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Chapter

1

Study skills



Colin Rees and Alan Glasper

**Links to other chapters in *Foundation Studies for Caring***

- 2 Interprofessional learning
- 3 Evidence-based practice and research

**Links to other chapters in *Foundation Skills for Caring***

- 2 IT skills

W

Don't forget to visit www.palgrave.com/glasper for additional online resources relating to this chapter.

Introduction

Your professional education in healthcare is an active method of preparing you for your future role as a healthcare professional. It requires the ability to think logically, and use a number of key skills to pull together a vast range of knowledge, and apply it to complex situations. Study skills are a major part of that activity. They consist of a range of techniques and methods for advanced reading, writing and critical evaluation, as well as methods of organising your time.

You will find your student life is easier if you acquire good study skills, as they provide a means of keeping on top of academic work. They help by providing a system and method for the processes needed to make sense of the knowledge and skills that have to be absorbed in a short period of time.

Student-centred learning is rapidly becoming a popular way of structuring learning for health professionals, as it develops the skill of identifying personal learning needs, and taking a proactive approach to learning. Both student-centred learning and professional education are influenced by how organised you are, and the extent to which you identify and satisfy your own learning needs. This chapter is an essential first step in helping you to a successful outcome in your academic work.

The aim of this chapter is to provide an insight into studying for a professional qualification. It covers essential features of study skills – in other words, how you learn to learn, and particularly how you can make tackling assignments easier. These skills will prepare you for some of the activities you will face early in your course.

Learning outcomes

The chapter will enable you to:

- outline the features of professional education
- describe the key features of student-centred learning
- outline a planned approach to learning
- describe key features of time management for assignments and projects
- identify the range of learning situations encountered in professional education
- describe the main features of reading for assignments
- demonstrate how to search for material on the web
- carry out a review of the literature
- demonstrate how to critique research articles
- outline the basic features of academic writing
- construct a references list using the Harvard system
- describe how to prepare seminar feedback
- summarise how to construct a poster presentation
- outline how to make appropriate use of supervisors.

Concepts

- Professional education
- Student-centred learning
- Sourcing literature and evidence
- Primary and secondary sources
- Reviewing the literature
- Critiquing research articles
- Academic writing
- Assignment work
- Plagiarism
- Referrals
- Reading styles
- Harvard system of referencing
- Seminar participation
- Poser presentations
- Supervisor support

S Scenario: Introducing Sue

Sue is 32 years old and starting her nurse education programme, after having worked part-time as a care assistant in a local home for the elderly for the last four years. She has two children aged 9 and 7. Adult nursing has always been her ambition, but when the children came along she had to put thoughts of becoming a nurse on hold until they were fully settled in school. She has some NVQ qualifications but not a great deal more.

Sue is excited about finally starting her nurse education, but is apprehensive about the academic side of it. She feels intimidated by younger students, and imagines they will be computer literate, and very bright. She sees herself as a slow learner. It is a long time since she has done any studying at this level and she does not have a great deal of self-confidence in her academic abilities.

There is a computer at home, which she bought with the children's education in mind. She does use the web for weekly shopping, and buying household bargains. She has

a new pencil case, an A4 note pad, and a neat backpack, so feels ready for the challenge. On commencement of the course Sue is allocated to a student learning group.

Learning activity

What do you feel are some of the common feelings and concerns of people starting an academic health professional course like yours? You may wish to undertake this activity as part of your initial learning group activities.

The start of any course can be overwhelming. Once you are provided with the details of course and module content, there seems so much to learn, and assignments and exams seem to require so much understanding and work. Even understanding the question of some assignments can feel like a huge challenge.

The world of education has also to fit in with life outside the university, where there can be other demands such as family and social commitments. Managing your learning can mean a lot of juggling commitments and opportunities, and deciding on priorities so everything exists comfortably together.

At the start of any course it is important to decide on some principles to follow in your academic work. The temptation is to become immersed in student social life and let the structure of attending lectures, seminars and tutorials just happen. On the other hand, you may find yourself squeezing your academic life into the time left over from looking after a family. Situations like this will result in tensions and difficulties in your life and need to be avoided.

Time management

Organising your time is one of the most important skills to develop early in a course. This means using diaries, calendars and 'to do' lists to ensure that you pace everything and successfully attend modules, meet deadlines and are at the right place at the right time. There are many tools to help you achieve this, such as:

- electronic palm-held organisers/mobile phone organisers
- notepads
- diaries
- wall calendars
- combinations of all these.

Choose a method that suits you, but be self-disciplined and consistent in its use. Have a clear system to record key events, times and places such as lectures, seminars and clinical placement details. You will find that you have to consult noticeboards for details of venues, or check the university website or virtual learning platforms such as 'Blackboard' for modules for changes or information on where you should be, and what you will need to bring with you, or wear.

One of the keys to being a successful student is taking responsibility for yourself, and ensuring that you are well prepared for daily life and for assignment and other academic work.

Becoming a good learner

Professional education means *engaging* with knowledge and skills that will provide the basis of your professional role. You will always be learning new things. Knowledge is not something that you empty out of a box and capture as a 'one-off' event. The secret of success is learning how to learn. That means developing skills that allow you to develop new understandings and put together, by synthesising, knowledge that can be applied to daily work. It also means being proactive in applying learning skills in all the situations in which you find yourself.

To engage with knowledge is more than learning something by heart, or rote learning. This is because learning something by heart does not mean you understand it, or can adapt it to different situations. You are limited to using such information in the way that you learned

it; in other words, the knowledge or skill is not transferable. This chapter covers the ways in which the main forms of engagement take place. They include:

- thinking
- reading
- thinking
- writing
- thinking.

The repetition of 'thinking' is deliberate. The key to engaging with knowledge is through thinking and reflecting on meaning, so that you can join areas of knowledge together and create your personal understanding. In your course, you will demonstrate that you have achieved understanding by writing about it, talking about it, and perhaps answering exam questions, as well as carrying out practical activities to demonstrate your grasp of information and skills.

Types of learning setting

S Scenario continued

Sue's previous education consisted of her school years, and the NVQ course she undertook. Her thoughts about the possible differences between nurse education and her past experiences were a little hazy. When she started the

course she was surprised at the size of the student group in lectures. She was also unprepared for the variety of forms in which learning takes place.

There are a number of different ways in which your learning will be structured. These include:

- lectures
- seminars
- tutorials
- workbooks
- student-centred learning
- group work and activities
- reflective accounts
- e-learning
- poster presentations.

Each of these depends on similar processes, although the way the student demonstrates that learning has been achieved may differ. The basic process is to:

- 1 Identify the learning outcome (aim).
- 2 Collect information and process it (or in the case of a skill, practise it).
- 3 Structure an answer to satisfy the aim or carry out a skill that has been demonstrated or described.
- 4 Reflect on what has been learned.

Throughout this chapter we show you how this is achieved in different situations. We concentrate mainly on thinking skills rather than clinical skills. Whatever the setting, it is important not to lose sight of the bigger picture of your course and how each part makes a contribution to your professional education. In other words, do not treat each part of your course as a 'stand alone': they are all meant to fit together, although at the time they might not seem to.

