Academic writing is an important way to communicate your critical thinking at university. It requires you to develop a strong awareness of the scholarly conventions in your discipline. You should read widely with a critical eye to build up an awareness of how professionals in your subject area articulate their ideas. Crucially, you should allow yourself time to plan, revise and edit your writing prior to submission.

- Read widely to identify effective models of scholarly writing
- Credit the authors by referencing clearly
- Discuss your ideas
- Plan your writing
- Revise your writing
- Edit your writing.
This chapter looks at academic assignments and investigates ways of analysing an assessment task. It considers how to select sources and preview them, for instance by skimming and scanning the contents. The chapter emphasises the different conventions of writing in disciplinary contexts and advises you to read journal articles in your subject area to become familiar with the culture of writing in your field.

**This chapter covers:**
- Academic assignments
- Analysing a task
- Locating and selecting sources
- Previewing sources
- Writing and disciplinary specificity
- Conducting research.

**Using this chapter**

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores the various kinds of preparation you may need to undertake before producing academic writing. It focuses on the role of critical thinking in preparing to write, and introduces some of the kinds of analysis you may wish to undertake as you read scholarly sources and develop your own ideas.

ACADEMIC ASSIGNMENTS

Many of the written assessments you undertake at university depend upon your skills of critical thinking and analysis. This is partly because assignments and bigger projects require you to undertake research, which cannot be done effectively without critiquing a range of academic sources and developing your own ideas on a topic. Figure 6.1 sets out some of the ways in which researchers employ critical thinking as they collect, evaluate and deploy data in their academic writing.

![Critical thinking for academic writing](image)

**Critical reading**
- Locating appropriate sources
- Selecting the best sources for your task
- Evaluating sources

**Critical planning**
- Understanding your task
- Fulfilling your task within the timescale
- Developing your own timescale

**Critical writing**
- Critiquing your own work
- Critiquing the literature
- Working with others to revise your writing

ANALYSING A TASK

If you are working on an assignment brief or set question, this is the first thing you need to read critically in order to identify what kind of information you require to respond in full, and to begin considering the position you will adopt. As you analyse your task or question, you may come up with an initial response, but you should not settle with this if you want to think about it critically. Sometimes a writer’s first ideas are the best, but often further research reveals the early thoughts to be incomplete, and they are usually strengthened by taking time to read and reflect upon the topic.
Here are some questions you can ask yourself to analyse your task:

- What is the main point of the assessment or task?
- What are the criteria by which it will be assessed?
- What steps are required to complete it?
- How much time is needed to complete it?
- Which resources will be most useful?

**LOCATING AND SELECTING SOURCES**

Once you have analysed your task, the next stage is to locate appropriate sources to fulfil this brief. This involves skills of analysis as you search databases or other repositories for relevant sources. Check the titles of sources for key words which signal their relevance for your purpose, and consult the abstracts of journal articles to find out whether they cover your topic. As part of your critical approach to selecting sources you may consider the following 12 questions:

1. Who are the authors?
2. Are the authors authorities on their topic?
3. What is the topic?
4. Is the topic relevant to your task?
5. What is the main argument?
6. Is the main argument clear and convincing?
7. How reliable is the evidence?
8. Are there any gaps in the evidence?
9. Is the source up-to-date?
10. Is there a reason if it is not?
11. Is the source comprehensive?
12. Or is it too detailed for your purpose?

Keep a critical eye on the sources you are using because sometimes texts which initially appeared to be useful can turn out to be distractions. For instance, once you begin reading in earnest you might find the line of argument in a source hard to follow to the extent that it confuses you rather than clarifying the issues you are thinking about. Or, you may feel having read a few pages that a source does not deal with your topic as directly you first thought. You should trust your instincts and reject any source that does not seem to be helpful because your time could be better spent reading more appropriate material. The more you practise evaluating the relevance of your sources, the more adept at this you will become, so keep asking yourself whether your sources are appropriate as you read. On the other hand, it can be worth persevering with difficult material so you should not be too quick to reject challenging texts.
6 Preparing to write

Here are some tips:

**Rejecting sources**
- Be prepared to reject sources you find confusing
- Trust your instincts if you feel a source is not useful for your task
- Distinguish between complex arguments and badly presented material (only reject the latter)
- Persevere with challenging texts which are well written.

