

**THE  
PSYCHOLOGY  
STUDENT'S  
GUIDE TO  
STUDY AND  
EMPLOYABILITY**

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# 5

# EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS: WHAT ARE EMPLOYERS LOOKING FOR?

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## CHAPTER STRUCTURE

- Aims of the Chapter
- Introduction
- What is Employability?
- What do Employers Want?
- Team Working
- Leading Others
- Effective Communication
- Critical Thinking
- Problem Solving and Creativity
- Computing Skills
- Final Reflections
- Additional Resources
- References



## AIMS OF THE CHAPTER

This chapter aims to:

- Describe the concept of employability and help you to understand how to make yourself more employable.
  - Reflect upon the knowledge, skills and abilities that you are gaining during your psychology degree and consider their transferability.
  - Articulate the key characteristics of skills you will gain during your time at university.
  - Build self-awareness and a capacity to identify your strengths and areas for development.
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## INTRODUCTION

Often when we think about education, be that at school, college or university we think about what we learn in terms of subject-specific knowledge and understanding. Yet through our experiences at university we gain a huge amount more than knowledge. We learn *how* to learn and gain skills that help us to make the most out of our courses and beyond.

Through the things that go well, and not so well you will practise and build skills and strategies to learn effectively, to interact with others, to question, debate and challenge. You will learn to manage your time, to prioritise and to become increasingly independent, and learn to engage effectively in a digital world.

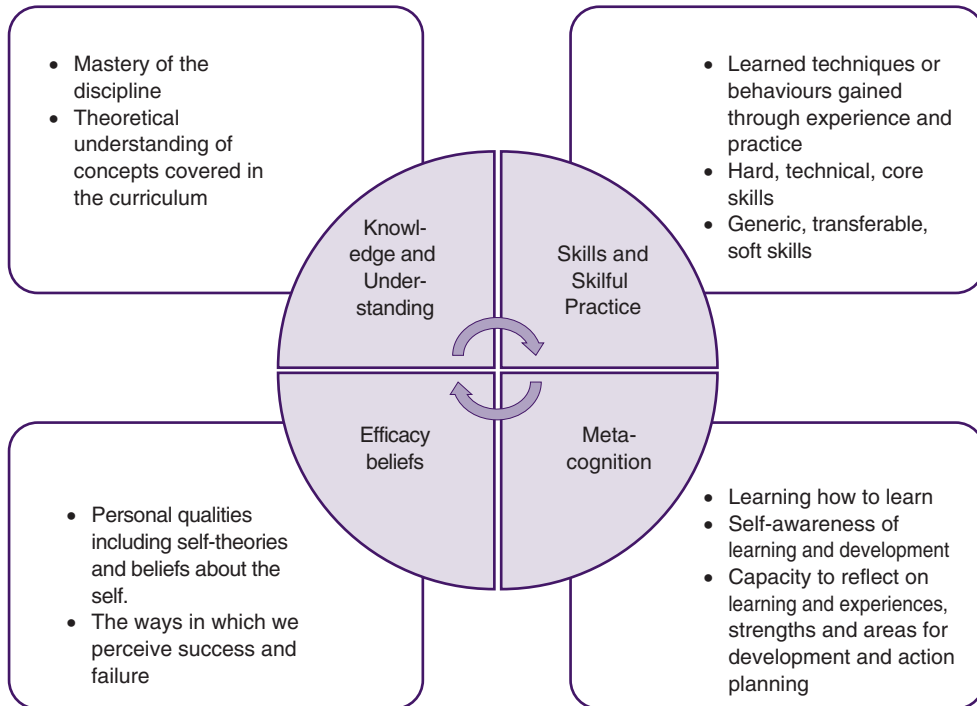
The point here is that your degree will equip you with a wide range of knowledge, skills, abilities and attitudes (KSAAs) that will help you to engage fully with your course and will be highly desirable to employers. But one issue is that students often find it difficult to talk about and explain their skills in an interview context (Reddy et al., 2013). Throughout this chapter we will consider what employers of psychology graduates are looking for and explore some key skills in greater depth to help you to identify and work upon your own skills and abilities.