E-learning

S Scenario continued

Sue has a home computer but leaves its use mainly to her husband, Simon. The children love it, and find little difficulty in using it for games and entertainment. Sue occasionally 'borrows' it for supermarket shopping to save time. She has some keyboard skills but feels she is a little slow. Now she is on the course she is surprised to find how

much students are expected to use the computer. They need to use it not only to write and submit assignments, but to communicate with lecturers through email and access learning programmes. This is yet another area of the course she finds a little stressful.

E-learning is any form of learning that takes place through electronic means. This includes everything from computers to learning programs on compact discs (CDs). However, more usually it focuses on computers and web-based methods of learning.

People vary in their skill and familiarity with computers, but whatever your level of skill, the best plan is to make it work for you. You will find computers make almost every aspect of being a student easier:

- writing in all its forms, including preparing assignments, emailing other students and university staff
- finding out what information is available on a topic
- getting hold of published and web material
- sending drafts of work to lecturers for comments
- using software such as referencing programs to make putting work together easier
- increasing understanding of topics through material available on websites and CD packages
- taking part in noticeboards or discussion pages on the web, often part of the university website
- working through learning packages on the web.

Practice placements

S Scenario continued

Sue is allocated to her first placement, where she meets her mentor for the first time. She is apprehensive about what she is supposed to do.

Getting the most from your mentor

All healthcare students are allocated a mentor when attending practice placements. The role of the mentor is to support students in meeting their practice learning outcomes. Practice learning outcomes are an integral part of the curriculum, and in some courses such as nursing, the practice component makes up to 50 per cent of the programme. All healthcare students should expect full support from their mentor, who will have undertaken a programme of study to equip them for this role. In some programmes such as nursing the mentor has to directly provide supervision to a student for at least 40 per cent of their allocated duties. It is the mentor's responsibility to plan and coordinate the student's learning experience and help them achieve their stated competencies. These competencies are prescribed by healthcare regulators such as the Nursing and Midwifery Council.

You are advised to make contact with your allocated mentor before starting the placement. This will enable you to coordinate your shifts to mirror those of your mentor.



Practice tip

One of the valuable student skills is being able to use a computer effectively.

During your placement your mentor will help you experience and demonstrate competence in a range of clinical skills. Always endeavour to ask your mentor for help when you feel overwhelmed in a particular clinical situation. You are a student and they are experienced practitioners who want to help you achieve your professional goals.

Improving your skills

Computer skills

You will need (as a minimum) to be familiar with word processing programmes, accessing the web and downloading material. It also helps if you have good keyboard skills and can type using all fingers rather than a 'two-finger stab'. There are a number of programmes to develop your typing skills, and these are well worth buying and persevering with, as the time you spend in learning will be more than repaid in the time saved later. Many universities insist that students undertake the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL). This is an extremely valuable course: you will find it easy to grasp and very worthwhile. The more you use the computer, the more valuable you will find it in every aspect of student life. Start with a positive view of using the computer, and develop your skills as much as you can throughout the early stages of the course.

Writing skills

During your course you will write for a variety of reasons and in a number of different ways. For example, you will:

- make notes in lectures
- make rough notes for assignments or tutorials
- take notes from articles or websites
- do assignment work
- note down reflections on your work for an assignment or private reflections
- prepare notes for a student-centred learning group meeting.

It is worth spending time to learn how to do all these different forms of writing effectively.

Making lecture notes and planning assignments

S Scenario continued

In lectures, Sue is unsure whether to sit and listen and makes notes later, or write down what the lecturer is saying at the time. Often lecture notes are available in hard copy for students after lectures, or can be downloaded from the university website. Other students seem to do a variety of things, including scrawling all over their notepads and producing something that looks like a spider's web. Sue wonders whether there is a right or wrong way to make notes.

It is common to take notes in lectures, but Race (2005) makes the distinction between 'note taking' and 'note making'. Note taking is like 'dictation' where we can be on automatic pilot, just going through the motions of taking notes. The results will not be very meaningful to us. In contrast, where we understand what is going on and want to ensure that we don't forget that understanding, *making* notes will allow us to recall that understanding.

There are a number of ways you can simplify note taking. Usually writing down the main words or key phrases will be enough to act as a trigger to remembering the most important aspects of a session. If you find it difficult to concentrate in lectures, taking some notes of the key points can help you keep tuned in to the main point of the lecture. Do not write down the content of PowerPoint presentations, as they will usually be made available to you, either as PowerPoint notes, or for download from the university website.

One interesting way of making notes, not only from lectures but also for planning

assignments, is using 'mind maps'. These are the 'spider diagrams' Sue saw someone making. Key words, perhaps enclosed in bubbles, are linked with lines and arrows, producing something rather like an underground map. Mind maps were originally developed by Tony Buzan, and he discusses how to use them in a number of books: for example, Buzan (2006).

Lectures are meant to be incomplete, in that it is not possible to cover everything you need to know in a lecture, and they are not always a good way to learn. The content of a lecture should provide the basics; you need to add to the information by reading source material and giving plenty of thought to what it all means. Use the lecture as a means to trigger questions and connections in your mind. It is just as important to write down your own ideas and questions during the lecture, to follow up later. Fill out your lecture notes with material taken from books and articles, and also add your own reflections and comments. In written assignments, do not simply repeat back to a lecturer their own words. This is not what they want to read: they want to know what you can add to the basic information they gave you. The key activity in university learning is reading: reading around the topic to show that you are an independent learner. Concentrate on this aspect of developing your own knowledge to gain good marks.

During your course you will effectively learn a new 'language': the vocabulary of your chosen profession. Many of the words will be new to you, and other familiar words will be used in a more specific way. In lectures, or as you read, each time you encounter a new word or phrase, record it in a specific 'vocabulary' notebook for future reference. Concentrate on producing a definition for these words. Make sure you can spell them correctly, and use them appropriately as part of a sentence. Read through your 'vocabulary' notebook regularly so that the words become familiar.

Academic writing

Using ideas and words from published sources such as books and articles is a big part of 'academic' writing: that is, formal writing such as in written assignments. This is because it shows that you have taken other viewpoints into account, and that where possible, you have read and considered what experts on a particular topic have learned or said about something.

Academic writing follows some important rules and principles. If you learn these, and follow them closely, it will make everything a lot easier for you, and help you develop a good writing style.

Plagiarism



Professional conversation

Sue comments: 'I was asked by another student from a different learning group in the second year whether I wanted to borrow her assignment from the first year. She said she would give me a copy the next time we met at the coffee point. As I was nervous about writing this assignment I was grateful for the offer. When I told my mentor about this the following day she became quite concerned, and told me that I might stray into potential plagiarism. I did not know what she meant, but when she explained, I was relieved that I had not actually taken the assignment from the other student. When I met the student again the following week she had forgotten all about the offer, and I never mentioned it again.'

One very important rule is that you must avoid plagiarism. This means using someone else's words and thoughts as if they were your own, without acknowledging where you got them from. Your student handbook will probably include some advice on this. Academically it is seen as a form of dishonesty, as it is intended to deceive people into thinking you are giving your own thoughts in your own words. Avoid this all costs, as the academic consequences if you are caught plagiarising someone else's work are quite severe, and at the worst you might be asked to leave the course.



