TAUGHT POSTGRADUATES

Just as moving up to university from school or college meant developing your skills to work at a more advanced level, moving up to Masters-level study will need a similar change. You will be expected to work at a higher level of scholarship and professionalism. A Masters degree is a professional degree, whether you are following a specialism to enhance your current career, or planning to become an academic. As a Masters student you are training to be a researcher and moving from consuming knowledge to starting to create knowledge. You will have to define the scope of what you are researching, choose the most appropriate methods for your research, and communicate your findings clearly.

The advice in this short guide includes tips from students who have experienced study at Masters' level to help you make these transitions from undergraduate to taught postgraduate study.

Studying at Masters’ level

A Masters degree means developing your studying practices from those suited to being an independent learner to those suited to being an independent researcher. You will be working at a more complex and sophisticated level, with a need for broader and more independently sourced research. You will need not only to evaluate what other people have found, but also to put your own research into context. You will be expected to be meticulous and professional and show higher standards of scholarship. You will also have to make sure your time management is effective to get everything done. With only one year to complete most Masters courses, it can be a steep learning curve, but if you look ahead at the shape of the whole year and work consistently, you will keep on top of the work.

Increased workload and intensity of study

At Undergraduate level: You may be used to an uneven workload, with a relatively easy start to each term and the pressure increasing as deadlines approach. Tutors may have spent a number of lectures explaining basic concepts and going over the fundamentals of a topic.

At Masters level: You will start working at a fast pace from the very beginning and this will increase. Your tutors will spend less time covering each topic, and you will be expected to fill in any gaps in your understanding through wider reading and discussing with your peers. You will need to keep up with the work from the start, and be strategic in how you spend your limited time.

"A Masters is like two years of work condensed into one year." (Masters student, Applied Statistics)

Taught Masters courses are often the most intense and demanding of any academic study and they have the steepest learning curve. The most common time management problem for taught Masters students is falling behind with the volume of work. Some tips for avoiding this are:

- **Aim for development not perfection**: Divide your time so that you don’t spend too much time on any one assignment. The important thing is to get your assignments in. It is better to hand something in on time, even if it is not as perfect as you would like, than let the work mount up.

- **Take it steadily**: Don’t be discouraged if your first few assignments come back with lower marks than you expected. Identify one or two areas to improve and work on those, as opposed to trying to fix everything at once.

- **Be selective**: Split your reading and study time between 1) ensuring you have an understanding...
of the basic concepts, and 2) following up some of your own interests in the subject.

- **It is never too early to start thinking about your dissertation topic:** Have an ideas file to keep all your ideas, notes, and useful articles together.

- **Divide your time appropriately:** Don't spend too much time on all the small assignments as other work may mount up. Work within your time and word count.

- **Have an overview:** Map out the shape of your year showing when you may need time for returning home or for researching. Seeing the bigger picture helps you to plan for the intensity.

- **Keep up with the reading:** You are expected to read more widely so you need to set aside more time for this. However, you can't read everything; aim to get a general context and a few differing opinions on a topic. Don't spend too long on one area before moving on.

"Accept that at Masters level it will be a step up from Undergraduate study, but accepting this and being well organised, and having good time management will make it a much less stressful experience." (Masters student, Economics)

**Different working relationship with tutors**

"Use the most important resource available to you - your tutor. Ask for advice or guidance sooner rather than later." (Masters student, Typography)

At **Undergraduate level:** During an undergraduate degree you may not have had the opportunity for much individual contact with your tutors.

At **Masters level:** Being a Masters student is also about learning to be part of an academic community, and discussing your ideas with fellow researchers, including your tutors. If you are doing your Masters degree in the same department where you studied your undergraduate degree, it might seem strange to work more closely with academics that used to seem distant, but they will be glad to talk to you - you are studying a specialised topic that they enjoy studying too!

"Although there is less contact time, there is more intense contact with lecturers. You get more personalised feedback and explanations; I take time to go through these with my students." (Masters lecturer, Classics)

**Applying your thinking**

At **Undergraduate level:** A key aspect of Undergraduate study in the UK is thinking critically. This means questioning everything and not accepting any information at face value without asking whether you agree or disagree with it, and what is making you agree or disagree.