## WHAT IS EMPLOYABILITY?

So far we've talked about skills quite generally and you've reflected on your own skills. Before we delve deeper into some general skills that you'll develop during your time at university we will consider in a bit more detail what employability is and what employers are looking for. At a basic level employability relates to the complex set of knowledge, skills, abilities and attitudes (KSAAs) that make graduates more likely to gain employment (Yorke, 2006), or further study which opens up access to employment within certain professions, such as the British Psychological Society (BPS) core professions (see Chapter 6). Yorke (2006) goes further still to suggest that employability goes beyond employment to consider the benefits to the graduate, the local community and the economy. Teasing Yorke's (2006) definition apart in the context of a psychology degree we see that employability goes beyond knowledge of the BPS curriculum, to include a broad array of skills and abilities, but also the influence of personality, values and attitudes, including being proactive, open to opportunity and

fully engaged. Harvey (2004) goes on to suggest that employability is a continuous process, developing graduates who are empowered to reflect critically on their own learning and development, promoting an attitude of life-long learning and development.

Yorke and Knight (2006) argue that employability is underpinned by four broad and interconnected themes, summarised in Figure 5.1.



**Figure 5.1** Factors underpinning employability

## Knowledge and understanding

Often, when we think about education, we think about the knowledge we gain, the concepts, theories and principles we learn about. To gain Graduate Basis of Chartered Membership (GBC) of the BPS, your degree programme or conversion course must have been accredited by the BPS which ensures that your degree provides you with knowledge and understanding across the psychology curriculum (see Chapter 1).

It is quite easy to see how the psychology curriculum holds direct relevance to the world of work, within and beyond careers in psychology. For example knowledge and understanding of social psychology and individual differences helps us to understand group dynamics, which inform organisational policies and practices; cognitive psychology supports our understanding of communication, attentional and perceptual processes; research methods can be applied in market

research, or to understand the experiences of customers, alongside the assessment and treatment of individuals across the lifespan in organisational, educational, health and clinical domains; furthermore ethics provides clarity within employment and client-facing issues, all of which indirectly supports the graduates' employability (Reddy et al., 2013).

In addition to your course content, you will gain a wide and diverse range of knowledge through your experiences at university through membership of committees, clubs and societies and through work experience. Knowledge and understanding underpin many skills, including critical thinking and problem solving.

## Skills and skilful practice

Skills are techniques and behaviours that have been gained or mastered through observation, practice and experience. There are many different ways that skills can be categorised – you have probably heard of hard and soft skills.

- **Hard skills:** Also referred to as core or technical skills. These skills are essential to perform well in a given task or job and because of this they are often itemised in job descriptions and person specifications for jobs. Hard skills are generally underpinned by knowledge and understanding. For example, to complete a research project you will need skills in numeracy, data entry and analysis, software such as R, SPSS and Microsoft Excel and possibly coding. Hard skills are often context specific and will hold different levels of importance and relevance in different job roles.
- **Soft skills:** Also referred to as generic or transferable skills. These skills are thought to be applicable across contexts and are highly desirable. Soft skills are often attributed to dispositional qualities, including personality, attitudes and values. Soft skills include communication skills, leadership and team work, emotional intelligence, adaptability, proactivity and resilience.



### SELF-REFLECTION POINT 5.1

#### Articulating your Skills

A wide range of employability skills are embedded within a psychology degree; however students often have difficulty in articulating these. Think about a module that you are taking this term, or that you have recently completed. Going beyond knowledge and understanding of the content, what skills have you developed or worked upon?

It might be helpful to look at the module description, module handbook or information on the virtual learning environment (e.g. Blackboard or Moodle). Think about a skill that you've developed or worked on associated with:

- Building your knowledge and understanding.
- Engaging with individual and group activities and tasks in lectures, seminars and workshops.

- Working towards formative (practice) and summative (formal) assessments.
- Preparing for exams.
- Engaging with marks and feedback.

