

An interactive approach to writing essays and research reports in psychology

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writing essays and
research reports
in psychology

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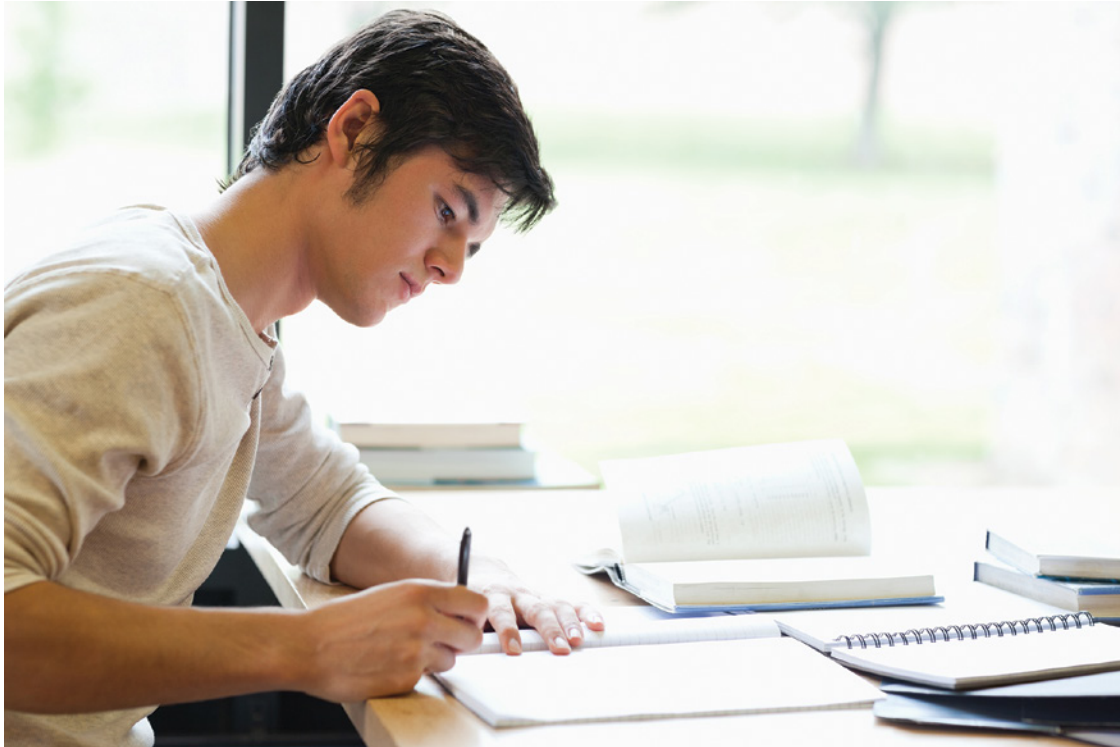
CHAPTER 1

Where to begin

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After studying this chapter, you should be able to:

- 1.1 apply the APA style in your writing
 - 1.2 understand the difference between a research essay and a research report
 - 1.3 ensure the information you find is relevant
 - 1.4 review the literature to develop your argument
 - 1.5 understand how to avoid plagiarism.
-



1.1 Introduction to APA style

LEARNING OBJECTIVE 1.1 Apply the APA style in your writing.

Everyone uses different “languages” for different activities. Visiting a foreign country will often mean you must speak in a different language from the one you normally use. But even in your everyday life you will vary your vocabulary in different circumstances. For example, the way you would speak in front of your grandparents is different from the way you would speak to young children. The language you would use while watching a game of cricket differs from that you would use in a formal debate. We all learn to use language appropriate to the occasion.

In the same way, the academic study of psychology has its own language. Unlike the colloquial “languages” you use in daily life, the one you need to use in studying psychology has precise and detailed requirements that you must follow. These requirements are contained in the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (APA). This language is commonly referred to as **APA style**.

APA style traces its origins back to 1928, when editors from a group of psychological and anthropological journals developed a seven-page “standard of procedures” to guide authors in the presentation of their work. This guide, now in its sixth edition, has been vastly expanded in the intervening years to provide a comprehensive manual of instructions that is accepted worldwide as the standard for writing in the discipline of psychology.

APA style covers every aspect of writing and presentation including format, structure, punctuation, word order, spelling, grammar, writing style, capitalisation, abbreviations, and referencing. Standardisation of these requirements provides benefits for everyone associated with the discipline of psychology. The main benefit is consistency. When everyone uses the same formatting and style conventions, it is much easier for the reader to understand what has been written and compare it with the work of others. No matter where the study originated, the written work will be presented in a style that is universally recognised. Imagine the confusion if every writer decided to use a different format, different abbreviations, different spellings, and a different order. The result would be chaos.

