MA and MSc:
Get it 'Write' First Time – Assignment Writing Skills

This workshop will:

- Offer tips for successful and thorough planning and mapping of your research and ideas for assignments
- Show you expectations about academic style at M level
- Give tips about structuring academic papers
- Teach you how to use and acknowledge sources when demonstrating arguments and analysis in post-graduate work

Teaching points:

1. Planning and mapping
2. Reading for writing
3. Tensions in academic writing
4. Structure of written work
5. Introductions and conclusions
6. Appropriate writing style and presentation
7. Acknowledging sources and referencing conventions
8. The editing, drafting, and proofreading process

1. Planning and mapping

Becoming a successful post-graduate student involves planning and having a plan. Many students are unaware of the difference…

Planning is a process involving many stages which include the development of a plan. Writing is a part of the process too. Every student has their own way of planning; even if they say they don't, they do. It is the process by which you transform…

- The demands of the topic

- The ideas of other writers

- Your own thoughts

…….into your original argument.

A plan is a stage in the planning process. It is a *conscious ordering* of your research material and notes into a coherent structure so that when you come to writing up your research or an assignment your marker can follow your argument.
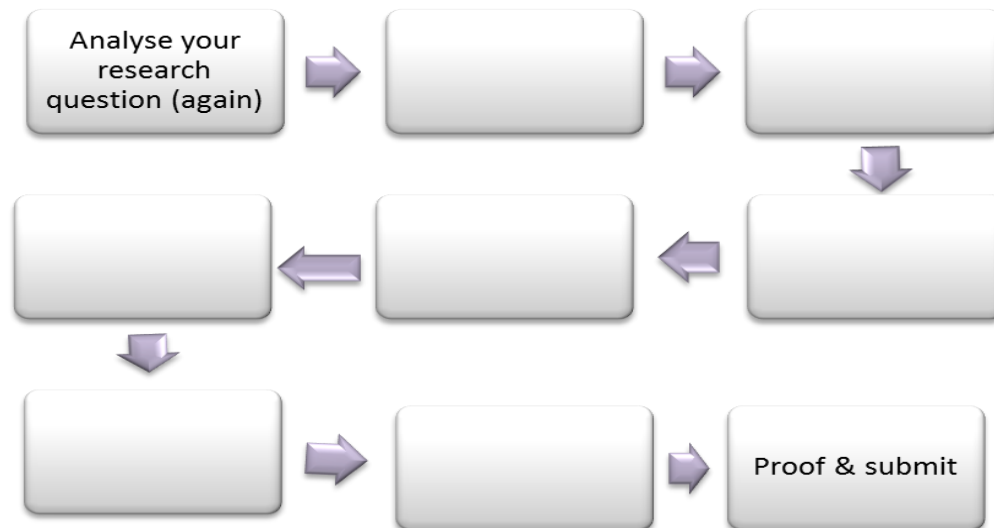
TALKING POINT

Together we will identify the negatives of not planning and the benefits of planning.

Negatives	Benefits

Activity 1: The planning process

With a neighbour or in a group, fill in what you think the gaps of the process of planning are. At what point in the process are you WRITING?

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┌─────────────────┐      ┌─────────────────┐      ┌─────────────────┐
│ Analyse your    │  ⇨   │                 │  ⇨   │                 │
│ research        │      │                 │      │                 │
│ question (again)│      │                 │      │                 │
└─────────────────┘      └─────────────────┘      └─────────────────┘
                                                           ⇩
┌─────────────────┐      ┌─────────────────┐      ┌─────────────────┐
│                 │  ⇦   │                 │  ⇦   │                 │
│                 │      │                 │      │                 │
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        ⇩
┌─────────────────┐      ┌─────────────────┐      ┌─────────────────┐
│                 │  ⇨   │                 │  ⇨   │ Proof & submit  │
│                 │      │                 │      │                 │
└─────────────────┘      └─────────────────┘      └─────────────────┘
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2. Reading for writing

Other workshops will cover reading specifically but here are a few tips that will help you specifically with your writing.