Practice tip

It is a good idea to keep a vocabulary notebook.

It is easy to avoid plagiarism. Do not stop introducing other people's ideas into your work, but do make sure you acknowledge where they come from every time you do so. Keep track of where you get material from, and always make sure when you include someone's ideas that you give full details of the publication (if the source is a book, article or website), or of the person providing the idea if it was not from a published source.

Where you use other people's ideas and words you will gain good marks if you discuss and analyse them, rather than simply repeat them. Say what ideas you agree with, or have found that others agree with. If you or others disagree with the author or have a different viewpoint, explain why. That is, you need to provide evidence or illustrations to support your comments.

Assignment work

S Scenario continued

A major worry for Sue is writing assignments. She feels she has little to say and worries that she will end up just repeating what has been said in lectures or what other people have written. She has been told that to get good marks she must develop an 'academic writing' style. In

particular, she has been told she should be analytical, not simply descriptive. If she knew what all this meant, she feels she might stand a chance! At the moment it all seems intimidating and she really does not know where to start with her first assignment.

Like all forms of writing, there are a few simple rules that will help you get a good mark for your assignments. These include:

- Understand what is required by carefully studying the question or title.
- Check the learning outcomes for the module to work out what you are being testing on through the assignment.
- Produce a timetable that will give you time to work on the assignment.
- Gather material that will be useful.
- Work to an assignment structure.
- Be prepared to spend time on editing the work several times.
- Ensure that the question or title has been fully answered.
- Reflect on what has been learned through the assignment.
- Always carry out a final check for simple errors, especially referencing errors, before submitting the work.

One of the unspoken rules for students regarding assignments is, 'First find out what they want, then give it to them!' It will help if you take some time at the beginning of an assignment to ensure that you understand what is being asked, and plan how you are going to answer it. You will save time overall by doing this. Once you feel confident that you know the 'angle' the assignment should take, you can calculate how much time will be required to complete the rest of the steps:

- 1 Write an assignment plan starting with 'Beginning/Middle/End' as a rough structure. You should not use these headings in the final version but they will help in the early stages of the work.
- 2 Gather material to slot into the various sections.
- 3 Write a first draft.
- 4 See your supervisor and get some feedback.
- 5 On the basis of the feedback you receive, edit the draft into the final version.
- 6 Check that you have followed the assignment brief and answered the question within the word limit set.
- 7 Make a final check for simple errors, including ensuring that references are complete and accurately presented.
- 8 Submit your work in the university agreed font style, size and spacing. Avoid exotic font designs and fancy layouts: remember you are writing an academic assignment.



Practice tip

Always follow the stated learning outcomes for the assignment. Each learning outcome must be addressed.

Seeking an extension/mitigating circumstances

Through no fault of your own, circumstances may occur which prevent you from meeting your assignment deadline. Most universities will grant a one or two-week extension provided you contact the assignment leader at least a week before the deadline. If they agree to give you an extension, the assignment leader will complete a student assignment extension form, a copy of which will be sent to you. This copy must be appended to your work at the point of submission.

Clearly it is not always possible to let your assignment leader know that you will be late completing more than a few days in advance of the assignment deadline. For instance, personal or family illness might occur suddenly. However, it is always better to give a reason for your inability to meet a deadline, rather than simply to submit late without explanation. This is known as 'mitigating circumstances'. A sudden serious illness provides strong mitigating circumstances, but 'the dog ate my hard drive' is a weak mitigating circumstance, and you will not be given much sympathy, even if you are able to provide authenticated photographic evidence! To avoid the dog scenario, buy a data stick and back up your work. Most universities sell low-cost data sticks to students.

It is much better, of course, to ensure the work is finished on time. It is a good plan to work backwards from the submission date and schedule the tasks you need to carry out, allowing plenty of time to achieve each stage, and to cope with any mishaps along the way.

One way to save time is to write your assignment plan and your draft material straight onto a computer, in a file marked clearly with the assignment name. If you make notes by hand then transfer them onto the computer, you will waste a lot of time. Once the material is on the computer it can be moved around, extended, or reduced, and you will already be quite a few words closer to your final draft.

Structuring your work

Your work will need a structure: that is, a way of logically dividing up the work. Unless you are writing a very short assignment, it is a good idea to use subheadings. This helps you to plan it all out, and it also helps the reader to find their way through the work. You can build on the simple structure of beginning, middle and end suggested above, to produce a more detailed outline:

- In the beginning section, you look at the title and what it means. Is there a question you are asked to answer? If the title is not in the form of a question, it can help to define it as a problem that you need to solve. In this section you will clearly state the aim of the assignment. This is also the place to outline the structure of the topics you will consider in the middle section.
- The middle is the body of your work. This is where you consider the main themes under subheadings. You will collect information to present under each of the headings, then discuss and analyse it.
- The end is where you bring it all together. You need to give a clear answer to the question, or summarise what you have done in the assignment. Think of the end of assignment as the prize you are giving the reader: the statement, or conclusion they will value that has made it worthwhile.

As mentioned above, 'beginning', 'middle' and 'end' are not appropriate headings to use in your final draft: these three headings are for planning only. Your final draft will need appropriate headings, which might be 'Introduction', a heading and subheadings relevant to your main themes, often the prescribed learning outcomes and 'Conclusion'.

Table 1.1 Writing tips

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Write the assignment question or aim on a piece of paper and place it somewhere you can see it when you are writing. This will keep you focused and avoid drifting aimlessly through the work. → Don't go for easy answers, just repeating what you have already heard in lectures. Try to be creative, or at least thoughtful. → Think about the question and what the topic means to you. → Gather examples to support your statements and add definitions where specialist words are used. → Make your references as up-to-date as possible. → Use a variety of books or articles to show you have read around the subject. → Don't over-use 'cited in': that is, giving second-hand references from someone else's work. → Each time you mention an author, add the reference to the 'References' section at the end of your draft. Then when you have finished your draft, you will also have finished your references section. This will also save you from omitting references. → Take care over spelling, grammar, punctuation and referencing. Mistakes in these can all lose you marks. Make sure your automatic spell check and grammar check are switched to English UK and not English US. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Write a fast first draft so that you have something to work from. Use simple words. Where you know there should be a reference, indicate to yourself that something needs to be added. → Always expect to change your draft later, rather than trying to write the perfect sentence and paragraph first time. → Look at the way other writers craft their work: how they introduce the names of other authors, how they start sections and paragraphs and so on. → Check drafts for notes to yourself you have not removed, repetition of words, and jumbled material. → Avoid over-using the same words like 'important' or 'key', and avoid starting sentences that are close together with the same words or phrases (such as 'It is'). → Look out for superfluous phrases such as 'as was said earlier', and delete them, as they do not add anything to the work. → Put your nearly completed draft out of mind and don't look at it for a day or two. Then you can take a final look at it with fresh eyes. → Write from a reader's point of view; would you be interested in reading it?
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Housekeeping

Whenever you work on your computer, it is essential to back up your work as you go along. Save a copy onto a data stick, a CD or a different computer. There is nothing more upsetting than completing a lot of hard work on a draft and then losing it because the computer has crashed or a similar tragedy has struck. Even if your program autosaves, also save the work manually from time to time, and close the file, so that you are certain the material has been saved.