## Efficacy beliefs

When you look at the intended learning outcomes for a module that you have taken recently, how confident are you in your knowledge and understanding of the content and how do you tend to respond if the mark for your coursework is weaker than you'd expected? According to Carol Dweck's (2006; Dweck et al., 1995) mindset theory, the way we view our ability to learn and develop and how we perceive successes and failures influences the way we experience the world, and possibly our likelihood of success. Before reading any further, complete the brief questionnaire in Exercise 5.1.

### EXERCISE 5.1



#### Do You Have a Fixed or Growth Mindset?

Before learning more mindset theory, take a few moments to answer the following three questions (Dweck et al., 1995), on a scale of 6 (strongly agree) to 1 (strongly disagree).

To calculate your growth mindset score, calculate the average of the three questions by adding your scores together and dividing the answer by three (e.g. if your responses are 6, 4, 5, your score would be  $6 + 4 + 5 = 15$  and  $15/3 = 5$ ).

		Strongly agree (6)	Agree (5)	Slightly Agree (4)	Slightly Disagree (3)	Disagree (2)	Strongly disagree (1)
1	You have a certain amount of intelligence and you really can't do much to change it						
2	Your intelligence is something about you that you can't change very much						
3	You can learn new things, but you can't really change your basic intelligence.						

- A score of 4.0 or above suggests that you have a growth mindset
- A score of 3.0 or below suggests that you have a fixed mindset

As highlighted in Exercise 5.1, mindset is effectively a continuum from fixed to growth. Those who tend more towards a fixed mindset tend to believe that their capacity to learn and develop is the result of underlying intelligence which cannot readily be enhanced; when goals are not achieved those with

a fixed mindset may feel that the failure is because of their lack of ability, and may feel inclined to give up. By contrast those with a growth mindset have a malleable self-theory; they tend to believe that knowledge and skills can be developed through hard work, good learning strategies and by embracing opportunity. Those with a growth mindset are more likely to perceive failures as opportunities to learn and develop.

As a result of this malleability those with a growth mindset are more likely to engage with deep learning, which involves taking time to explore information in greater detail, to question, critique and build arguments, as opposed to shallow learning which focuses on memorising details and facts rather than building solid knowledge and understanding of the material.

The good news is that research has found that mindset is itself malleable. Yeager et al. (2019) conducted a large-scale study in the USA and found that a brief online growth-mindset intervention enhanced the growth mindset of students, increased the grades of lower-achieving students and influenced an uptake in advanced mathematics courses, suggesting that students who developed a growth mindset not only did better, but they took on challenging courses associated with greater long-term success.

## Metacognition

At a basic level, metacognition is the process of thinking about thinking, and about learning. Metacognition is a higher-order cognitive process, involving taking an active role in learning and development, analysing our thoughts, feelings and behaviours. It involves taking a step back and considering what you have done, why you have done it, what you thought about that, how you felt and how you behaved – being reflective. By being reflective we develop self-awareness and a capacity to learn from what has gone well and not so well and importantly to actively plan for future development, whether that involves doing something differently, seeking out novel approaches or experiences, or re-evaluating our thoughts, feelings or behaviours.

Developing self-awareness helps us to set goals, monitor progress and establish when a goal has been achieved. For example, when you are working on an essay, the first step might be to read and understand a theory. How do you know when that goal has been achieved? Self-questioning is an important metacognitive process, which helps to monitor goal progress.

Students often ask what the difference is between cognition and metacognition. There is of course overlap, but one useful way of explaining the differences is using the example above of understanding a theory. Cognitive processes and strategies help us to achieve the goal of understanding the theory, i.e. the processes of obtaining knowledge and understanding. Metacognitive strategies by contrast help us to evaluate goal progress and ensure that the goal has been reached, for example summarising the theory without the use of notes to test understanding. Metacognitive processes therefore come before, during and after cognitive activity, and may be most dominant when cognitive processes are ineffective, for example if the approach you took to understand the theory was to highlight key points in the text, and at the end realised that you weren't able to summarise the main points.