A. Read your tutor's/marker's literature: You will see the structure and terminology they use; and the area they are most interested and expert in

B. Read literature reviews in the subject areas your research relates to for structure conventions, recurring themes and how to construct summaries

C. Create min-literature reviews for each source: write a summary and relate it to other sources you have read. Also make a note of any specific or interesting passages you may want to use in your writing

3. Tensions in academic writing

There are always tensions in post-graduate writing:

➢ You need to get all the relevant detail and depth of answers in your work whilst making it to the point and not going over your work count:

➢ Detail and depth v concision and word count

❖ You also need to ensure your work is accessible whilst still being appropriately academic, and ensure it is 'contentful' without being too dense:

❖ Accessible and 'contentful' v 'overly'-technical and dense

The table below summarises these tensions and provides ideas for improved accessibility of your written work:

| Factors generally increasing accessibility		Factors initially improving text, but may impede accessibility if taken too far		Factors generally worsening accessibility	
Structural considerations	sufficient organizers, well-developed framework	Push for concise phrasing	'less is more' becoming too dense and formal with no 'flavouring'	Professional authenticity	using unnecessary jargon, over-complex vocabulary and grammar construction
Logical and developmental pressures	chaining text for ease of understanding using paragraphs and sentences	'Say it once and say it right'	develops into a lack of 'warm-up' links needed to grasp wider pattern of argument	Reproducing the feel of an original text	as above
Readability	understandable language and simple grammatical forms	Maximizing originality	can lead to using unnecessary concepts or terminology, or writing over-dense text; and writing in 'equations', ie x with y leads to z	Cramming in substantive content	too much detail
Managing readers' expectations	'need to know'				

4. Structure of written work

You want your marker to walk with you through your research process journey, picking up the golden nuggets you have carefully placed along the way to the conclusive pot of gold. A strong and simple logical structure showing your line of reasoning will do this. There are two aspects to structure – **macro-structure** relating to the piece of writing as a whole and the organisation of your notes, and **micro-structure** which concerns itself with the internal structure of chapters, sections, paragraphs and even further.

It is important to be clear about the **macro-structure** of your post-graduate written work, to ensure that your ideas are clearly and logically presented to your reader, so that your research process with its supporting evidence can be followed.