Label your files clearly with a file name that you will recognise in relation to the assignment. If you include a date in the file name (for instance, 'Assignment B 24 June') it will allow you to quickly identify different drafts on the same topic.

Receiving a referral for an assignment

Not everyone passes an assignment first time: sometimes you might be given a referral, which means that you are asked to do some extra work on the assignment to bring it up to the required standard.

It is useful to consider what you should do if you get a referral rather than a pass. The important thing is to get the work back, along with the comments. Read them carefully (and read through your work again) so that you understand what problems or failings the assessor(s) identified. Then make an appointment to see your supervisor, to discuss what you should do. You should already have learned something from the feedback, and have some ideas on how you can improve the work, but your supervisor should be able to advise you further.

There are a number of areas you may need to focus on, depending on the feedback you have received. The most obvious is, did you answer the assignment question by addressing each of the learning outcomes? You need to have an explicit answer to the question or issue in the assignment title or brief. You also need to consider how much evidence you included in

the assignment. Did you give your own opinions without backing them up adequately, or did you include sufficient examples and references from the literature to support your ideas?

A common problem highlighted in feedback comments is that students tend to describe things rather than include critical comment. In other words, you should not just repeat what other people have said. You need to say what *you* think about what they have said, and how convincing you feel their arguments are. In this context, being 'critical' does not mean being negative: it means looking thoughtfully at something. An important part of criticism is to explain why something has been successful, or why you agree with an author's viewpoint. Of course, if you disagree, you can say so too, but you should avoid making offensive comments about the authors whose work you discuss, and you need to provide reasons to back up your opinion. So it is not sufficient to say, 'I don't agree with this', and unwise to say, 'This author is wrong.' It is much better to say, for example, 'There is a lack of evidence provided by the author to support this view.'

Referral comments might also mention poor grammar, punctuation, style and referencing. Referencing is seen as very important in academic work: it is discussed on pages 13–16. Getting your referencing right is a mechanical job – you just need to be more thorough and systematic – but it is not so easy to improve your grammar and punctuation, if they are not up to the required standard. The best approach is to identify your blind spots and get hold of some easy to understand books that will help you overcome them.

Do not resubmit the work until you are confident that you have dealt fully with the comments you received. This time around the work should look and read differently. Use the feedback sheet to identify and number the points the assessor(s) suggested should be improved, and before the resubmission, go through the sheet again and tick them off once you have addressed them.

You will find further useful ideas on this in Price (2004).

Getting the best from your academic personal/link tutor

Most universities have a system of link and personal tutors (often the learning group leader). The university should provide you with a student handbook which gives details of how to contact your personal tutor. These individuals are there for your benefit. The link tutor will act as the intermediary between your mentor and the university, and the personal tutor will help you primarily with your academic assignments. Their responsibility is to help support the link between practice and the university department or school. Both are mandated to help you achieve your goal of becoming a healthcare professional. Remember most personal tutors are very happy to meet and help students.

Seeking academic support if you have a learning difference

If you believe, or your tutor believes, that you might have a learning difference such as dyslexia, you can be referred for a learning assessment to your university Learning Differences Centre. It is important for you to understand that all students have different learning styles. Being referred to a centre is not a reflection of your intellect: it simply means that steps are being taken to ensure you are able to benefit to the full from your education. If you are subsequently diagnosed as dyslexic you will be in good company: among the famous dyslexics are Zoe Wanamaker, Steve Redgrave and Brian Conley. If your assessment suggests that steps need to be taken to deal with a learning difference, you and your tutor will be kept informed by the centre.

Referencing skills

When collecting material from any source, remember that if you subsequently use it in your work you will have to provide a full reference for it. Always ensure you have recorded all the

information you will need to complete the reference. This is equally true whether the material is a hard copy or electronic (such as information from a website).

There are a number of different referencing systems, but all of them provide essentially the same information. The differences are in the way the information is given in the references section, and how the reference is given in the body of the work.

The most popular system in UK academic schools is the Harvard system, and this is the system outlined below. In this system, references are listed in alphabetical order of author's surname in the references list, and the author's surname and date of publication are used as a reference in the body of the work. The main alternative is the Vancouver system. This uses numbered note markers in the body of the work, and a references section with corresponding numbered entries.

There are a number of variations in the Harvard system. It is important that you use the system recommended by your academic institution, so the discussion here is intended to show you the broad principles. Refer to university sources to ensure that you are aware of any differences between your university's standards and the one used here, or to more detailed books if you need to know how to phrase more complex references, since this provides only a general outline.

A simple guide to the Harvard referencing system

In order to provide a reference to a book you will need details of:

- the surname(s) and initial(s) of the author(s)
- surname(s) and initial(s) of the editor(s) if any
- year of publication (see below)
- title (in italics)
- number of the edition if second or greater (first editions are not indicated)
- place of publication (where several places are given, use the first in the list)
- the publisher (not the book printer).

This information should all be available in the book itself. The cover and spine will give you details of the author(s), title and publisher, and the remaining information is usually on a left-hand page near the start of the book. Where there have been several editions of a book, this 'imprint' page will list all of them: it is the most recent that is required. (A reprint is not the same as a new edition, and details of reprints are not needed: what you should give is the year in which the edition to which you are referring was first published.)

For example, in the references section the entry might be:

Michaels, J. and Owen, D. (eds) (2008) *Professional Education in Healthcare* (2nd edn).
Oxford: Blackwell.

In the body of the text, you will give a reference such as (Michaels and Owens, 2008: 25), where 25 is the page reference for a passage you have quoted. (If you are not quoting the text but just discussing it or giving it as a source of information, it is not always necessary to reference a specific page or page span, but it is good practice to do so whenever it is appropriate.)

If you are referring to a specific chapter in a book (for instance, an edited collection of chapters contributed by different authors), you will also give the title of the chapter and (according to some standards) the page span within the book. For example:

Johns, M. (2008) 'Assessing pain in the young', pp. 24–47 in Davies, O. (ed.), *Pain and its Treatment*. London: Routledge.

The text reference is the same as for a book, for example (Johns, 2008: 31).

Note that each reference is given on a new line, running right across the page. The references are normally presented as continuous text, not in table format, and are not fully capitalised.

For referencing a journal article, you will need the:

- surname(s) and initial(s) of the author(s)

- year of publication
- article title
- name of journal in full (in italics; do not use abbreviations)
- volume number
- number within the volume
- page numbers over which the article is spread.

For example:

Hauxwell, B. (2008) 'Study tips for students', *Nurse Education Today* 36(4), 26–30.

The volume number here is 36, the number in the volume is 4, and the page span is 26 to 30. Note that there is no need to use 'vol', 'no' or 'pp.' unless this is the style specified by your educational institution. The text reference to this will be, for example (Hauxwell, 2008: 27).