The APA style requirements apply to you, as a student in psychology, in the same way they apply to all other writers involved in the discipline at an academic level. Learning a language that you have never come across before may seem daunting, but do not be discouraged. At an introductory level, you are not expected to be an expert on all its nuances. The important thing is that you learn to apply the key elements of APA style. That is what this book is all about.

As a student setting out to write your first **essay** or **research report** in psychology, you may indeed be intimidated by the 270-plus pages of the *APA Publication Manual*. No one expects you to memorise all 270 pages of the *Publication Manual*. Rather, this book aims to provide a hands-on, interactive approach to learning the key elements that you will need to apply when writing essays and research reports in the discipline of psychology. It will summarise the most important points of style and presentation and allow you to practise them in a user-friendly way.

This book recognises that the more you practise APA style requirements, the easier they become to learn. The many learning exercises throughout the book will help you master the skills needed for APA formatting. It would be impossible to cover every aspect of the APA manual. Instead, the focus is on the requirements that are most important to the writing you will be doing.

Learning to use the correct APA style is also an easy way to improve your grades. Not only will sticking to APA requirements in areas such as grammar and punctuation improve the flow of your writing, but many lecturers will actually mark your paper down if you stray from APA style. Using this book could be the key to a higher grade point average. Chapter 2 covers the mechanics of APA style and provides tips for writing clearly and precisely. You will learn how to sharpen your critical thinking skills in Chapter 3.

Why research is reported

The body of knowledge in the field of psychology, as in all academic disciplines, continues to grow as researchers carry out more and more studies. The way researchers convey the results of the work they

have done is by publishing them in the form of an essay or research report. Certain accepted conventions govern the format of these reporting mechanisms. Learning these conventions is vital if you intend to pursue postgraduate studies. They are forms that you will be expected to follow, so you will have to learn them at some stage. But even if you do not go on to further study, learning APA style will help you understand more quickly what the author of an essay or research report is trying to say.

1.2 Essays versus research reports

LEARNING OBJECTIVE 1.2 Understand the difference between a research essay and a research report.

The two most common types of work you will undertake as an undergraduate student are the essay and the research report. These two models are similar in many ways, but there is one crucial difference between them. The essay is based on a review of past literature and what you can conclude from that—you have no data of your own to report. A research report also reviews past literature but is primarily concerned with reporting the results of research that you have carried out.

In the 4th edition of this book, we distinguish between quantitative and qualitative research. **Quantitative research** uses measurable data to quantify attitudes, opinions, and/or behaviours and generalises results from a large, representative sample population to the target population. In quantitative research, data are analysed through numerical comparisons and statistical inferences to formulate facts about, and uncover patterns in, various phenomena. Quantitative data collection methods include various forms of surveys, interviews, longitudinal or cross-sectional studies, experimental studies, and other systematic observations.

Qualitative research is more exploratory than quantitative research, and involves delving deeper into the research question to gain an understanding of underlying reasons, opinions, and motivations of human behaviour. Qualitative research provides insights into the problem from a research participant's perspective. Qualitative data collection methods include interviews and focus groups, and data may also be collected through participant observations. The sample size is typically small in qualitative research and data are analysed by themes from descriptions by participants.

In this book, you will learn how to format research reports in APA style for both quantitative and qualitative research.

The following sections will look at the formatting and content requirements for both an essay and a research report, including both a quantitative research report and a qualitative research report.

Structure of an essay

The aim of an essay is to examine the literature on a particular topic, critically evaluate the findings, and reach some conclusions. You may argue a particular point of view based on the evidence that you have considered in the available research. An essay does not require you to carry out any original research or studies of your own. It is similar to the review articles you will see published in psychology journals.

An essay is not normally divided into separate sections; the text simply flows from start to finish without headings or subheadings to separate different sections. However, this does not mean that essays do not contain a number of different elements. A standard essay pattern includes an introduction, a body, and a conclusion. The introduction, one or two paragraphs long, sets the scene for what will follow; the body is where past research is reviewed and critically examined; and the conclusion is where a particular argument is advanced.

An essay also requires a title page, an **abstract**, and a **reference list**. (The exact content and formatting requirements for an essay are outlined in more detail in Chapter 4.)