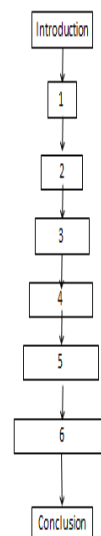There are a number of basic writing structures. Just three of them are shown below:
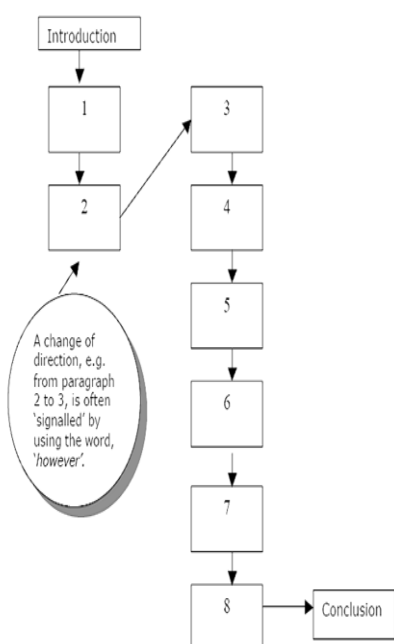
The Switch	The Zig-zag	The Snowball
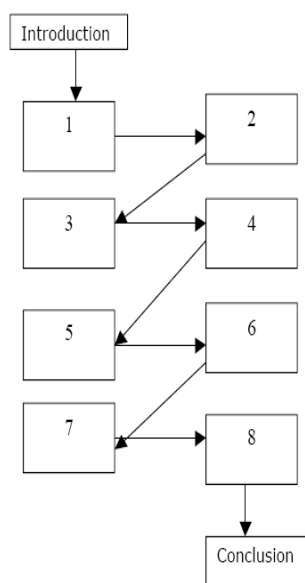
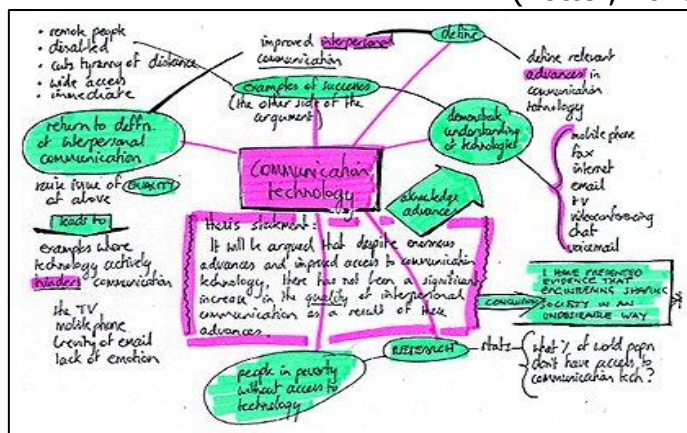| Firstly, you argue from one point of view for approximately half of the text and then 'switch' to another viewpoint until your conclusion | Your first paragraph makes one point of an argument, then you 'zig to the next different (possibly opposing) point and argument, then you 'zag' back to your original argument with another point, and so on to the conclusion | You come to a crescendo of one point building on another and another and so on until your conclusion |

Don't forget to check with your school, tutor/superviser or programme handbook about a preferred structure.

Having a good macro-structure is also about engaging with your notes not just writing them out. It's about how you physically organise your notes: will you use a mind or concept map, diagrams, flow charts, a computer or pieces of paper on a board?

(Potter, 2013)

(University of Roehampton, 2013)

(Inspiration, 2013)

An excellent tool which is available on all University computers is MindGenius 3. It is useful both for planning and structuring, and creates connections between sections or elements of processes and assignments. There are a number of different organisational formats for you to choose from.

The pathway is:

Click on Start icon;
All Programmes;
Productivity Software;
MindGenius 3

TALKING POINT

We will start the process of planning and creating a plan using the following assignment question. What are the key words or phrases to consider and what do they mean? Use the space below for your notes.

Examine the sociological evidence of stereotypes of social groups in the mass media. What are the causes of stereotyping in the mass media and to what extent do they influence social attitudes?

Activity 2:

Now you have the key words and phrases, with a neighbour, create a plan or map of the main elements you may wish to discuss. Use the space below for your plan.

Micro-structure

Paragraphs are the stepping stones for your reader to move along your argument's line of reasoning. Paragraphs have a set structure with each paragraph making a separate point starting with …

- a **lead-in sentence** which makes a smooth **transition** from the previous paragraph and **introduces** the reader to the new point of a paragraph

and ending with…

- a **lead-out sentence** which **relates** the paragraph's point back to the **original task** and may **link** to the **next point** and paragraph to come.

A fuller structure is shown in the graphic below:

Point 1

1. **Lead-in to introduce new point and transition from last point**
2. **Explanation and detail necessary to make the point**
3. **The point in your line of reasoning**
4. **The evidence which supports your point and any further critical analysis of that evidence**
5. **The lead-out that states the importance/relevance of the point to the task and/or links forward to the point ahead.**

You will have noticed that **a line of reasoning** is mentioned. This means that your paragraphs cannot just go in any order, but must be laid out in a logical order, perhaps using a 'switch', 'zig-zag' or 'snowball' structure. Stay focused and do not ramble.

