)

Long quotation

> 'A *national role conception* includes the policymakers' own definitions of the general kinds of decisions, commitments, rules and actions suitable to their state, and of functions if any, their state should perform on a continuing basis in the international system or subordinate regional systems. It is their "image" of the appropriate orientations or functions of their state toward, or in, the external world.' (Holsti 1970, 245–246)

Indirect quotations summarise an idea or paraphrase an argument produced elsewhere. Students must acknowledge the source of indirect quotations by adding author, date and page. Some published work might not always state the page number for indirect quotations but it is advisable to do so in assessed coursework to facilitate marking.

Examples of indirect quotations

Mentioning the author in the text

Rathbun (2007, 42) contends that domestic and foreign policy positions are often based on the same principles and mirror each other.

Acknowledging a source

Foreign policy decision makers increasingly take domestic issues, such as the economy or the electoral cycle, into consideration (Harnisch 2009, 43; Oppermann 2012, 67).

Students are free to use a footnote-based citation style instead of in-text references. However, **note that footnotes are included in the word count** for both the dissertation and any essays submitted for assessment. The Graduate School recommends using a parsimonious referencing style that still makes it easy for markers to locate sources easily. The extensive use of 'op.lit.' or 'ibid' in either footnotes or in-text citations can be very confusing and time consuming to the reader.

A list of all works cited needs to be presented in a **bibliography** at the end of each essay or dissertation. Journal articles give excellent examples of this common practice. The sources need to be listed in alphabetical order and presented in a consistent format. This includes accurate punctuation and spacing.

Primary sources and data can be listed separately but the bibliography should not otherwise be broken up into types of sources (do NOT produce a separate list for books, articles etc.).

Example of a bibliography
Harnisch, S., 2012. Conceptualizing in the Minefield: Role Theory and Foreign Policy Learning. *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 8(1), 47–69.
Harnisch, S., 2009. "The Politics of Domestication": A New Paradigm in German Foreign Policy. *German Politics*, 18(4), 455–468.
Holsti, J.K., 1970. National Role Conceptions in the Study of Foreign Policy. *International Studies Quarterly*, 14(3), 233–309.
Oppermann, K., 2012. National Role Conceptions, Domestic Constraints and the New "Normalcy" in German Foreign Policy: the Eurozone Crisis, Libya and Beyond. *German Politics*, 21(4), 502–519.
Rathbun, B.C., 2007. Hierarchy and Community at Home and Abroad: Evidence of a Common Structure of Domestic and Foreign Policy Beliefs in American Elites. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 51(3), 379–407.

Examples of verbs for referencing

Verbs for referecing authors
Form: verb + that + subject + verb … acknowledge, admit, agree, allege, argue, assert, assume, believe, claim, conclude, consider, decide, demonstrate, deny, determine, discover, doubt, emphasize, explain, find, hypothesize, imply, indicate, think, note, object, observe, point out, prove, reveal, say, show, state, suggest etc.
Form: verb + noun … discuss, express, examine, describe, present, evaluate, criticise , define etc.
Form: verb + person or object + for + noun or gerund … applaud, blame, censure, criticise, disparage, fault, praise, ridicule, single out, thank etc.
Form: verb + person or object + as + noun or gerund or adjective … appraise, assess, characterize, class, classify, define, depict, describe, evaluate, identify, interpret, portray, present, refer, view etc.

Tips 2.5.

- Use a citation programme to produce consistent references quickly.
- Zotero, Mendeley and others are available online for free.

Plagiarism is the act of copying word by word or referring to an author's or one's own earlier work, ideas or arguments without acknowledging the source. The University of Edinburgh considers intentional or unintentional plagiarism a **serious disciplinary offence** and it can have disciplinary **consequences** for students proven to have plagiarised.

SPS uses **plagiarism software** to routinely detect cases including self-plagiarism.

Key points 2.5.

- Always acknowledge where a quote, an idea or argument came from.
- Always write down all bibliographic information when reading and taking notes.
- Always cite direct and indirect quotations.
- Always include a bibliography.
- Check which citation style is preferred in your discipline.
- Be consistent.
- Do not plagiarise (see links below).

Literature in the library

Pears S. and Shields G.J. 2013. Cite them right: the essential referencing guide, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Colin N. 2010. The complete guide to referencing and avoiding plagiarism, Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Further information

The basics of referencing (external link: Palgrave)
IAD Meeting academic standards
SPS Avoiding plagiarism
University of Edinburgh - Plagiarism
Plagiarism student guidance (PDF)
Procedures for academic misconduct cases (PDF)

2.6. Essay feedback and assessment

All coursework submitted for assessment is returned with specific written feedback as well as a numerical mark (see below link to the marking scheme). Markers highlight **strengths and weaknesses** and point towards practical **ways to improve**. Students should not take the

stress of weaknesses in these comments as a sign of failure but rather as a motivation to work on them in their next assignment.

If the feedback is unclear or students want more help with improving their writing and scholarly skills, they are encouraged to speak to their personal tutor (in most cases, their programme director), lecturer or course organiser in their weekly guidance and feedback hours, which are indicated in the course handbook or on staff webpages on the SPS website.

Further information

Marking scheme
Assessment regulations (link to PDFs)
Extensions process for Taught MSc students
Special circumstances process
MSc Taught Student Handbook

3. Being organised

3.1. How to prepare – how to succeed

A key element of being organised is to be prepared. Students should carefully read the information available online, in the programme and course handbooks, and take note of **timetables and deadlines** in time for the start of the semester.

Tips 3.1.1.

- Use a paper or digital diary and make to do lists to keep track and an overview.
- Make a note of timetables and submission deadlines in your diary.
- Build a monthly, weekly and daily schedule.