Sections of a research report

The main aim of a research report is to disseminate to others the results of a study that you have conducted. This will require you to review past literature and critically evaluate key studies on the topic, but the primary aim is to describe what you did and found in your own research.

A research report has a set structure. This involves a number of different sections, divided by sub-headings, each of which has particular format and content requirements. This structure must be followed. The research report describes original work that contributes to the body of knowledge on the topic. It needs to adhere to the same conventions that all other researchers use when reporting their results.

A quantitative research report contains the following main sections:

- Introduction—where you critically evaluate past research and explain why you undertook the study and what you expected to find
- Method—where you describe how you conducted the study
- Results—where you report what you found
- Discussion—where you outline the conclusions you can draw from these findings.

A qualitative research report contains the same main sections as in a quantitative research report, with the exception that you typically combine the Results and Discussion sections. Thus the analysis and interpretation of qualitative data is reported in the same one section of the report.

Like an essay, both quantitative and qualitative research reports also require a title page, an abstract, and a reference list. In some cases, they may also include appendices. (The exact content and formatting requirements for each section of a quantitative research report and qualitative research report are outlined in more detail in Chapters 5 and 6, respectively.)

1.3 Finding the right information

LEARNING OBJECTIVE 1.3 Ensure the information you find is relevant.

It takes a great deal of time to write essays and research reports in psychology. Before you even put pen to paper (or hands to keyboard!) you need to first find the appropriate information and then review the literature. Make sure you pace your study, allowing sufficient time to devote to the actual writing-up process.

The first step in preparing an essay or research report is to clarify exactly what you want to talk about. For an essay, this means carefully examining the topic and making sure you understand exactly what you are being asked to do. This issue is covered in more detail in Chapter 4. For a research report, this means being very clear on your research aims and what you expect to find through your study. This is covered in more detail in Chapter 5. If you are unclear on either the essay topic or your exact research aims, make sure you ask for advice. This might simply mean talking to your lecturer or tutor. Or you might try an online discussion group, where you can post a message and receive feedback from fellow students or from academic staff.

The next step is to thoroughly research the literature relevant to your topic. There are a few general rules you should follow in surveying past research. The more you read on your topic, the greater your depth of knowledge will become and the more informed you will be when assessing it. You should consult a wide range of sources when looking for relevant studies. Check out books, journals, other **peer-reviewed articles**, the internet, unpublished academic papers, conference proceedings, newspapers, and any other sources that might be relevant. This will ensure that you locate the widest possible range of views on the topic. Also, make sure you compare older and newer sources to track developments over time. Earlier works may present pivotal findings on a particular topic, but newer works may have modified or supplemented those findings. As a general rule of thumb, you should consult sources published in the past five years as well as earlier works on the topic. You need to cover the total picture in your research.

The next sections will provide more information on how to search the literature for the most relevant material and how to review that material once you have found it.

Searching the literature

There are many ways in which students can search the literature for material most relevant to their research topic. The resources available to each student will be different, and you should take the time to learn how to get the best results from these resources.

Be sure to keep a photocopy of any material you may wish to cite in your work, noting the full referencing details. Write down the author, year published, title, and full publication details, including page numbers, of every article you collect, even if you are uncertain whether to include it in your essay or research report.

The rest of this chapter will outline how to search the literature in two ways—by using the library in the traditional way, and by using the internet. It will provide tips on how you can use these resources most effectively to save time that you can use in reviewing the literature and writing your essay or research report.

Using the library

The two main hard copy resources in a library are books and journals. You can find where these are kept by consulting the library's catalogue system. Most libraries now maintain computerised catalogues, which make it easier to locate books and journal articles. Other library resources include unpublished student theses, conference proceedings, newspapers, videos, and government reports. These resources will also be listed in the library catalogue.

Sometimes you will be looking for a particular book or journal article that is not listed in the library catalogue. You may be able to obtain it from another library through an inter-library loan. The easiest way to organise this is by talking to a library staff member at the reference desk. Do not be nervous about asking for help on this or any other concern you have about library resources. Asking for help can save you a lot of time and trouble in the long run.

It is a good idea to keep a checklist of sources that you have used. It can be quite confusing to keep track of the material you have found and the sources you still need to locate. A written record is the best way to make sure you do not waste time searching repeatedly for information you have already found.

Many libraries today subscribe to journals that can be viewed electronically through online databases. Some of these databases will enable you to access full-text versions of journal articles. This means you do not have to locate a printed copy of the journal, since the text of the article is available to you online. Other databases do not provide full-text versions, so you will need to track down a hard copy. Check whether your library subscribes to online databases that provide access to the journals you are looking for. Three useful databases that provide online access to full-text journal articles are:

- Ingenta (<http://www.ingentaconnect.com>)
- Science Direct (<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science>)
- Wiley Online Library (<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/>).