Intro Para 1 Para 2 Para 3 Para 4 Para 5 Conc
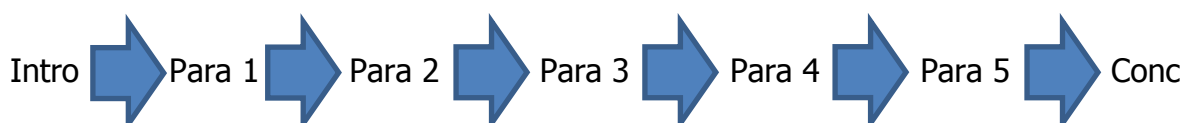
>>>>>DEVELOP A LINE OF REASONING>>>>>

n.b. 'Flow' is not the same as structure. 'Flow' is about making it easy for the reader to move smoothly from one paragraph and point to another, and good planning and plan-making will help with this. However, you also need some creativity in your opening and closing paragraph sentences. Your marker will expect your writing style, including flow, to be of a higher standard to that produced at under-graduate level.

For example, if you are analysing one study and then comparing or contrasting it to another in a later paragraph, you could use a transition word or phrase such as:

X is different from Y in a number of respects.
X differs from Y in a number of important ways.
There are a number of important differences between X and Y.
Women and men differ not only in physical attributes but also in the way in which they …
X is different from Y in a number of respects.
X differs from Y in a number of important ways.
There are a number of important differences between X and Y.
Women and men differ not only in physical attributes but also in the way in which they …

Examples:

The nervous systems of X are significantly different from those of Y in several key features.

The effects of X on human health are similar to those of Y

A paragraph that illustrates a point with a case study or example would use a transition word or phrase such as:

- For instance, …
- For example, …
- this can be illustrated by …
- …, namely, …
- …, such as …

Example:

The interpretation in Nguyen (2006) was supported in practice, as illustrated by the fieldwork of Corelli (2008).

Two excellent websites to help with this and other difficult elements of writing are:

http://owll.massey.ac.nz/assignment-types/essay-flow.php

http://www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk/critical.htm

5. Introductions and conclusions

A clear **introduction** is vital as it sets the scene for the whole of your post-graduate written work. It provides the purpose of the work by giving the reader a clear direction and structure to the essay. It acts as a map of the content with a summary of the points you will make in the order they are written which are signposts for the marker, giving them confidence in your work.

There are two popular ways of getting started:

- The 'tell them what you are going to tell them' approach

Includes phrases such as: This report will consider/review/discuss.....
This assignment is structured into three main parts. In the first…
A central point will be……

- The 'quote a quote' approach

This opens with a quote which is used as the springboard for informing the reader what you are going to do (so you can use the above phrases too).

The **conclusion** will remind the reader of how you have answered or addressed the question or task, and you do not *have* to have come to a definite position on one side or the other. Whether you come to one point of view or not, make it clear why whatever position you *do* take is significant. At post-graduate level, you may be expected to include a recommendation for future research: check with your tutor if this is a requirement.

Remember:

- Including a quotation can be an excellent way of ending any written piece of work.
- Make sure you link your conclusion to your title or task.
- There also needs to be a definite indication and sense that you have reached the end.

Use phrases such as: This essay has shown that…
In conclusion, the main points in this report are…
Finally,……..
The balance of arguments suggests that….
Despite the evidence to the contrary, it could be argued….

6. Appropriate writing style and presentation

If you are a practitioner whilst studying or likely to be on placement, you will notice that the writing you do in your professional field, e.g. reports or proposals, has different conventions than post-graduate academic writing. This is because you are writing for a different audience and purpose. The first may be to instigate or review action, or for record keeping; the second is to show your understanding of your subject area and to apply that to your own research project. Therefore, it makes sense your writing styles will be different. This can cause difficulties at first, but with practice, you will be able to switch from one to the other quickly and competently.