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**FOCUS BOX 5.1**


### The Employability Skills Found in your Degree

The Quality Assurance Agency for UK Higher Education (QAA) provides a framework detailing what is expected of a psychology degree in terms of content and skills. The QAA (2019, p. 8) *Subject Benchmark for Psychology* highlights that 'Psychology is distinctive in the rich and diverse range of attributes it develops, drawing on skills that are associated both with studying the humanities (for example, critical thinking and essay writing) and other sciences (hypothesis-testing and numeracy)'. The variety of learning practices (e.g. large and small-group teaching, interactive seminars and tutorials, diverse assessment methods) helps students to develop and practise a wide range of skills.

#### Subject-specific skills

The QAA (2019) lists a range of skills that they argue are specific to psychology graduates. These include the ability to:

- **Apply** different perspectives to psychological issues, drawing upon theory and research and recognising diversity in methods and perspectives.
- **Integrate** ideas and findings across perspectives.
- **Identify** and **evaluate** patterns of behaviour.
- **Generate** and **explore** theory/research-led hypotheses and research questions.
- Design and carry out **quantitative** and **qualitative research**.
- Use a range of **psychological tools** (e.g. specialist software, psychometric measures, lab equipment).
- **Apply** psychological knowledge ethically and safely in real-world contexts.
- **Critically evaluate** theory/research.

Whilst the skills listed above are described by the QAA as psychology specific, you will see that they involve the ability to: analyse, interpret, question, critique, investigate, evaluate, synthesise and apply - all of which are applicable beyond the context of your degree, and are valued by employers (Sarfraz et al., 2018).

#### General skills

In addition to the psychology specific skills, the QAA (2019) list what they refer to as generic skills:

- Effective communication (written and oral).
- Numerical reasoning.
- Computer literacy (word processing, database and analytic software packages, coding).
- Retrieval and organisation of information and evaluating sources.
- Team work and leadership.
- Self-awareness and self-reflection and proactivity in relation to academic, personal and professional development.

As you read the following section on What do Employers Want?, see if you can see the overlaps between subject-specific and general skills that will be found in your degree.

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## WHAT DO EMPLOYERS WANT?

Now that you understand a bit more about what employability is and you have started to think about the skills you have developed, and those that you work on, we will shift focus onto what we know about what you gain from your degree and what employers are looking for.

A number of studies have reported on the KSAs that are valued by employers – some emphasise subject-specific skills, but many focus on general skills that are valued across professions. Across occupations the skills that are most highly valued are team work, problem solving, communication, computer skills, analytical thinking, leadership, time management, creativity, interpersonal and organisation (Sarraz et al., 2018); emotional intelligence has also been identified as a key skill for the workplace (Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007). Soft skills are often considered more desirable as employers are known to ‘recruit for attitude, and train for skill’ (Rao, 2014, p. 45).

However, in a review of the literature, Suleman (2018) noted that there is some variability in the set of employability skills valued by employers across occupations. For example, whilst employers value critical thinking most highly in business graduates (Pinto & Ramalheira, 2017), they value personal qualities, including enthusiasm and dedication in economics graduates (Velasco, 2012), and leadership ability in health graduates (Messum et al., 2017). Research conducted by the author of this chapter, and two final year undergraduate psychology students (Branson et al., 2020), adopted the Delphi Technique of data collection (see Iqbal & Pipon-Young, 2015) to gain expert consensus on the skills that employers of psychology graduates value most highly. A panel of 24 employers participated, all of whom held responsibility for recruiting and line managing psychology graduates. Employers worked across a range of professions including: academia (4.2%), clinical (50%), counselling (4.2%), forensic (4.2%), health (4.2%) and human resources (12.5%), with the remaining participants spanning criminal justice, public relations and information technology (20.8%). The top 10 most important skills, in rank order, were:

1. Disposition (e.g. adaptability, empathy, flexibility, proactivity, creativity)
2. Job-specific skills and knowledge (e.g. clinical skills)
3. Communication skills (oral and written)
4. Initiative
5. Positive attitude (e.g. professionalism, self-motivation, resilience)
6. Self-organisation (e.g. time management, planning, prioritisation)
7. Research and enquiry (data handling, analysis)
8. Degree-specific skills and knowledge (e.g. critical thinking, analysis)
9. Team work
10. Willingness to learn (e.g. self-awareness, reflection)

Employers were also asked about the value of employment-enhancing experiences, and of these the most desirable were considered to be relevant work experience (including volunteering), a professional placement year and experience of a leadership role at university (e.g. student union or course representative). See also Chapter 9 for a range of employment-related knowledge you will learn during the course of your psychology degree that you can apply to everyday life.