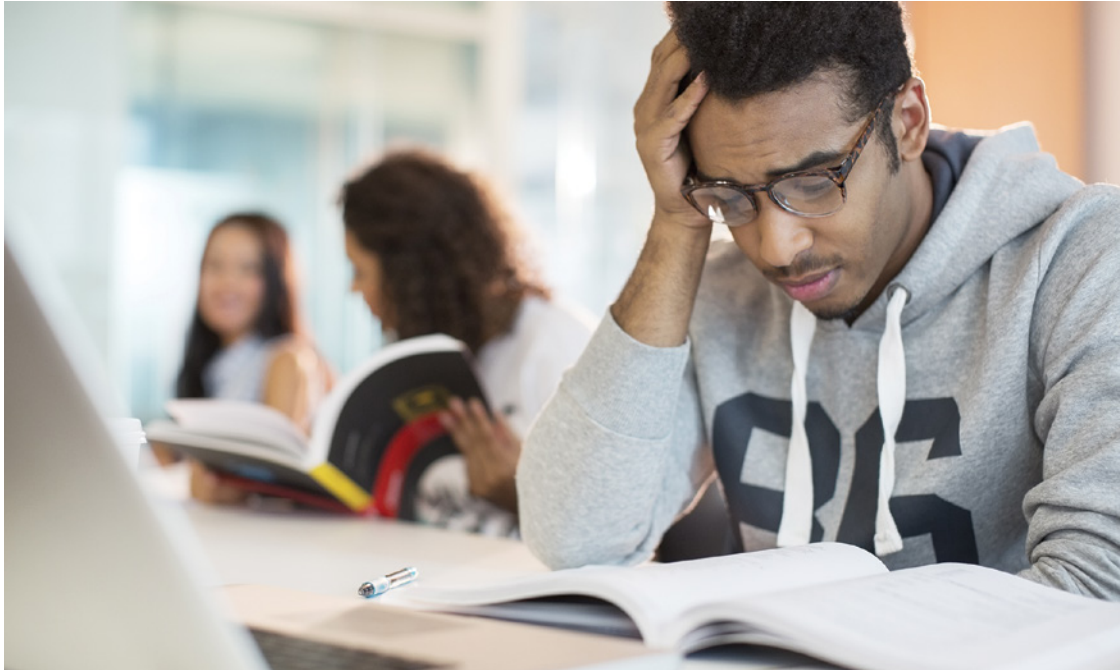
Two other extremely valuable databases are Psychological Abstracts and the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI).

Psychological Abstracts includes abstracts of many articles published in the field of psychology, covering a wide range of sources including journal articles, books, book chapters, technical reports, and student dissertations. It is published monthly and includes full reference details for the articles.

Psychological Abstracts is available in hard copy in most university libraries. It is also available in electronic form, which enables you to search much more quickly through the abstracts it contains. The main electronic version, called PsycINFO, provides access to abstracts of all types of publications. A slightly smaller version, called PsycARTICLES, omits dissertations and technical reports. The electronic version of this database is an extremely valuable tool that can save you considerable time and energy tracking down reference details.

The Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI) provides a list of all works cited by authors in a wide range of publications in the social sciences field. The SSCI is printed annually, but many university libraries now have access to an electronic version of the SSCI. You can use this to discover the reference details of works related to your topic, and also to determine which works have been cited most often in a particular field of study. This can be very useful in focusing your search.

This list of resources is not exhaustive; other databases can also be useful. Check with your library staff for help in finding the right database for your topic.



Using the internet

Used properly, the internet is a powerful medium through which to locate and access information on your research topic. The internet provides quick links to data sources all over the world at the click of a mouse button. However, you need to be very selective in the way you use the internet and in the type of information you draw from it. Trawling through the mountains of information available on the World Wide Web can be time consuming, and the quality of data you end up with may not meet the rigorous standards required in academic writing.

This section will further examine methods you can use to find information on your research topic through the internet, suggest ways to evaluate the quality of the information you find on the internet, provide links to useful sites for students of psychology, and offer some general tips on how to make your search for data more effective.

Ways to find information on the internet

The internet is a vast resource with unlimited access points, so do not rely on just one or two sites when researching a topic. The rest of this section will outline three ways to locate information on the Web: through general search engines, subject directories, and the Invisible Web.