For website material you should give the:

- author's name, or name of organisation if no individual author is credited
- year if indicated ('not dated'/'nd' if not)
- title of page or article
- name of organisation or website
- web address (listed at top of screen or bottom of printout page): your computer will probably automatically underline this, and that is fine
- date accessed (usually automatically printed at the bottom of a printout of an article, unless it is a pdf).

For example:

Royal College of Midwives (RCM) (2004) *Position Statement Number 4: Normal Childbirth*, RCM [online] <http://www.rcm.org.uk/info/docs/PS4-Normal-Childbirth.doc> (accessed 21/5/09).

For this the text reference would be (RCM, 2004). Although we have covered books, articles and websites separately, in the Harvard system it is usual to combine the entries in one alphabetical sequence and not separate them by category.

The difference between a references section and bibliography is that references are all the works you refer to in your assignment. A bibliography also lists material you have read or referred to in the course of your research, but not made specific reference to in your work. Although some courses ask students to provide bibliographies with their assignments, their ability to show learning is questionable. They could be the first 20 titles you spot walking into a library, since the body of the text will not provide any evidence that you have read them.

There are some variations in the referencing in the main part of the assignment depending on the use you have made of the material. If you are directly discussing a work, you would phrase it as, for example:

Francis (2008: 94) feels that the problem is easily overcome.

If you are giving a source for some information you provide but not discussing it directly, you would phrase it as:

Although it is felt that the problem can easily be overcome (Francis, 2008: 94) ...

'Cited in' and 'et al.'

This part of the chapter covers only some of the main principles, but two points that frequently cause confusion need attention.

You might read an article by, say, Lee (2009), who mentions some interesting points made by another author, Peters (2008). The point you want to include in your assignment is one made by Peters, and not an original observation by Lee, so you need to make this clear in your reference. In the body of your work you would say:

Peters (2008, cited in Lee, 2009) suggests that the key points include ...

The idea of referencing is to direct the reader to your own source material, so in the references section there will be no mention of Peters, as you did not read Peters' original work. You would reference Lee in the usual way, as that is where you got your information.

'Et al.' is short for the Latin *et alia*, which means 'and others'. It is used when there are three or more authors for a piece of work. To save cluttering the body of the assignment (and using up the word allowance) by listing all the authors' surnames, you give the name of the first author, followed by 'et al.' and the year of publication. (There is a full stop after 'al.', because it is an abbreviation which does not end with the final letter of the original word: sometimes in the modern style this is missed out, as are the full stops after authors' initials.) However, the references section should give all the names. So for an article by Emerson, Lake and Palmer (2009), the text reference could be:

Work by Emerson et al. (2009) illustrates the use of this technique.

The use of Latin abbreviations like this is sometimes discouraged today, and it is usually acceptable to use 'and colleagues' or 'and others' if you prefer, but et al is the academic norm.

You can lose up to 10 per cent of the available marks for the incorrect use of references in an assignment, so it is worthwhile to have a checklist of all the elements in the Harvard system with you on a card, or electronically, while you are doing

Practice tip

Get into the habit of systematically checking that all this information is present as soon as you source the material, whether it is from a library or from the web.

your research, and ensure you record the reference information at the same time as the material you want to use. Otherwise, when you come to add the material to your assignment, you might find you do not have an essential detail, and you will have to go back to the reference, or do a web search, to find it.

Common problems include a missing year of publication, place of publication, publisher or website address. If you use a photocopier, essential information such as page numbers can be missed off the copy. When you photocopy sections from a book, it is a good idea to photocopy the imprint page too.

Learning activity

To avoid grade penalties for the incorrect use of references in assignments, in your learning group take a selection of books and papers and practise developing a reference list.

Gathering information

Assignments depend on your gathering information that will help you in putting an answer together. An important consideration is the source of that information, as that can influence the weight you put on the information or views it contains. Some sources of information are more trustworthy than others.

Learning activity

If you were looking at a public health topic such as the problems associated with smoking or drinking, think what kind of information might you gather? What sources would you feel were more trustworthy or reliable than others?

Sources of information include:

- published articles
- books
- websites
- leaflets
- expert opinions
- personal written accounts.

When it comes to organising your thoughts about a topic, whether it is to take notes ready for an assignment or exam question, there is a structure that will help in most situations. This takes the form of answering these questions:

- What?
- Why?
- How?
- Who?
- When?
- Problems?
- Solutions?
- Implications (for practice/the assignment/the future)?

All the knowledge you gain needs to be thought of in terms of what it says and how it fits together, and how much weight you are prepared to put on each part.

Published articles

A major consideration here is the journal in which they are published. Journals are taken more seriously if they take steps to control the quality of the information they publish. Good-quality health journals are 'peer reviewed'. That is, when articles are submitted for publications, they are first sent to an expert on that topic to ensure that the content is sound. Although this is a useful form of 'quality control', you should be aware that it does not guarantee accuracy. However, knowledge gathered from peer-reviewed journals stands a better chance of being accurate and dependable.

Much the same considerations apply to websites. Information from 'official' sites, such as the Department of Health, an academic department or professional body, is considered to be more reliable than information from a commercial site, or one where it is not known whether the material has been subject to review.

With journal articles the age of the material is a further consideration. Information does have a 'sell-by' date, in that our knowledge advances so quickly that what was believed to be true some years ago might now be known not to be true. It is usual to try to ensure that articles cited are less than five years old. The closer they get to ten years, the less likely the information is to hold true, where it is based on opinion or research knowledge.

There are some clear exceptions to this, and some research studies of much earlier date are still accepted as reflecting the current level of understanding. These are known as 'seminal' studies or papers, and have proved to be reliable. In general, however, age is an indicator of the weight you should put on the information.

The country in which a study or opinion is carried out should also influence its value to your assignments. Healthcare systems vary throughout the world, and cultures vary in their attitude towards health and healthcare. Different populations also vary in lifestyle patterns, and this might influence the effect of conditions and treatments. This means that some information that is sound in one country might not be transferable to another. It is useful to show that you are aware of these problems, but if you refer to material of which this is true, it is unwise to say that the information cannot be used because it is biased/out of date/

Learning activity

Look back on your thoughts on the public health topic such as the problems associated with smoking or drinking, and the kind of information might you gather. Try to organise your thoughts on how you might look at information on the topic to answer some of the questions in the list above (what? why? how? and so on).

Learning activity

Visit your academic library and look at a small number of professional journals. Examine articles to see whether they say, 'This article has been subject to double-blind review.' This means that the person who was sent an article for comment did not know who the author was, and so was not influenced by their reputation, or lack of one. This form of review is called 'double-blind' as the author also does not know the identity of the reviewer. Double-blind is a common form of peer review (which means, review by someone of similar status to the author). Are most of the journals you consult peer reviewed?

unreliable. It is better to say, 'There may be limitations to its use', and to then spell out what you consider them to be.

Reading

S Scenario continued

Each module Sue undertakes seems to have a vast reading list. In many of the lectures, further references are given, and handouts similarly seem to give long lists of things that have been referenced. The question going through

Sue's mind is, when is she supposed to find time for all this reading? Do they want her to read every single reference? If so, what is she supposed to do with it if she reads it?