## TEAM WORKING

Effective teams can have a positive effect on our productivity, performance, wellbeing and attitudes; teams can also support learning and creativity (Delarue et al., 2008; Richter et al., 2011). With almost three quarters of workplaces having formally designed teams (Kersley et al., 2005), and team-work skills being valued by graduate employers (see: What do Employers Want?), it is worth taking some time to explore team working in more detail.

### What is a team?

There are many definitions of team work. Katzenbach and Smith (1993, p. 45) define a team as ‘a small number of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, performance goals and approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable’. Breaking this down, the authors emphasise how teams that perform well are normally:

- **Small:** 6–8 people is ideal.
- **Complementary:** members’ knowledge, skills, abilities and attitudes (KSAs) will differ, but will add strength to (complement) the team.
- **Common purpose:** members are committed to the same purpose.
- **Goals:** members are focused on achieving the same goals. The definition highlights performance goals, but where a task is new or very challenging, goals to gain knowledge and understanding (learning goals) are also valuable.
  - Goals that are **s**pecific, **m**easurable, **a**chievable, **r**elevant and **t**ime-bound (SMART) offer the highest chance of success (see Chapter 3).
- **Approach:** there is an agreed method to achieve the team’s goals, even when goals are shared across team members.
- **Mutual accountability:** the team have shared responsibility for achieving goals. Tasks may be distributed across team members (remember those complementary KSAs) but being committed to a common purpose, members feel a mutual sense of responsibility for achieving goals.

Working in a high-performance team can be really rewarding, but it takes time to create such a team, and depending on the task or goal, it may not be sensible. This is where it can be helpful to distinguish between a team and a group.

### Team vs. group

Think about experiences you have had of being in a group, maybe on a night out, or as members of a society or club, or possibly as students coming together to study. If you contrast those experiences with what you have just read about teams you are likely to see substantial differences. A group therefore is a number of people who have something in common and come together in the context of their shared characteristics.

In a university setting, much of the work that you do with others will be more akin to group work than team work. You will have shared characteristics, e.g. you have been scheduled in the same group at the same time for this module and you are being taught by the same person; however many of the elements that support high-performance teams are not automatically present, e.g. shared understanding of the purpose, goals and approach. This doesn't mean that group work can't be effective, it can, with appropriate planning.

## Types of team

Teams serve a variety of purposes and come in different forms. Teams vary in their permanency and stability – some are relatively full-time, lasting for years with well-defined roles and responsibilities (e.g. teams in the workplace), whilst others are more time-limited (e.g. to conduct a research project or solve a problem). Some teams will be enduring, but only come together once in a while for a particular purpose (e.g. committees that meet monthly or quarterly, such as student–staff partnership committees or a sporting or debate team that meets weekly).



## SELF-REFLECTION POINT 5.2

### Experiences of Being in a Team

Take a few moments to think about your experiences of working with others this year. Considering what you have learned about the qualities of a high-performing team, do you think you were part of a team, or a group? What type of team was it?

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## Team building

Earlier in this section we talked about the time it can take to create a high-performing team. Bruce Tuckman (1964) developed a very influential five-stage model of team development which highlights how the interpersonal relationships and trust between team members can be affected by their stage of development.

You may have experienced team-building activities. These are designed to help team members get to know one another, to develop trust and interdependence and move through the early stages of team development. Although the model suggests a linear pathway through the stages, teams won't necessarily move through the stages in order. Consider for example if a new team member joins, or if a new project is introduced, change can move teams into earlier or later stages.