Even though you are likely to be writing about *your* literature review, how *you* carried out *your* research and reflecting on *your* decisions, issues, and solutions, in the main, formality and detachment are the watchwords for post-graduate academic writing. There may be specific assignments when your tutor may allow 'first person' terminology (I, me, my, mine) but double-check as marks may be lost. Never address the reader as 'you'; re-write so the sentence is in the third person.

The appropriate level of formality is achieved through sentence construction (including use of punctuation) and word choice.

You will often find that using words that are more formal in a given order will also help you with not going over your word count. 26 words

OR

You may find a more formal phraseology also assists with controlling word count. 13 words

TALKING POINT

Which words could we use to improve the formality of the following sentence?

Scientists are *looking into* innovative ways to combat AIDS.

1.
2.
3.

Activity 3: Improving the formality of written work.

Working with a neighbour, substitute the italicised words in the following sentences for words or phrases that improve their formality. See how many alternatives you can apply.

A. The purpose of this paper is to try to *figure out* what is lacking in our current understanding of corrosion and protection in concrete.

B. Researchers have recently *come up with* hybrid vehicles that use a fuel-cell engine and a battery-assisted power train.

C. Problems with this policy *showed up* soon after its implementation.

Activity 4: Rewording sentences into a more formal style.

Now you have the hang of it, change the wording in the following sentences so they are more formal.

A. The government did not allocate much funding for the programme.

B. You can see the results in Table 2.

C. This problem doesn't have many viable solutions.

Adapted extensively from Swales and Feak (2009: 18-22)

How your written work looks is important- making a good first impression on your tutor will help them to relax and have confidence in your work. Your programme or module handbooks are likely to include details of font choice and size, space settings, page number placement and other requirements for written work. Apart from proofreading (more later) and adhering to stipulations made by your course, does your paper submission look as if it has been carefully prepared and are there clear paragraphs?

7. Acknowledging sources and referencing conventions

Your use of citations and references will be scrutinized even more thoroughly now you are a post-graduate student. As you are now a contributor to the knowledge pool of your discipline, others may be influenced or inspired by your work just as you are by your predecessors in your field. Therefore, it is both fitting and expected you acknowledge the research and texts you have read within your own written work, as you would want others to do regrarding your research.

You do this in two ways:

✓ **Citations** *within* your text

A citation is a signal to a reader that you are either quoting or paraphrasing original work from another writer/s. Readers will see the citation 'signal' and be able to look in your reference list for the additional information required to trace the source of the original material in your written work.

✓ **References** at *the end* of your written work

A reference provides all the information a reader would need to find the text you have used. For hard copies of books this is: author, date of publication, name of the text, location of the publisher and publisher name. Other information is provided for other types of text, such as article name, journal issue and number; web page name, web address and date of access for on-line information; photographs, paintings, and other sources of other requirements.

Each citation refers to a full bibliographic reference of the source in the list of References at the end of the document. These references are listed **alphabetically** in order of authors' first or family names.

Note: your **list of references** should contain only those sources to which you have **specifically referred** during the course of your work, whereas your **bibliography** should list **all** the books and other sources with which you have engaged during your research, whether you have mentioned them specifically or not. A list of references should be included at the end of any piece of academic work, whilst an additional bibliography is only required in lengthy pieces, such as substantial reports and theses. Check with your tutor whether they want separate lists or one complete list of all references.

There are many different **referencing systems**, and occasionally you will be asked to submit an assignment using an unconventional, to your discipline, referencing system. If you have any difficulties with a 'usual' or new system, contact your Subject Librarian who will be able to help you.

There are two systems that are used regularly both in your writing and in journal articles. These are Harvard and Numeric.

The Numeric system:

Each source you refer to is **followed** by a number (starting at 1) enclosed in brackets. So, if the first author you mention is Baker, and the second Jones, Baker would be (1) and Jones (2). For example:

'Baker (1) has suggested that government intervention in the economy limits productivity. However, an alternative view has been advanced by Jones (2).'