Traditionally, university students have talked about 'reading' for a first or higher degree. This is because education at this level has mainly been based on knowledge gained from books, rather than simply attending lectures. Students quite literally 'read' for their qualification. However, it is not possible to read every single reference that is given to you, although you will be expected to read key authors and sources of information. Where you are given 'indicative reading' lists you will be expected to choose from among the sources given, so that you follow up the information given by lectures.

The purpose of all these references is to provide you with the primary sources of the ideas or research that underpin the course. 'Primary sources' are those in which a point was first made or research evidence presented. 'Secondary sources' are pieces by other writers that report on or discuss the material in the primary sources.

It is always best to try to read and use primary sources in your work, as those producing the secondary information might have been selective, or had a personal interest or agenda which helped determine which information they included in their work. In other words, there are issues of accuracy and bias in the use of secondary referencing. Sometimes where a book or article is out of print or too difficult to get hold of, discovering what it said from a secondary source may be the only option open to you, but as a general rule you should avoid secondary sources.

Reviewing the literature

S Scenario continued

Sue develops a method of 'reviewing the literature', as she has been advised to do. This consists of her getting hold of as many books and articles on a subject as possible, copying out relevant passages, then sitting down and joining it all together, keeping the words copied from the articles and books intact as far as possible, but not

making it clear that they are someone else's words, rather than her own. She then sums up with a conclusion she writes herself. Her tutor says this is totally wrong. Sue is now confused and does not understand what she has to do. Her tutor explains that she needs to paraphrase.

A common task that is given in assignments or module activities is to review the literature on a particular topic. This is a skill that you will need to develop. It will be easier if you understand what is meant by a literature review, and the principles to follow in conducting one.

A literature review does not mean copying down as much information as possible on a topic, then putting it together in an assignment (using direct quotes) to form a new version, a bit like a collage or mosaic. A review should be written to answer a specific question. It should contain a description of what you have learned about a topic, and in parallel, include your comments, thoughts and views on that material. This should address both what it says and how convincingly, or persuasively, it says it. You can make some direct quotes from your source material, but it is not wise to do this in excess (they should make up a minority of your

piece, not the bulk of it), and you must always make it clear that they are not your own words, or you will be guilty of plagiarism.

Collecting information for a literature review

Like so many other activities described in this chapter, reviews are also better if they are carried out systematically following a logical process. Here are some tips on organising the literature review.

You must be clear on themes to be covered, so start with a clear statement or aim of the review. This will provide the search terms you will need to search for information from databases. Using the key word of your topic, consider the list of key words for organising a review mentioned earlier (the 'what, why, how, problems, solutions and so on) and decide which might help you decide on areas to be covered in your review. This will help you decide on the theme subheadings that will divide up your review and help you see the relationship between the sections. These words will also give purpose to your reading once you have the articles, as it means you can speed read through much of an article and slow down once it starts to cover an aspect that can be placed under one of the key words.

When you write up your review, you may be required to include information on how you went about gathering information. This usually includes:

- key words you used to search databases
- the names of the databases or search engines you used
- time frame, that is the years between which most of the information was published
- inclusion and exclusion selection criteria, if you specifically searched for information from certain countries or aspects of information (for instance, including information about relatives or carers as well as patients/clients).

Search the databases following your plan, and note any changes you find you need to make or difficulties you encounter, such as different spellings of words for American sources, or unanticipated phrasing in the literature. For example, an initial search for information on teenage pregnancies using the word 'teenage' might show you that information is easier to locate if you use the word 'adolescent'.

Using your key words, you should first search for articles that have relevant titles. If there is a summary, check it for relevance (discard the item if it is clearly not relevant to your topic). If you search online databases you may be able to directly download some of the articles you find listed. You will probably find it best to search for information on two or three occasions, and reconsider the relevance of some of the articles you have already found.

When you read articles, give them a 'star' rating out of 5. Note this down on the cover or first page, at the top right or left, whichever you prefer. A 5 rating will mean 'brilliant – lots of good material' and a 1 rating, 'very little relevance'. Keep articles with similar star ratings together, and concentrate initially on the high-star articles when you start putting the material together. You might find you get enough information from these, and do not need to go through the low-star pieces.

Look carefully at the reference sections in the articles you have gathered. These often provide details of articles you could add to your search.

If you think you will use an article, list the details in a 'references' file or on index cards, using the Harvard system. This can also be used to check whether you have already reviewed an article, if the title comes up in a future search.

Once you have your material, you need to extract relevant 'quotes' and comment on them. These will form the basis of your ideas and material for your work. It is a big advantage if you



Practice tip

What is paraphrasing? It is simply a restatement of concepts and ideas from published work which is put into your own words (with acknowledgement of your sources).



Practice tip

When you have got hold of some articles, do not stockpile them but scan them quickly to look for information relevant to the theme headings under which you will structure the review. You might want to use a highlighter pen for this.

can put this material together under theme headings so that you can see it and identify any possible agreements between the writers (a consensus of opinion) or any differences.

Your aim is to compare, contrast and comment on the literature as a whole under these theme or sub-theme headings. In writing the review, it is important that the reader hears your voice talking them through this literature, and not a large number of other voices as a result of your simply summarising all the studies or providing a series of 'sound-bites'.

In writing up the review, you need to tell the reader the results of your examination of the literature. This will include what the literature says, how well it says it, and the strengths and limitations of the available literature.

Critiquing research articles

Professional knowledge is based on the strongest evidence possible, and often that takes the form of information derived from research. Research is a vast topic, and you will probably have sessions on this subject. We recommend you to use that knowledge in conjunction with the research textbooks recommended to you. Here, we concentrate on research articles you may have to read and make sense of as part of your course. This is called *critiquing* research.

Critiquing has been defined by Rees (2003) as 'the careful consideration of both the strengths and limitations of a published piece of research'. It is not simply 'criticising' or being very negative about a study.

In order to successfully critique an article you will need a systematic framework for critiquing, and some essential research knowledge. There are a number of critique frameworks, which all provide a systematic checklist of important areas to consider in a research report.

