



General Tips for Academic Writing

Introduction

Writing an essay and case studies can be daunting, especially if you have never written at Master's level or did so a long time ago. The following are hints to make sure you are addressing the Master's level competences and present your writing in an academic style. I have provided some examples.

The GCRB provides **guidelines for the essay and case studies**; it is essential to use them if you are to succeed in preparing work that is judged appropriate for registration.

An important point to remember is that you must anonymise material relating to any patient.

Section 1: Making sure you analyse and synthesise

The skills that distinguish Master's level work from undergraduate level work are *critical appraisal* and *synthesis* of the published research literature. These skills must be demonstrated in the academic pieces of work submitted in the portfolio (essay and case studies).

1.1: Critical appraisal of published research

You need to use a range of current papers to underpin your arguments and key statements, but you should show that you are capable of assessing the quality of the papers you cite. This is critical appraisal and **must** be demonstrated in the academic pieces of work submitted in the portfolio. Generally papers should be those reporting research, and you can demonstrate your ability to critically appraise by commenting on the rigour or power of the study. Some questions you could ask yourself are:

- Did the authors use an appropriate method to answer the research question?
- Was the sampling strategy likely to recruit a sample from the target population?
- Was the sample appropriate and of satisfactory size? How representative was the sample recruited?
- Were the correct methods used to analyse the data?
- Do you think the results justify the conclusions of the authors?
- Can the findings be generalised beyond the sample recruited?

You can then use your conclusions to make comments within the essay/case study.

'White et al. (2019) suggested that genetic counsellors are not well educated in the United Kingdom (UK). However, those authors used a small sample of only five genetic counsellors working in one genetic centre and there is therefore some doubt about the generalisability of the results. In contrast, Black et al. (2018) conducted a survey of 198 UK genetic counsellors from seventeen centres and found that almost all had been educated at Master's level.'

1.1: Synthesis of published research

You need to compare or contrast findings or group them together to show you can synthesise a number of pieces of evidence. It is **not enough** to make a list of descriptive statements such as:

‘Bloggs et al. (2012) found that people with genetic conditions were worried about their children. Jones et al. (2019) found that people at risk of autosomal dominant conditions were most concerned about passing on the condition to their children. Parents carrying recessive conditions were also worried about their children being carriers (Smith, 2014).’

To show you can synthesise, you could work these statements together:

‘While some authors found that people with genetic conditions were concerned mainly about passing the condition to their children (Jones et al., 2019; Bloggs et al., 2012), Smith (2014) suggested that parents who carried recessive conditions were also worried about their children being carriers.’

The Academic Phrasebank is a general resource for academic writers and gives examples of phrases that can be used when demonstrating the skills of analysis, synthesis and critiquing.

<http://www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk/>

Section 2: Referencing

It is important that you use a range of current references to underpin **every key statement** in your work. This shows you are an evidence-based practitioner and can access appropriate resources. Use of references also helps to show you are not passing others’ work off as your own (plagiarism).

Usually references less than 10 years old are acceptable, but you can use older ones if they report seminal work in the field, for example:

‘Tijo and Levan (1956) reporting for the first time the correct number of human chromosomes.’

Try not to use textbooks as references, the material may not be research based. It is expected at Master’s level that you will mainly cite *primary sources* of research evidence – the original research papers that report and interpret the data. Secondary sources provide analysis, synthesis, interpretation and evaluation of primary research. Systematic reviews (if conducted well) are regarded as good quality secondary sources.

There is a section in the GCRB Applicant Guidelines on plagiarism and one on referencing and we strongly recommend referring to both.

Section 3: Formatting

Whatever you do, be CONSISTENT throughout the text.

Headings

The usual format is:

BOLD 14 pt for main heading

BOLD 12 pt for sub-headings

Bold 12pt italics for sub, sub-headings.

Try to keep to this and be consistent. In academic writing, capitalizing and underlining are generally not used.

Punctuation

- One space after a comma, colon or semi-colon.
- Two spaces after the punctuation at the end of a sentence.
- No spaces between the previous word and the punctuation.
- No space between the first bracket and the word inside the bracket.
- References in brackets are part of the sentence and come before the full stop.

‘Although you might think Heather is a pedant, it is important to be consistent and to use punctuation correctly. This adds to the overall appearance of the work, doesn’t it? Several other authors support this approach (Smith, 2014; Jones, 2019; Lewis et al., 2017; Morecombe & Wise, 2016).’

Numbers

For numbers ten or under spell it out (e.g. seven), for numbers 11 or over, express in numerals (e.g. 256). However, at the start of a sentence, always spell the number out.

‘Although only eight people in this study were men, their beliefs about termination of pregnancy were very similar to those of the 27 women interviewed. Eleven of the 27 women had experienced termination of pregnancy in the past.’

Using direct quotes

In general, try not to quote directly from a source. You need to show that you can analyse and synthesise the material and if you use direct quotes you don’t have a chance to demonstrate these skills. However, there may be times when you think it is very important to use the direct quote (for example when quoting a seminal piece of work). When using direct quotes, put the relevant words into italics. If you use a direct quote from a reference, you must always put it in inverted commas and put the page number in the reference.

‘As Skirton states, ‘... *it is better to reference well than not at all.*’ (Skirton, 2009, p3).’

Abbreviations

Use only recognised abbreviations. The first time you use the phrase in the text you must spell it out and then put the abbreviation in brackets after it. You can then just use the abbreviation subsequently in the text, except at the start of a sentence. Like numerals, abbreviations should not be used at the start of a sentence. If you are only using the phrase a few times it is probably not worth abbreviating.

‘Huntington disease (HD) is a neurodegenerative condition. People with HD experience depression and a movement disorder, as well as a degree of dementia. Huntington disease can be inherited from either parent.’

Proofreading

If you ask someone else to proofread the text they will be more likely to pick up errors, but be aware of any potential breach of confidentiality.