At **Masters level:** You will be expected to apply your critical thinking to consider issues or problems within your specialised field. Masters degrees prepare you for entering a professional area, whether this is academic research (e.g. PhD study), industry, business, or elsewhere. They train you to apply your thinking to examine the theories and the practices that make up the professional knowledge in your subject.

"I ask the group to look at the pros and cons of a particular theory. But this is only the first step - this isn't original thinking in itself. So then I ask them to apply the theory to a different situation... and their initial reaction is you can't, but then they start to use what they know about its strengths and weaknesses to adapt the theory to their own situations in their companies - that's more original!" (Masters course director, Management)

**Being meticulous, rigorous and professional**

"I could get away with coasting a bit as an Undergrad, but not in my Masters... for example, make sure all your references are accurate - it may seem tedious, but it really matters!" (Masters student, Meteorology)

At **Undergraduate level:** Your lecturers may have told you (endlessly!) that referencing, avoiding plagiarism, and accurate writing were important, but they may have been more lenient when marking your work, as you were still learning these academic practices.

At **Masters level:** A Masters degree is training in how to be a researcher, so academic practices, like referencing and accurate writing, are now the tools of your trade. Your markers will be reading your work differently, and expecting you to
demonstrate the same attention to detail and rigour that a professional researcher would.

**Becoming an independent researcher**

*At Undergraduate level:* You may be used to developing your practices for independent learning, such as taking the initiative, managing your time, and reading widely about the key issues in your subject.

*At Masters level:* You will build on these practices to become, not only an independent learner, but an independent researcher. Rather than just working within the key issues or debates in your subject, you will be expected to examine the edges and boundaries of your subject and understand how knowledge is constructed in your subject. This means:

- Reading more recent research at the cutting edge of your subject.
- Evaluating methodologies - understanding how and why researching something in a certain way constructs knowledge.
- Identifying gaps in the existing research - seeing where the edges and limits of knowledge in your subject are, and how you might set your own research questions to fill these gaps.

This is a significant step, so don't be discouraged if your first few assignments have lower marks than you expected, as these higher-level research abilities take experience to develop. However, as a Masters course is so intense, it's important to seek help and advice early on so you can keep progressing, as soon you'll be onto your next assignment.

**Researching at Masters’ level**

Researching at Masters level means increasing the breadth and depth of your reading. You need to understand the overall context of the topic you are researching as well as knowing about the most up-to-date research. Reading takes time, so this involves being strategic and reading with more of a purpose, as opposed to just following a reading list or picking the first few likely texts. Your thinking doesn't stop there, because at Masters level, as well as evaluating what you are reading, you are expected to apply your reading. This could be to help interpret your own research findings or to propose potential solutions or recommendations to problems in your subject area. When conducting your own research, you need to be aware of what you are doing and why. You have to decide what you want to find out and evaluate the best methods for finding this out.

**Increasing the scope of your reading**

A Masters degree is more specialised, so you'll be expected to read more widely and more deeply in a narrower field.

Ease yourself into reading complex journal articles by first reading overviews or introductory texts to get a basic understanding; build on this by going further into current research; then develop a wider focus by reading a few related articles to get a range of views, or a different perspective.

As well as gaining specialist subject knowledge, you need to read more widely to 1) set your topic in a wider context and 2) understand theoretical frameworks which will help you analyse your topic.

For example, imagine you wanted to write about the Canadian-Caribbean author Nalo Hopkinson. You are interested in the way she uses the science fiction genre to explore ideas of alien-ness and belonging in society. You might start by reading her novels (primary sources) and what critics have written about her work (secondary sources).

**Wider context**

However at Masters level you would also be expected to place her work in a wider context which considers how her work fits within the concept of 'literature' as a whole. Hopkinson's work is considered to be science fiction, but it also draws on Caribbean literature and myth. So you would need to read more broadly to understand how science fiction as a genre is constructed; how science fiction may use mythical structures from other cultures; and also the debates about the relationship between popular genres like science fiction, and more 'academic' forms of literature like Caribbean poetry.
You may not need to refer in detail to all your contextual reading when writing assignments, but it enriches your understanding because a) you are aware of how your topic is positioned within the larger debates in your subject; b) you can see how the key boundaries and concepts of your subject are under dispute.

