

Writing at higher academic levels

Getting the basics right

- Avoid spelling mistakes wherever possible. Make use of
 - Spellchecking
 - Personalised proofreading checklists (based on previous feedback)
 - Software such as TextHelp Read & Write to identify homonyms (words that sound the same but are spelt differently)
- Use appropriate grammatical sentence structures
- Use appropriate punctuation to make the text readable
 - For more grammar and punctuation advice see <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/student-services/support-for-your-studies/academic-support/study-resources/writing/technical-advice-on-writing.aspx>
- Use words accurately: check you understand their meaning
 - For more advice on choosing your words see <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/student-services/support-for-your-studies/academic-support/study-resources/writing/choosing-your-words-and-improving-your-writing.aspx>
- Clarity – avoid jargon!

Quality of writing

You need to clearly demonstrate

- Critical analysis of evidence – of research findings, opinions and experience
- Synthesis – drawing together the evidence in order to construct a coherent argument
- Evaluation - justifying a particular viewpoint or conclusion as a result of 'weighing up' the evidence and the basis of the arguments presented

For more information on writing critically, synthesis and evaluation see

<http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/student-services/support-for-your-studies/academic-support/study-resources/writing/writing-critically.aspx>



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Practical considerations

- How long is the piece of writing? Long assignments require a different approach to short essays.
- Interrogate terminology and concepts – be clear where ideas could be contentious, explain why that might be the case, and explore how convincing the evidence is
 - E.g. use examples from previous studies/research to identify where definitions, meaning and/or attitudes have changed over time and explore how and why interpretations or conclusions vary.
- Ask 'why?' about everything: seek and provide proof using references to sources, and make sure you clearly discuss the significance of evidence and your findings.

Talk to your tutors about marking criteria as these can also clarify expectations about writing at higher academic levels. Descriptors for being awarded qualifications at Nottingham are available in the [Quality Manual](#) (scroll to Masters/Doctoral level).

Facets of Mastersness

Recent research identifies seven facets or aspects of the learning processes that underpin studying at Masters level:



The above diagram is cited from:

<http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/sheec/learning-from-international-practice/taught-postgraduate-student-experience/facets-of-mastersness> and reflects the work of Heather Gibson and the Working Group for the Scottish Higher Education Enhancement Committee (SHEEC).

<http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/StudentServices/StudyResources>

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The SHEEC research builds on the work of Susan Warring, (2011) "*An analysis of learning levels within and between a degree and a diploma: New Zealand case study*", Quality Assurance in Education, Vol. 19 Iss: 4, pp.441 – 450.

Facet	Definition
Abstraction	Extracting knowledge or meanings from sources and then using these to construct new knowledge or meanings
Depth (of Learning)	Depth of learning, i.e. acquiring more knowledge and using knowledge differently. For example, engaging in a narrow topic in depth, engaging in up-to-date research or taking a multidisciplinary approach and examining something familiar and presenting it in a new innovative way.
Research and enquiry	Developing critical research and enquiry skills & attributes
Complexity	Recognising and dealing with complexity of knowledge - including the integration of knowledge and skills, application of knowledge in practice - conceptual complexity, complexity of learning process
Autonomy	Taking responsibility for own learning in terms of self-organisation, motivation, location and acquisition of knowledge
Unpredictability	Dealing with unpredictability in operational contexts - recognising that 'real world' problems are by their nature 'messy' and complex, being creative with the use of knowledge and experience to solve these problems
Professionalism	Displaying appropriate professional attitudes, behavior and values in whatever discipline/occupational area chosen (from academic to occupational subjects), including learning ethical behaviours, developing academic integrity, dealing with challenges to professionalism, recognising the need to reflect on practice and becoming part of a discipline/occupational community

For further information on the SHEEC project see
<http://www.enhancementthemes.ac.uk/sheec/learning-from-international-practice/taught-postgraduate-student-experience/the-masterness-toolkit>

What about research/doctoral degrees (e.g. MPhil, PhD)?

Research projects usually require an extensive piece of writing (though there is still an upper word limit – no more than 100,000 words). Do explore the regulations and expectations for your particular research course

<http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/academic-services/quality-manual/research-degree-programmes/phd-and-mphil-regulations.aspx>.

Remember:

- Many of the same principles of 'Masterness' apply for writing a PhD
- Make sure you familiarise yourself with examples of recent theses from within your subject area or discipline
 - Be aware of the appropriate protocols and what is appropriate in your discipline when you are part of a larger research project team e.g. where several students are working on connected research topics in the same laboratory. Acknowledging the work of others, whilst demonstrating the individual contribution your work makes at PhD level, will be important.



- Get a sense of how long chapters/sections generally are in your field – and what sort of structure they use.
 - Is a report-style common? (Numbered sections and headings/subheadings)
 - How many chapters might there be? (This may also vary depending on the approach and topic of your thesis, as well as expectations in your discipline.)
- Even if you are doing lab/experiment-based research, maintain writing habits by regularly updating a research journal that creates a written record of:
 - What you have done (e.g. experiments, library/archive searches)
 - How was the work carried out? (e.g. method, data searching systems)
 - Why did you do it that way? (e.g. purpose and intention of your actions; how do your actions and findings compare to previous research?)
 - How well did it work? (e.g. what did you find out? Any limitations?)

These records will help you with writing up your thesis, including the literature review, your research methodology and methods, and the interpretation of the significance of your findings.