If you need to make your references more specific, you can add page number(s), as in the following:

'*Baker's argument (1: 25) that intervention hinders economic growth is addressed in detail by Jones (2: 45-65).'*

Although you may refer to the same source repeatedly throughout an assignment, you **only use a single number** when referring to it

Each number refers to a full reference of the source in the list of references at the end of the document (references may also appear at the foot of each page). These references are listed in the numerical order in which **they appear in the text**, *not* alphabetically.

The Harvard System

This system is most common. It too involves reference both in the text and at the end of the document.

The Harvard system involves inserting the last or family name of a source's author and its year of publication into the text. This insertion is known as a **citation**, and can be done in either of two ways, as in the following:

'In a recent study (Smith 1996) the solution was shown to be…'

OR

'In a recent study Smith (1996) argued that…'

Again, if you need to make your references more specific, you can add page number(s):

'A recent study (Smith 1996, p.51) found that 10% of people had experienced…'

OR

'A recent study by Smith (1996, p.51) found that 45% of people disliked…'

Note: If there are two authors, both of their names must be cited; for example, 'Davison and Grimes (1976)' or '(Davison & Grimes 1976)'. However, if there are more than two authors, only the first need be cited, followed by '*et al.*', which means 'and others'. Remember, though, that **all** the authors need to be included in the bibliographic reference.

Avoid plagiarism by referencing your sources. You should reference all evidence including:

- The source of all statistics from external sources used in your report
- The source of all quotations used

TALKING POINT

What other sources should we cite and reference?

8. The editing, drafting, and proofreading process

This process is to be rushed as valuable marks can be lost at post-graduate level if care is not taken. Whilst these stages are closely related, they are discrete activities.

A. Firstly, you write your first draft or version. This will need editing once you have read through what you have written.

B. Next you will edit or revise and adapt this first version. Editing is about amending the substansive content of your written work, i.e., what you are trying to say. You may want to add, delete or change the content, move paragraph or part-paragraphs around, and ensure it is clear and concise. Check your work relates back to the task, that it meets any quality or criteria standards and is within your word count range.

C. Another draft comes next followed by more revisions and editing until you are happy with the final version.

D. Finally, you proofread for typo's, grammar, spelling and punctuation. This is done last as revisions may change the context of your content which may, in turn, require additional changes at this stage, so do not waste time proofreading until you have finished revising and drafting.

Try to put yourself in the position of someone who is interested in your topic but knows nothing about it. Would it make sense to him or her? Have you used the best words to express the points you are seeking to make? Do the individual elements fit into the assignment as a whole? Will the joins show? In considering these and similar questions you will often be surprised at the changes you decide to make in the interests of enhanced clarity and greater variety and elegance in the language used. The Three Rs of competent writing are revise, revise, revise. This is especially important with a substantial piece of work like a post-graduate dissertation.

The following text needs revising and proofreading:

The dollar has been dclining in value against the euro over the last s6yearshurting travellers to Europe and American consumers purchasing Europeen goods. The strengthening euro has not the expected beneficial impact in Europe as trade with North America has shown a downwerd trajectory as a result.

Following revisions and editing (word count reduced by half):

The dollar has been dclining in value against the euro over the last s6yearshurting travellers to Europe and American consumers purchasing Europeen goods.

After proofreading:

The dollar has been declining in value against the euro over the last six years, hurting travellers to Europe and American consumers purchasing European goods.

TALKING POINT

Let's edit the next text together– we can reduce it by 66%. Just cross out the unnecessary words.

The public's knowlege of health is pore and more goverment funding for healt education is needed. Increase sums of money shuld be spent on courses to make people awear of personal health ishues. People don't always know what then can do too take care of their health, so further invesment is needed in training on health issues.

Activity 5: Proofreading text

Proofread the text that is left above. Jot down in the space below the improved text. Check with your neighbours if your changes tally.