**PREVIEWING SOURCES**

When you have located a range of potential sources for your research and selected the most appropriate texts, you should engage in another kind of critical thinking by previewing selected sources. You can deploy two techniques to evaluate the usefulness for your purpose, and these are **skimming** and **scanning**.

**Skimming**

This means reading relatively quickly to get an overview of a text. As you skim read you will discover the topic and scope of a source as well as the main argument and some of the themes. A useful skimming technique is to read the introduction, the conclusion, and the first sentence of each paragraph, known as the ‘topic sentence’.

The topic sentence often articulates the point being made in a paragraph, so as you skim read you do not necessarily have to read the rest of the paragraph. If you were to read on, you may find that the rest of the paragraph contains evidence or an example to illustrate the point being made. You may also find that the rest of the paragraph contains an explanation of the issues raised by the topic sentence and, although you may skim over this, you should be aware that the explanation part of a paragraph is often where authors demonstrate their critical thinking by evaluating the evidence and articulating their own stance on the subject being discussed.

**Scanning**

This means concentrating on the sections in a text which are most relevant for your own purpose, and examining these in detail. Often readers skim a text to identify the main components, then scan the most relevant parts in more depth. As you scan you may be looking for data such as dates, statistics or historical facts in a source, or you might be most interested in the conclusions and recommendations made by researchers.

Whereas you could focus on the topic sentences in a source as you skim, you may wish to examine the evidence presented by authors when you scan in order to find the information you need to support your own academic writing. Scanning is most
effective when you have a clear goal in mind as you read, such as looking for an
author’s stance on a topic, or learning about a particular theory you wish to write
about.

WRITING AND DISCIPLINARY SPECIFICITY

At an advanced level, studying in your chosen field requires you to adopt distinctive
conventions in your academic writing, which means that you should apply the general
principles outlined in this book to your own field. As you undertake your degree
studies you will be exposed to the common forms of communication in your disci-
pline, which provide clues about the various ways scholars in your area generate and
disseminate ideas. As you prepare for your career, you will also gain insight into the
conventions for writing in your chosen professional context. In addition to exploring
how successful scholars and professionals in your chosen area communicate ideas,
be aware that everyone develops their own approach to academic writing. So, use
the tips in this chapter to explore what works best for you.

CONDUCTING RESEARCH

As you undertake research, there are certain databases you should use to locate
the most appropriate sources for your studies. The best place to learn about these
is your university library, so you should find out about training courses or visit your
subject librarian. You can use the relevant databases in your subject area to locate
the journal articles that will provide the best information for your assignments. As
journals contain up-to-date research in your area, they are essential for stimulating
your critical thinking in response to your set assessments.

When you search for articles in your field you will encounter a vast amount of
choice, so take the time to familiarise yourself with a small selection of journals
at first. To get started, you could check out the reading lists your tutors provide
and notice the names of a couple of journals. Start by looking at these journals
to identify the themes they tend to include and the general format of the articles.
Each journal has a mission, which you can read about in the hard copy or on the
journal website. If you find it hard to remember the kinds of topics treated in the key
journals in your field, you could make yourself a list with the title and stated aims
of each publication. This will give you a head start when you are set an academic
assignment that depends upon research and critical thinking.

Why read journal articles to inform your writing?