Table 1.2 Critique structure

<p>1 Focus What key words sum up what this is about? Look for key words in the title.</p> <p>2 Background Why did the researchers choose this topic? What literature do they use to support the issue?</p> <p>3 Aim What is the statement or question the researchers want to answer through the data collected? (It usually begins with the word 'to': to examine/compare/determine, for example.)</p> <p>4 Methodological approach Is it quantitative/qualitative? Is it descriptive, or does it look for relationships between variables?</p> <p>5 Tool of data collection What was used to collect the information? Questionnaires, interviews, observation, assessment scales, physiological measures? If it is quantitative research, did the researchers pilot the method?</p>	<p>Do they consider the reliability and validity of the tool? What has actually been measured by the tool? (Qualitative research works a little differently: refer to research textbooks for more on this.)</p> <p>6 Ethics Was the research considered by an ethics committee (REC in the United Kingdom, or in the United States an IRB)? Did the researchers get informed consent? Were possible risks to the individual(s) considered?</p> <p>7 Sample On how many subjects are the results based? How did the researchers choose them? Were there specific inclusion and exclusion criteria? Did anyone drop out of the study, or what percentage response rate did the researchers achieve? Do you feel those remaining were typical/representative of the group?</p> <p>8 Data presentation How did the researchers process the information collected? How do they present it? Is it understandable like this? Is it explained?</p>	<p>9 Main findings What data answers the aim (the results)?</p> <p>10 Conclusion In the author's own words, what sums up the answer to the aim?</p> <p>11 Recommendations What do the researchers suggest should happen now? Who should do what?</p> <p>12 Readability Did the researchers make it easy to read by explaining technical aspects? Was it interesting?</p> <p>13 Strengths/limitations Summing up, what were the good aspects of the method? What were its weaker areas?</p> <p>14 Implications for practice What do you feel are the messages for practice? What is the 'so what?' aspect for you?</p>
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The system introduced in Table 1.2 outlines the main headings used by Rees (2003). The framework comes in two versions, depending on the type of research being examined, but Table 1.2 provides just the basic quantitative framework. (Do look at the qualitative framework in Rees (2003) if that is the kind of study you are examining.) It is not essential to use this specific framework, provided you use one that covers the relevant issues, and that you find easy to apply. Without a system, it is easy not to notice that important elements are missing from a study.

As part of your course you will learn some of the fundamental principles of research. This is important if you are to assess whether the research has been carried out soundly, and can be compared to the best of its type. In other words, you need to be confident that the researcher(s) have rigorously followed good research practice. If they have, the result will be 'robust' in the sense that it gives strong and reliable findings. It should then be possible to apply the results safely in a variety of appropriate settings.

The advice here should be supplemented from a research textbook from your course booklist.

Essential pointers to remember when critiquing

One research study rarely provides the definitive answer to what should be done in a clinical setting. That is why replication studies – ones repeating an original study under the same or slightly different conditions – are important to ensure that initial results are reliable. Research is seldom undertaken under perfect circumstances, so it will never be flawless. However, when you comment on any limitations, remember not to be over-critical. Try to suggest an alternative that could have been used if you feel there were weaknesses in the work.

Although you must remember that there are possible limits to knowledge produced by research, and no published research is beyond criticism, relying on research results is always better than unquestioned faith in interventions that have not been subject to enquiry or testing.

Among the common classifications of research is a broad division into quantitative and qualitative approaches. Although some academics do not like this distinction, if you are new to critiquing it certainly helps to understand some important differences in study designs. Quantitative research focuses on measurement and the relationship between things of interest (variables). It is relatively easy to spot this approach as the results are numerical: provided for instance in tables, bar charts or pie charts.

Qualitative research is not about 'quality', nor should it offer subjective views. It is about experiences, understandings and interpretations. It explores human situations and events through the eyes of those concerned, using their language and descriptions of things. The findings sections will be in the form of words rather than numbers.

The most important aspect to identify when critiquing is the aim of a study. This usually begins with the word 'to' and will be phrased as, for example, 'the aim of this study was to determine/examine/identify/describe ...'. There may be more than one aim, and if that is the case, it is worthwhile naming them as part 1, part 2 and so on. As you read through the study, you should ensure that each part is followed up in the results section and the conclusions. It is easy for the researcher to start off with an impressive list of aims and not address them all.

The importance of the aim is that it influences the form and nature of many other aspects of a study, such as the broad research design, the tool of data collection, and method of analysis and sample. At the end of the study, part of your judgement will be how well the author has achieved the aim.

It is crucial to look for ethical considerations in a study. An ethics committee should have approved studies involving patients/clients, or health staff, unless the study is an audit. In the United Kingdom this committee is a Research Ethics Committee (REC). In the United States it is an IRB (Institutional Review Board). You will also want to see it confirmed that informed consent was given by those involved, and that they were treated with dignity throughout.

The use of numbers and statistical processes in research articles intimidates many readers. Although you should not take it for granted that figures are right, in a peer-reviewed journal someone should have considered whether appropriate statistical techniques were used, and might have checked the accuracy of calculations. It is not good practice to avoid having anything to do with numbers or charts. You need to look at the figures and try to work out what they show. Usually the writer will explain in the article what the numbers represent and their interpretation of them. It is very important to give attention to the researcher's interpretation as well as to the data provided. Try to make your own interpretation of the results, then compare it with the researcher's interpretation.

Similarly, do not be put off by the specialist language of research; each health professional group has its own jargon. When in doubt of the meaning of words, you should use the glossary section of research textbooks.

There are a number of different research tools that can be used to collect data. Each one has advantages and disadvantages, and is better fitted to some settings than others. You need consider whether the researchers' choice was reasonable given the aim of the study and the target sample group. Do they justify their choice? Have they made allowances for the limitations of the chosen tool(s)? Do you think an alternative tool might have been more appropriate?

A tool used for a quantitative study should have been either used in previous research, so it is known to be accurate, or piloted to test how consistently and accurately it worked. Check on whether the researchers have demonstrated one of these alternatives. A related issue is validity, which relates to what the tool measures, and how appropriate this is to the aims of the study. Often in the discussion section, the results of similar studies using the same tool are compared to suggest that validity has been demonstrated.

Qualitative research does not use such standardised tools. One feature of qualitative tools and approaches to data collection is that they are very fluid and flexible. This makes piloting difficult, as qualitative studies do not seek standardisation. Although many readers are uncomfortable with this flexibility, qualitative research can and should be carried out in a rigorous way, especially during data analysis.

Look closely at the size of the sample, and how this compares with other studies mentioned, or known to you. Sometimes it is very small, even under a dozen. The research can still be valid and relevant because of the depth of data produced. In quantitative studies, the general rule is that the bigger the sample the better, as this makes generalisations more acceptable. However, this does not apply in qualitative studies; the core question is whether the sample provides sufficient information on the topic.

The way the sample is selected for inclusion in a study can vary enormously. Each sampling method too has advantages and disadvantages. The main consideration in quantitative research is whether the sample is an accurate representation of the 'population' it is derived from (which can itself be defined in various ways). Consult your research texts for more information on this.

The crux of a study is its findings: the answer to the question the researchers set out to explore. Do not just read what the authors say they found: look at the results (the tables, charts or quotes they present).

The discussion section will raise issues arising from the results. It may start out by discussing the limitations of the study. You should take this as a positive feature: it means the researchers are trying to help you determine how much emphasis you should put on the results.

The final section of a research paper includes the conclusion and recommendations. These round off the study, and should answer the aim. In some cases, the conclusion consists of the recommendations, and you have to look to the discussion to find the answer to the aim. The recommendations should make proposals for who should do what now, and how, based on the researchers' interpretation of the results.

The most important part of the critique is deciding whether the study is fit for purpose.

You need to consider whether you feel the results can reasonably be applied to practice. In some cases articles specifically refer to this, perhaps in a box at the end.