Theoretical frameworks

If you are interested in how Hopkinson’s work explores ideas of alien-ness and belonging, you would also need to read relevant theories to give you the tools to be able to analyse her work. You identify recurring images of crossroads and encircled cities in her work, but you don’t know why these are important or what to do next with this observation. However, on reading postcolonial cultural theories, you discover that the tension between ideas of the imperial ‘centre’ and colonial ‘periphery’ helps you explain how Hopkinson’s imagery uses space to show the power relationships in ideas of belonging and exclusion.

Theories may seem intimidatingly abstract, but they are really useful tools. They provide frameworks or sets of ideas which you can apply to your specific topic. As theories are abstract and general, it means they will never explain everything or be a perfect ‘match’ for your topic, so this gives you scope to critically analyse them - What does the theory fail to consider? Where are the gaps in the theory? How does the theory fit with ‘real life’ practice or specific examples?

Making use of the library and wider sources

Part of doing a Masters’ degree also involves developing your abilities to identify, locate, and manage wider sources. To find the more specialist sources you need for your course, particularly for longer projects and dissertations, take the opportunity to use libraries and archives beyond the University Library at Reading.

You may find it useful to know about:

* Subject specific databases and search engines
* Finding conference papers and theses
* Automatic email alerts when new journal articles are published in your field

* Reference managing software like Endnote or Mendeley
* Using libraries outside of Reading and inter library loans

See the Library guides on how to find information or ask your Academic Liaison Librarian for more details.

The Library also has advice on how to do a literature search.

Setting your own research questions

Deciding what to examine is part of the training in becoming a researcher. Selecting a research question isn’t a straightforward process of picking a question and then answering it; it involves an ongoing process of discovery and refinement.

Your question gives you a focus, but it is natural for this focus to adapt as you read more.

- Phrase your thoughts as questions and include an aspect that can be measured, evaluated, or judged. Instead of "Use of graphical communication to promote Milton Keynes," turn this into "How successful has graphical communication been in promoting Milton Keynes?"

- Break your main question into sub-questions. What do you need to find out to answer each of these? - This creates your research plan.

- Keep referring back to your research questions to decide whether material is relevant, especially when analysing your results. You will probably have collected far more information than you need to answer your questions, so be ruthless!

Informed choice of research methods

"In my Undergraduate dissertation I did focus groups because everyone else was doing them. For my Masters dissertation, I wanted to use this method, but quickly realised why it wasn’t right for the job." (Masters student, Management)

Deciding how to research something is also an important part of becoming a researcher. You need to make an informed choice about the research methods you use and be able to justify why they are the most appropriate. You have to
take into account what other people have done, so, again, this means reading widely. You may also have to read up on research methods that you haven't used before in order to learn whether they are appropriate and how to use them.

- What do you need to find out - how are you going to do this?
- Is there more than one way of finding out what you need?
- What methods have other people used in similar situations and why?
- What are the strengths and limitations of the methods you are considering - how do these limitations influence what you can find out and what you can conclude from your results?

**Writing at Masters’ Level**

Writing at Masters level means being able to explain more complex ideas at a greater length and depth. This doesn't mean sounding 'more academic' and using more complicated sentences to impress your readers. It does mean being able to communicate more developed ideas in a clear way, and one of the best methods of ensuring this is by getting the basics of good academic writing right; good planning, structuring, and meticulous referencing will all help sustain your writing over a longer word count. Another element of clear writing is selecting relevant evidence, knowing why you are using it, and putting it to full use by interpreting and analysing it. Clear and accurate writing comes from a clear understanding, so if you are being vague or including a quotation because it seems roughly related to your topic, take a step back and give yourself more time to make sure you fully understand what you are writing about.

**Knowing where you are going**

Good planning and structuring are vital when writing longer assignments, both for you as a writer, and for your reader. They give your ideas a logical shape and guide you and your reader clearly to the conclusions you want to make.

When writing your assignments or dissertation, you are leading your reader through a research 'journey' - showing them what topic you decided to explore and why; who has explored it before and what they found out; how you explored it and what you found out; what did your discoveries tell you about your topic?; and what did that lead you to conclude?