A potential benefit of reading scholarly articles is that they often represent strong
eamples of how critical thinking can be presented in a scholarly fashion, and this
6 Preparing to write

makes them possible models for your own academic writing. Within the relatively tight space of an article, researchers put forward a hypothesis or articulate a research question, and this acts as the trigger for the critical thinking that is displayed throughout the article. The authors of academic articles do not usually reveal their first thoughts on a subject, but before and during the writing process they incubate ideas and engage in extended critical thinking and discussion, so, what you read in an article is the authors’ final assessment on their subject. As a reader you may be persuaded by their arguments based on evidence, or you may perceive weaknesses and wish to critique the article’s contents.

Whether or not you are convinced by the argument in a journal article, you should appreciate the effort involved in producing scholarly writing and note that you cannot achieve the same level of professionalism without dedicating time to your academic writing. Scholarly authors research and plan their publications with care before drafting them in accordance with the culture of their discipline and the conventions of their target journal. Prior to publication, they submit their article to be sent for peer review by experts in their subject area, and these experts critique the contents and point out any limitations in the article. As a consequence, articles in peer reviewed journals are often superb examples of critical thinking presented in a scholarly format.

Why persevere?

As journal articles are written in an academic style and deal with specialist subjects, they can appear to be rather inaccessible if you are not accustomed to their style and format. Try not to be put off because scholarly writing gets easier to understand the more familiar you become with the conventions the authors employ. If you get an opportunity, you could ask your tutors for help in understanding articles, or enquire about relatively accessible articles to start with. Alternatively, you could work with a friend to read an article related to a subject you are studying, then discuss the main points and any parts you find difficult to understand. Reading one article on a topic can help to prepare you for reading others in a related area because authors often provide lots of information which gives you insight into the issues. You can pick up essential knowledge as you read by taking notes, and in a fairly short time you will build up a stronger appreciation of the topics you are studying.

It is well worth persevering with journal articles as sources to stimulate your critical thinking because they are written in a scholarly style and they can be exempla of how to present ideas within your academic community. Once you have learnt how to locate relevant articles, they can provide concise yet comprehensive information for your projects, and give you a real boost as you research and prepare to write. Without the focused, often expert accounts of relevant scholarship that journal articles provide, you might miss out on information that could help you develop your own innovative ideas. There are two main reasons why it pays to be able to locate appropriate journal articles and draw on them to enhance your academic writing:
The structure of different journal articles

As mentioned above, scholarly articles are exempla of critical thinking within a specific subject area. The authors are experts in their field and have read widely in the relevant scholarly literature. Whilst it is not necessary for you to follow the conventions precisely because they are writing for publication and you should develop your own written style, it is important that you are familiar with the specialist vocabulary the authors use and the ways in which they present their research. For example, although it is not possible to generalise, in the sciences the following elements are often included in a scholarly journal article:

- Abstract
- Introduction
- Literature review
- Methodology
- Results
- Discussion
- Conclusions.

In contrast, in the humanities journal articles are often organised differently, and do not tend to report on the findings of an experiment. Although there is great variation and a wide range of types of publications, the following elements may be included in a scholarly journal article in the humanities:

- Abstract
- Introduction
- Literature review
- Main argument
- Supporting arguments
- Conclusion.

In the social sciences there are other structures, as discussed in the next chapter. As you are reading articles in your field you will notice common structures and components. However, be aware that as there is wide variation across the many kinds of journals, these two lists are only intended to give you a sense of the variety that exists.
Referencing sources

You need to reference your sources fully. Always make notes about the sources themselves as well as the content, so you can cite the author, date and page if you borrow ideas. You will also need to construct a complete list of references, and to do so you should follow the guidance your tutors provide about which referencing style to adopt. If you are unsure about any aspect of referencing, you should seek advice from your tutors or attend any training sessions offered at your university. If you are not aware of where to find support with your referencing, start by enquiring at your university library.

SUMMARY

This chapter has discussed various ways in which you can prepare to produce effective academic writing. It has emphasised the importance of critical reading in this preparation process, in particular the value of familiarising yourself with the conventions of scholarly writing in your subject area.

The main arguments in this chapter were:

- Select your sources with care
- Read your sources critically as you prepare to write
- Learn about the conventions of academic writing within your subject area.