The first method is to use a general search engine. Most people with internet access will be familiar with these programs, which can be used to search for information on any topic at all. Some of the more common are:

- Google (<http://www.google.com>)
- Google scholar (<http://scholar.google.com.au/>)
- Bing (<http://www.bing.com>)
- Yahoo! (<http://www.yahoo.com>).

They work by searching the internet to find files containing key words that match those you enter in your search request. The problem with search engines is that they do not use specific criteria for choosing which sites they locate, so you may end up with a long list of often useless material.

These search engines are useful for finding information on topics of general interest but are not suitable for locating the scholarly material you need in academic research. Do not rely on these search engines in your study—there are much better alternatives.

One of these alternatives is the second way to locate information on the internet—via subject directories. Many students may not be aware of these directories, or do not use them often enough. Subject directories allow you to search for information on particular research topics within selected academic resources. They ignore all the miscellaneous, non-refereed sites accessed by general search engines and concentrate on sites that provide access only to academic-quality data. An example of a reliable subject directory is Academic Info (<http://www.academicinfo.net/index.html>).

The third way to find information is through the Invisible Web. This “invisible” Web is what you cannot retrieve (or “see”) in the search results of a general search engine or subject directory. It provides access to searchable databases, dynamically generated pages and pages intentionally excluded from general search engines. It also includes high-powered search engines that access material not “visible” to traditional search engines. One way to find the Invisible Web is to search a subject term and the word “database” using a general search engine. For more information about the Invisible Web, access the following site:

- Finding information on the internet: A Tutorial (<http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/TeachingLib/Guides/Internet/InvisibleWeb.html>).

Useful psychology sites

Many internet sites provide specific information on psychology topics. These sites include pages maintained by peak professional bodies, psychology departments of universities, academic journals that specialise in psychology, and sites created by individual psychologists. They often contain useful information and links to other resources. The following are among the best psychology sites you can use in your research:

- AmoebaWeb (<http://old.vanguard.edu/psychology/amoebaweb/>)
- PsychNET (<http://www.psychnet-uk.com>)
- Psych Web (<http://www.psywww.com>)
- Electronic Journals and Periodicals (<http://psych.hanover.edu/Krantz/journal.html>)
- Scholarly Psychology Resources on the Web (<http://www.psywww.com/resource/bytopic.htm>)
- Australian Psychological Society (<http://www.psychology.org.au>)
- American Psychological Association (<http://www.apa.org>).

Tips for searching the internet more effectively

Searching for information on the internet can be a time consuming and complicated process. Here are some simple tips that will help you search more effectively and find the information you seek with less hassle.

- Take care with the way you submit your search request. Make sure you read the instructions for each search engine you use—many operate in completely different ways (e.g., some are sensitive to capital letters in your search request).
- Check the accuracy of your spelling. If your first attempt does not produce satisfactory results, repeat your request using alternative spellings or key terms.
- Use several different search engines; do not rely on just one. Different search engines access different sites and produce different results, even when you submit exactly the same request.
- Refine your search request. Look at the *advanced search* tips that many search engines offer. They will often tell you how to refine your search by linking key words with Boolean operators such as AND or NOT. This will help narrow the search.
- Make sure you keep a note of those subject directories and sites you find most helpful and easy to use so you can access them quickly in future research.

Evaluating the quality of information on the internet

Not all the information you find on the internet is suitable for use in a university essay or report. The first thing you must do is apply the same critical review as you would to information found in a traditional source—that is, you need to check whether the information was generated by academic research, whether that research conformed to the highest standards of academic rigour, whether the work was published in a peer-reviewed academic forum, and when the research was carried out.

One important use of the internet is to access online versions of reputable journals. You can be sure that the data contained in these online journals meet the academic standards you require.

Information published in other online arenas may give you valuable background on your topic and help you gain a wider appreciation of the arguments that you might consider. However, unless the information meets the standards applied to peer-reviewed publications, be very cautious about the weight you place on it. Websites give people the opportunity to publish their opinions about various topics, without the backing of reputable research. You should be sceptical of data that do not result from the application of scientific methods.

A good way to assess the quality of the information you find on the internet is to use the CARS evaluation checklist developed by Harris (1997). CARS is an acronym that stands for Credibility, Accuracy, Reasonableness and Support—four key criteria that provide a simple recipe for quality control.