The shape of the journey that you write about in your assignment will probably look quite different to the journey you personally took when you researched the topic. Research journeys tend to have many detours into interesting areas that are not directly relevant, but which help build understanding and context and give an original angle to your arguments.

The final journey you write up in your assignment should be a lot more direct and clear. You need to digest and sift through your reading and research, and be selective. You will need to write a first draft to get the general shape of your journey on paper. This will help you identify what you really want to say and give you a clearer idea of where you are headed in your journey. Then you need to redraft to make sure everything is relevant and contributes to getting you to your destination.

"Get started on your assignments early - you need to plan and redraft a few times, and you can't do that on an ad hoc basis. Don't underestimate the time you will need." (Masters student, English)

**A focused approach to your evidence**

Not only are your assignments longer, but you are also expected to refer to a wider range of reading; it takes practice to integrate more sources and refer to them skilfully in your writing. You may find that even with a higher word count it is difficult to fit all you want to say in. It's important to make every source work for you in backing up your points, and not waste words in describing unnecessary parts of the source.

You don't have to refer to each piece of evidence in the same depth. Sometimes you need to show that you understand the wider context of the issue, and a short summary of the key issue and key researchers is all that is needed.

**For example:**
Many studies have investigated household accidents caused by cheese. These studies disagree about the most significant reasons for cheese-based injury with some arguing that choking on cheese poses the highest risk (Muffet, 2008; Moon; 2009; Rennet, 2011). Other studies claim that burns from melted cheese are more hazardous (Rechaud, 1989; Rarebit, 2009), whilst a minority of recent studies have identified slipping on cheese as a growing danger (Skepper, 2011).

A significant amount of reading and in-depth understanding of the field is demonstrated in those sentences above. The summary maps out the state of current research and the positions taken by the key researchers.

Sometimes you need to go into greater depth and refer to some sources in more detail in order to interrogate the methods and stand points expressed by these researchers.

For example:

Skepper's recent study introduces a new model for assessing the relative dangers of cheese related-injuries (2011). He identifies the overall total damage done as more important than the frequency of injuries (Skepper, 2011). However, this model does not adequately take into account Archer's theory of 'Under-reporting' (2009) which states that people are less likely to report frequently occurring small accidents until a critical mass of injuries are reached.

Even in this more analytical piece of writing, only the relevant points of the study and the theory are mentioned briefly - but you need a confident and thorough understanding to refer to them so concisely.

Accuracy and awareness of complexity

Accurate and appropriate use of language in your writing is one way of demonstrating academic rigour. You will need to be more thoughtful about the way you use the English language, and refine your writing to meet the new demands of your studies. Immerse yourself in good quality English writing: read broadsheet newspapers and academic articles - but remember that the best writing style is clear and accurate, not unnecessarily complicated. Practice your critical thinking and analysis on non-academic sources like newspaper articles, adverts, and TV shows.

If English is not your first language, there is more specialised support and advice available from the International Study and Language Institute.

At Masters level you can't get away with writing about something that you only vaguely understand, or squeezing in a theory in the hope it will gain extra marks - your markers will be able to tell, and this does not demonstrate the accuracy or professionalism of a researcher.

Imagine you write the sentence: "Freudian psychoanalysis demonstrates how our personalities are developed from our childhood experiences."

At Masters level, the word 'demonstrates' becomes very loaded and potentially inaccurate. This is because at Masters level you are expected to interrogate the assumptions, boundaries, and way in which knowledge is constructed in your subject. With this in mind, the sentence above raises a lot of contextual questions: To what extent could Freud's theory of psychoanalysis really be said to 'demonstrate' the origins of our personalities? What part of Freud's many theories are you referring to when you write 'psychoanalysis'? What about the developments in psychoanalysis that have happened since Freud, and the many arguments against his theories? Your writing needs to take these questions into account, and at least be aware of them, even if you don't address all of them.

Don't just stop at discussing the pros and cons of a debate; academics rarely agree on interpretations of theories or ideas, so academic knowledge is more like a complex network of views than two clear sides.

This guide reproduces the text of our LibGuide for Taught Postgraduates. The online guide has links to additional information and can be found at:

https://libguides.reading.ac.uk/reflective

For tips and guidance on other academic skills, see the Study Advice website at