To sum up this section, critiquing is a core professional skill that will inform your clinical practice. It is not just an academic exercise that you will carry out during your time at university. All healthcare professionals need to be careful about accepting the results of research without question. Do not accept research simply because it has been published. Part of the responsibility of researchers is to share their findings so that they can be debated and weak areas identified and strengthened. In other words, you have a right (and a duty) to consider how a study was undertaken as well as what it found. The most important point is to consider how the research can make a contribution to practice.

When you have critiqued a study you should be able to explain verbally or in writing the following main areas. These can form the summary of your critique:

- The aim of this study was to (aim) ...
- It did this by means of (this kind of study), and (this kind of data collection method), on (this number of) people (design and method) ...
- They found (main results) ...
- The conclusion was ...
- The strengths of the study included ...
- The limitations were ...
- The implications this study has for practice include/are ...

If you are able to structure your thoughts in this way, you have achieved a balanced critique of the study. Critiquing is a skill, and the more you practise it, and talk to others about your thoughts, the more proficient you will become.

Seminar/Learning group presentations and poster presentations

Learning takes place through many different activities on a course. Different people will have different favourite methods, but the course will ensure that you develop a range of skills. Throughout your course you will use a range of presentations in your student-centred learning groups, including seminar and poster presentations. Each has a variety of forms, so here we consider some general principles.

Seminar/Learning group presentations

The idea here is that instead of learning coming from a lecturer, the students take on the responsibility for preparing and presenting material, with the lecturer adding to the discussion as appropriate. As with other forms of learning, what you get out of these sessions is influenced by what you are prepared to put into them.

Although some people are reluctant to speak out in a group, once you have qualified you will be expected to present information to others, and to do so to a high standard. Seminars are topic or question based, and you will be given guidelines on what to read as background to the discussion, or what you are expected to present at the session. As for assignments, you will be expected to add your views and not simply present the material you look at.

Among the skills you need to develop are the abilities to grasp the essential points in the material you read, reflect on it and develop some views, and get the main points over in a structured, systematic way. If you are asked to stand in front of the group, you must project a confident image, and be able to talk clearly, succinctly, and at a speed that allows people to follow what you are saying. Where you are arguing a case, you also need to be able to make it interesting and engage people's attention.



Practice tip

If you are asked to present material at a seminar or learning group you need to prepare what you are going to say, and rehearse how you are going to present it.

Preparing for a seminar or a learning group is similar to preparing for any other kind of work, in the sense that you need to be clear on the aim, and work out how you will achieve it. You should make it easy to identify points, backed up with evidence or argument. Your 'script' should be put on cards, or a PowerPoint presentation. Do not write out what you will say in full, then read it word for word: be prepared to talk around key phrases or bullet points.

Rehearse what you are going to say out loud, either to yourself, or even better to a few friends or family to give you the feeling of a 'live audience'. They will probably interrupt less than the seminar members, so this rehearsal is likely to be shorter than the live presentation.

When you present in the seminar, do not keep your head down, reading off cards, piece of paper or a computer screen all the time. Project your voice so that everyone can hear you, and swing your gaze round the room so that everyone feels included in the conversation. This is called the 'lighthouse effect'. Make sure your contribution has a clear beginning, middle and end, and make good use of pauses to emphasise important parts. Do not try to say it all in one breath.

Before you start to speak, take a big breath and let it out slowly, getting rid of any tension or stiffness in your body, and start with a smile. If you get any questions, thank the questioner and do not be defensive. Answer honestly. If you don't know the answer to a question say so, and ask whether anyone else can contribute information or an opinion. Afterwards, consider what aspects you did well, and what you might have changed in retrospect. Above all do not be over-critical of yourself. If you did your best, you can be proud.

Poster presentations

Poster presentations are a popular method of communicating research and practice developments at many health professional conferences and in learning groups. During the first decade of the 2000s they have also become a frequently used learning method in university schools of health, and they form part of formative assignments on some courses. Part of their popularity is due to their flexibility and creative element: they can provide a more stimulating way of engaging students with topics. They are ideal as a feedback method to demonstrate knowledge and skills, as they require you to be very clear on the messages you are trying to convey, and allow you to use pictures, images and other visual means to complement simple text.

Poster presentation sessions are very interactive, and stimulate plenty of questions and feedback between the presenter and the audience. Some of this is a result of the increased physical proximity between the two. Posters can be designed on an individual or group basis. This makes them far more enjoyable than more formal methods of verbal or PowerPoint presentations.

Designing your poster

Designing a poster involves deciding what goes into it (content), and how it will look (presentation). The content must fit the instructions or 'brief' you will be given for the poster. The selection of the material will be influenced by the space you have available. The key is to think about the main statements or issues you need to cover, to lead up to your main point.

Think about the content as a series of 'pages' or areas of information that will need to be laid out on the poster in a logical way. Posters can be displayed as wider than they are tall (known as landscape orientation) or taller than they are wide (portrait orientation). This has a bearing on how the information is set out. The poster should have a strong visual appeal and high impact. This can be achieved through well-selected graphics, strong colours, and a good choice of attention-grabbing wording. All these should contribute to the message of the poster.

It is best to avoid lots of writing or text, as this is too difficult to read and looks unattractive. Ensure you look at the poster from the viewer's perspective, and make it an interesting and challenging presentation.

Content can be handwritten or printed from a computer. The latter will give you a range of fonts, colours, clip art and pictures. Illustrations can be drawn directly onto a poster by hand, or photos or other images stuck on, as well as generated by computer.

Where posters are a group effort, make sure that each group member has the opportunity to use their talents and imagination to contribute to the finished project. Make sure everyone agrees on the basic message and approach.

Some of the problems relating to posters are outlined in Table 1.3.

Table 1.3 Poster presentation problems and solutions

Problem	Solutions
No clear aim or message	Make sure both are explicitly stated, and use a title that explains the purpose.
Too much information presented in a confusing or boring way	At the design stage split material into 'pages'. Keep the content succinct and use space and graphics as much as possible.
Unimaginative appearance	Go for impact, colour, bold titles and graphics, supporting clear ideas.
Unreadable	Writing should be seen clearly from 2 metres away. Try 18-24 font sizes.
A jumble of items	Ensure logical progression of ideas. Indicate the order in which the items should be read with arrows, lines or numbers.
Takes a long time to read	Avoid using only capital letters as text, as the eye tends to stop at each letter and slow down reading. Write in both upper and lower case throughout.

S Scenario continued

Sue has to present a poster as part of her public health module. It came as a surprise to her that her initial feelings of bewilderment of how to approach this disappeared once she realised that the format was very similar to all the other activities she had engaged in on the course. At this point she realised that perhaps of all the things she had learned, the study skills were the most important, as they provided her with the tools to do the job.

She now finds her modules challenging, but is clear on what is expected of her, and how she will tackle all demands on her to demonstrate her understanding of the course content. She feels these skills will continue to be important to her, once she has qualified and is required to continuing learning as part of her professional development.

a Learning activity

In your learning group design a poster presentation format which you can adapt and use for future learning group presentations.

Conclusion

Being on a course calls for more than just remembering everything that is said or done; it involves developing an understanding of how it all fits together and shaping your own knowledge. To achieve this you need some process skills and tools. This chapter has presented some of the key elements you will need to make the learning process enjoyable and get the most out of it.

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