Credibility is all about how confident you can be that the information provided is reliable. Harris (1997) identifies the author's credentials as one important indicator. You should check whether an author has been named in the first place, as anonymity is not a good indicator of reliability. You should also check their academic qualifications, their background or experience in the field they are addressing, the organisations they represent, their position or job title, their previous publications, their reputation among peers, and whether their contact details are provided. You also need to check for evidence of quality control. It is relatively easy for people to post information on the Web that has not been assessed or reviewed by anyone else. You need to look for evidence that the information has been subject to the scrutiny of others with appropriate expertise. For instance, is the information posted on behalf of a reputable organisation? Has the information been drawn from a book or academic journal that is subject to peer review? Is it drawn from an online journal that has an editor and a peer-review process?

Accuracy is the test of how true the information is—whether it is up to date, factual, detailed, exact, and comprehensive (Harris, 1997). Ongoing research is continually adding to the body of knowledge in many subject areas, so information can quickly become obsolete. You need to be sure that the data you are accessing remains current. You also need to check that the information gives a complete view of the subject matter, rather than looking at it from a narrow perspective. The full range of views needs to be acknowledged and discussed, particularly in areas where there are definitive texts or theories that are important in this field of study. Finally, check the intended audience and purpose of the information. For example, firms may place information on the Web to try to persuade prospective purchasers to buy their goods or services. You would have far less faith in that information than you would in data drawn from an academic source that is specifically intended for scholarly use.

Reasonableness means assessing the information for fairness, objectivity, moderateness, and consistency (Harris, 1997). Check whether the information is presented in a balanced way, free from emotive or irrational arguments that advance a particular cause ahead of others. Is the stance neutral, or does the information reflect a bias or self-serving interest? Be sceptical of organisations or sites that promote their own products with one-sided information. Be sceptical, also, of apparently wild and extreme claims that seem too far-fetched to be true. Use your common sense to carry out a reality check on these statements. If they seem difficult to believe, there is probably reason to doubt them.

The final test in the CARS evaluation is **Support**, which is all about the extent to which the information presented has been backed up and corroborated. Check the sources of the information. Can they be verified? Are they published and documented? It is particularly important that the source of statistics is documented, otherwise someone could simply be fabricating the numbers (Harris, 1997). Check also that the information presented is corroborated by others. Test the information provided against other sources to see whether there is agreement, particularly where it presents contentious or surprising claims. Look also for consistency with the body of knowledge on a particular topic—that is, check whether it builds on well-known and established information in that field.

1.4 Reviewing the literature

LEARNING OBJECTIVE 1.4 Review the literature to develop your argument.

Now that you have searched the literature and found the most relevant past research, you are ready to review the articles for evidence to develop your argument.

Be realistic about how many works you can review in depth. It is impossible to comprehensively critique every source that touches on your topic. You need to work out which are the key studies you should focus most energy on and which are the less important works. However, do not make the mistake of concentrating all your time on only one or two sources. You need to strike a balance. Knowing how to evaluate the information you retrieve from your scholarly works requires an exercise in critical thinking. Consult Chapter 3 for details on how to critically interpret and evaluate the research evidence.

The rest of this section will provide tips on background reading and note taking.

Reading articles

When you read through an article or book chapter as part of your research, there are two main questions you should ask yourself: what are the key points the author is making, and how do those findings relate to your research questions? It is often difficult to answer these questions after reading through the work only once. A good practice is to read through articles at least twice. The first read will help you identify the main points the author is making and decide whether they are useful to your own research. During your second read you should start taking notes on those key findings.

Note taking

Taking clear and concise notes is essential in academic research. Effective note-taking practices can make writing an essay or report much quicker and easier than if it is done in a disorganised way. This section provides tips on how to improve your note-taking procedures.

- Take detailed but selective notes. You should note only the key findings and arguments in an article rather than trying to summarise everything the author has said.
- Keep photocopies of important articles. Resist the temptation to photocopy every article, essay, or book chapter that has a remote connection to your research topic. That could result in mountains of paper that will be of little use to you.
- When you find a relevant work, make sure you photocopy or record the full referencing details—the names of the authors, the title of the publication, the place and date of publication, and the page numbers. This will avoid the need for a lot of rechecking when you come to cite texts in your work or reference list.
- Take comprehensive notes to help you avoid plagiarism. It will ensure that you give credit to other authors where necessary, and not accidentally reproduce their words or ideas as your own.
- Use a system. Do not take notes haphazardly; rather, work to a system that ensures you record all the details needed for each work you read. This means not only recording the key ideas, and the page numbers they appeared on, but also capturing all the reference details previously mentioned. Some