Tips for proofreading:

- Put your work to one side overnight so you proofread with a fresh brain and eyes.
- Proofread backwards one sentence at a time: you will be used to what comes next if you read from the beginning, and will miss errors accordingly.
- Look for one type of proofreading issue at a time – punctuation, grammar, spelling, typo's, etc.
- Beware of spell-checkers as you may have spelt a word correctly as far as the computer is concerning – their/they're/there or to/too/two – but is grammatically incorrect.

Which member of University staff can proofread your work?

Don't be afraid to share your writing with your friends. There is nothing wrong with discussing your ideas and opinions, and having group support will prove invaluable when you are finding it all a bit tricky. There will be times when you are flying and others are less confident, so you can return the favour.

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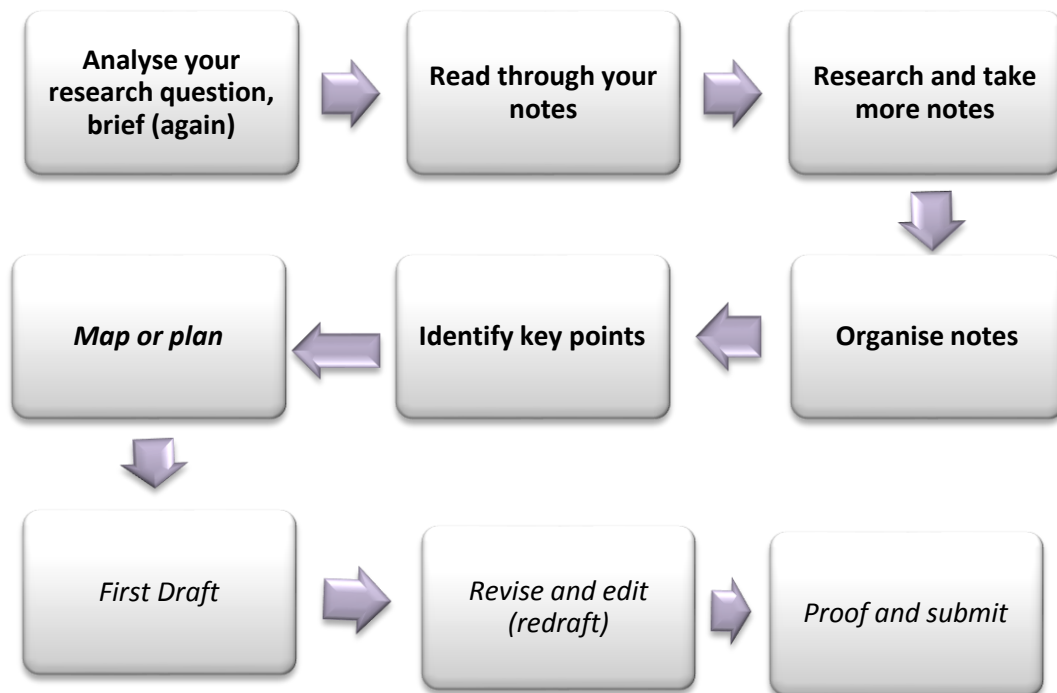Wisker, G. (2008) *The Postgraduate Research Handbook*. 2nd ed. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Answers

TALKING POINT

Negatives and benefits to planning

Negatives	Benefits
Don't know where to start	Showed my plan to my tutor who gave me great feedback on my assignment
Nothing to show my tutor to gain feedback about	Planning helps me think clearly and know what I am trying to do, so I write more confidently
Made loads of notes but don't know what is relevant	
	My plan shows me how to start my assignment and where it goes.
I'm over my word count but still go so much to include	
	A plan makes writing easier

Activity 1: Planning process

Analyse your research question, brief (again)	Read through your notes	Research and take more notes
Map or plan	Identify key points	Organise notes
First Draft	Revise and edit (redraft)	Proof and submit

1.   Analysis: work out what the question or task is asking you as this will help you to decide your stance. It will also help with your research and outline plan for the assignment. Is it descriptive or analytical? What are the key words?