Time planning means finding a **structure** that works for the individual student. Some students may prefer working nights or days, working weeks or in blocks. Students should have an **agenda** for each study period and session. This should include overall **goals** and the breakdown of these into smaller **manageable tasks**.

Tips 3.1.2.

- Set a personal study and writing agenda.
- Have study goals.
- Break down goals into manageable tasks.
- Ask yourself: What has priority?
- Is the amount of reading or writing reasonable and achievable in this time?

The **study environment** is important. Students might prefer to work in complete silence, with music or background noise. They may work best on their own or in study groups or a combination of both. Study groups can take different forms. They can be groups in which readings and/or topics are discussed or meetings of peers who read and write in silence with short social breaks in between.

Tips 3.1.3.

- Find the best study environment for you.
- This could be at home, in a library, in a café, in a study room etc.
- With whom: alone, peers or both.

Students should **start tasks early** and plan their time **allowing ample time** for reading and writing. They should **be flexible and review study plans** if things do not go as planned or they find that they do not use their time effectively.

Tips 3.1.4.

- Take a few minutes at the end of a studying session or the day, and ask:
- What have I done today?
- It may help to keep a diary of achieved tasks. This can be useful on days when you are wondering: what have I done all week/month/semester/year?

Taking **breaks** is important. Time off studying helps **reenergise and refocus**. Working in intervals with short breaks can be beneficial and increases the **attention span**. Taking a day or two off also helps taking the mind of a topic and **revisiting** it afresh.

The links below include practical advice on managing workloads, how to combine family life and free time with studying, articles on why the human brain needs breaks and how to make to do lists.

Key points 3.1.

- Plan and structure your time.
- Prioritise tasks.
- Revise your study plan.
- Take breaks.

Literature in the library

Allen, D. 2001. Getting things done: how to achieve stress-free productivity, London: Piatkus.

Covey, S.R. 2004. The 7 habits of highly effective people, London: Simon & Schuster.

Courses and workshops

ELE Listening to lectures and note-taking
IAD LearnBetter

Further information

IAD Preparing your studies
IAD Managing your time (includes self-assessment and time planners to download)
IAD Ways to prioritise your time (PDF)
IAD How to use your time (Excel)
IAD Managing reading workloads
Get organised (videos)
Time management skills (external link: The Open University)

Information about taking breaks

You've Been Taking Breaks All Wrong. Here's How To Do It Right (external link: The Huffington Post)
Why You Need To Stop Thinking You Are Too Busy To Take Breaks (external link: fastcompany.com)
Tooling and Studying: Effective Breaks (external link: MIT)
Tomato Timer

Information about to do lists

The psychology of the to-do list (external link: BBC)
Master the art of the to do list (external link: lifehacker.com)
Why "To-Do" Lists Don't Work, and How to Change That (external link: lifehacker.com)

3.2. How do you learn?

By **reflecting deeply** on study materials provided to them, students are more likely to memorise ideas and arguments than if they simply listen to discussions in class. It is through **engagement** with written materials that more effective **learning takes place**.

There are, however, different ways in which individuals best absorb information. The Open University has an excellent guide to **making the most of individual learning styles** (link below) including a test to assess one's individual learning type and suggestions on how to try new ways of learning.

Tips 3.2.1.

- Reflect on your learning style.
- Try a new learning style.

Students should **take notes** during lectures and seminars as well as while reading and thinking about their essays and dissertation. It is essential to keep an **active mind** while taking notes. This means notes should take the form of key words and/or concise **summaries**. **Reactions and thoughts** should be marked as such in study notes and kept separate from thoughts taken directly from published material.

When **reading**, students can identify main points in paragraphs and show how they are linked in their notes. For **lectures or seminars**, students should prepare and get informed about upcoming topics. Course handbooks will normally indicate the theme of each week of the course and state the requires and further readings.

There are **different note taking techniques** and the Open University offers a good introduction to them (see link below).

Tips 3.2.2.

- Think while you take notes.
- Structure your notes into headings and/or bullet points.
- Use abbreviations.
- Write down author, title, date etc. in case of reading materials.
- Try different note taking techniques to find your own.
- Capture your reactions and thoughts in your notes.

Key points 3.2.

- Being a 'critical' thinker, reader and writer is *learning*.
- Actively take notes.
- Finding an individual note taking technique can help with processing materials.

Courses and workshops

IAD LearnBetter

MOOCs (free online courses preparing for a variety of tasks)

Further information

IAD Reflection (links to PDFs on what, why and how)
IAD LearnBetter essentials - Tips for effective reflection (PDF)
IAD Effective studying and learning
Making the most of your learning style (external link: The Open University)
Note taking techniques (external link: The Open University)

3.3. Further Guidance

Feedback is an important part of **communication** between students and teaching staff. It helps students identify their strengths and the areas that need improvement. Students should view feedback as part of the **process of learning** rather than a final judgement and one-off event.

Students should make use of the **weekly guidance and feedback hours** of each member of staff to discuss course requirements, their progress and seek any additional guidance and feedback they might wish to get.

Key points 3.3.

- Feedback is part of the learning process.
- Get in touch with staff if you need advice or clarification.
- There is help:
  - In teaching staffs' guidance and feedback hours.
  - through the Student Development Office.
  - the Graduate School Office.
  - In the Taught MSc Student Handbook, MSc Programme Handbooks and course handbooks.

Further information

Student Development Office
For general enquiries: ssps.student-development@ed.ac.uk
Visit the website at http://www.sps.ed.ac.uk/gradschool/student_development

SPS Graduate School
For general enquiries: Gradschool.sps@ed.ac.uk
Chrystal Macmillan Building, room 1.20 (reception)
Opening hours: 9:30-12:30-13:30-16:00