2.   Your notes: remind yourself of the subject using your lecture notes and any other class handouts or information. Do you have any gaps in your knowledge or understanding?

3.   Research: will fill the gaps, and provide ideas and evidence to support your argument.

4.   Organise: what theory goes with what aspect and what evidence?

5.   Key points: what is your bank of notes telling you are the important and significant points to cover

6.   Map/plan: put together a tentative outline of the main sections and order of your assignment. You can always amend it later

7.   Write you first draft: more ideas may come from writing so….

8.   Revise and edit: to ensure your subject matter is relevant to the question/task and the order makes sense. Do a 'reverse outline' by making short notes by the side of each paragraph or section and check you are answering the question and it flows well from one subject to the next.

9.   Proofread: check your format, spelling, grammar, and punctuation as it is easy to lose marks here.

TALKING POINT

Key words in assignment question

Sociological: dealing with social questions or problems, especially focusing on cultural and environmental factors rather than on psychological or personal characteristics

Stereotype: a simplified and standardized conception or image invested with special meaning and held in common by members of a group

Social groups: grouping individuals into groups based on specified criteria

Mass media: any of the means of communication that reach very large numbers of people

Causes: a thing that acts, happens, or exists in or by the mass media to affect social attitudes

What extent: by how much

Influence: the capacity or power of the mass media to be a compelling force on or produce effects on people's social attitudes

Social attitude: a hypothetical make-up that stands for an individual's or a group's degree of like or dislike for social groups based on stereotypes

Activity 2: Structure of assignment plan

Definition of a stereotype
What are the different kinds of stereotypes?
Race; Culture; Nation; Class ; Sexual orientation; Gender
Do they intersect?

Define what is meant by mass media and what it includes
Press; TV; Radio; Online

How are these stereotypes represented in mass media?

- Situation comedies
- Cartoons in newspapers
- Choice of interviewees on news programmes
- Always including the ages of people in newspaper articles

Any evidence of influencing social attitudes?

TALKING POINT

Words to improve the formality of the following sentence?

Scientists are *looking into* innovative ways to combat AIDS.

1. investigating
2. exploring
3. researching

Activity 3: Improving the formality of written work.

A.   The purpose of this paper is to try *to figure out* what is lacking in our current understanding of corrosion and protection in concrete.
1. discover
2. determine

B.   Researchers have recently *come up with* hybrid vehicles that use a fuel-cell engine and a battery-assisted power train.
1. developed
2. created

C.   Problems with this policy *showed up* soon after its implementation.
1. were revealed
2. appeared

Activity 4: Rewording sentences into a more formal style.

Now you have the hang of it, change the wording in the following sentences so they are more formal.

A.   The government did not allocate much funding for the programme.
        The government allocated little funding for the programme.

B.   You can see the results in Table 2.
        The results can be seen in Table 2.

C.   This problem doesn't have many viable solutions.
        This problem has few viable solutions

TALKING POINT

Other sources to cite and reference

- The source of specialist knowledge you have paraphrased or summarised
- The source of any definitions quoted or paraphrased
- The source of any previous external research summarised
- The source of any theory, model, idea, or working practice that you refer to in your text.

TALKING POINT

Editing text together

You have a choice as each sentence says the same thing:

The public's knowlege of health is pore and more goverment funding for healt education is needed.
Increase sums of money shuld be spent on courses to make people awear of personal health ishues.
People don't always know what then can do too take care of their health, so further invesment is needed in training on health issues.

Activity 5: Proofreading text

The public's knowledge of health is poor and more government funding for health education is needed.
Increased sums of money should be spent on courses to make people aware of personal health issues.
People do not always know what they can do to take care of their health, so further investment is needed in training on health issues.

University staff that proofread student work:

Nobody