## Team composition

We have already talked about team members having complementary skills, this section however relates to the team's composition – the structure of the group, what they bring in terms of strengths (and weaknesses) and how they work together. Team composition is influenced by a vast array of individual difference factors, including personality, values, motives, attitudes, preferences, culture, age, knowledge, skills and abilities, experience ... and the list goes on.

**Table 5.1** Tuckman's stages of team building

Stage	Theme	Behaviours
Forming	Awareness	Making contact and bonding Developing trust Learning roles and responsibilities High dependence on leader to direct
Storming	Conflict	Expressing differences in thoughts, feelings and behaviours Reacting to leadership Members are relatively independent Leader should coach members through
Norming	Cooperation	Developing group norms and values Finding effective ways of working Decisions made through negotiation and consensus building Leader facilitates and enables
Performing	Results	Members work collaboratively The team has an established identity and shared vision Members are interdependent Leader delegates and oversees
Adjourning (finishing)	Separation	Members move on to new projects/teams Emotions can run high Leader supports

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**FOCUS BOX 5.2**

**Research Looking at Team Composition and Personality (Humphrey et al., 2011)**

**Background:** A person is thought to fit well within the team if they provide unique knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs) that are needed within the team (complementary fit) whilst being similar to the rest of the team on other fundamental characteristics (supplementary fit). Personality influences how we experience the world around us, and the researchers focused on two personality characteristics:

- **Extraversion** relates to how much energy is directed internally (introvert) or externally (extrovert). Extraverts tend to be warm, outgoing, assertive and energetic, while introverts tend to be reserved, laid back and appreciate their own company.
- **Conscientiousness** relates to the extent to which an individual is geared towards goal pursuit and accomplishment. High scorers tend to be organised, hardworking and disciplined, while low scorers tend to be disorganised and distractible with a low sense of duty.

**Aim:** To understand the influence of personality (extraversion and conscientiousness) on the performance of MBA teams, focusing on complementary and supplementary fit between team members.

(Continued)

**Method:** First year MBA students were allocated to 54 teams of 5-6 for their course. Each student completed a personality questionnaire and their grades for individual and group assessments were recorded.

**Results:** Teams that were composed of members that had a small amount of variance in conscientiousness (i.e. they were similar, consistent with complementary fit) and a high amount of variance in extroversion (i.e. they differed, consistent with supplementary fit), had the highest short- and long-term grades.

**Discussion:** It is thought that supplementary fit (diversity) in extraversion led to high performance because it created role differentiation: high scorers (extraverts) are likely to be dominant and sociable (leadership qualities), whilst low scorers (introverts) are more likely to be followers. By contrast too many leaders or followers is likely to result in conflict or lack of consensus and progress.

It is thought that complementary fit (similarity) in conscientiousness led to high performance because of the effect on perceptions of effort and goal pursuit. Low variance produces a team in which members have similar perspectives on how to accomplish work, how much effort to put in and what they want to achieve. By contrast where there is high variance, members may have different performance goals and levels of determination and perseverance, which is associated with conflict.

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## Team roles

Research conducted by Meredith Belbin and colleagues found that the best teams include individuals with a broad range of KSAs that can fulfil nine behavioural or 'team' roles. The nine roles, which you can find out more about at the Belbin website, fall under three categories: thinking roles, action roles and people roles. According to Belbin, we tend to have preferences across two or three roles (primary roles) and can manage a few others (secondary roles), meaning that a team can remain small because all roles will be covered through team members' primary and secondary roles. As well as detailing the strengths of each role, Belbin highlights allowable weaknesses, aspects of behaviour within each role that we should be aware of.

Please note, there have been criticisms of Belbin's team roles, including the reliability and validity of the Team Role Self-Perception Inventory (e.g. Furnham et al., 1993), yet it is regularly used by careers advisors to encourage students to think about and reflect upon their strengths and areas for development.

Although there is a cost associated with completing the Belbin Team Role Test some career centres offer free testing, so take a look at the resources available in your university's careers centre.

See: [www.belbin.com/about/belbin-team-roles](http://www.belbin.com/about/belbin-team-roles)



## SELF-REFLECTION POINT 5.3

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### What Skills are You Learning When You Work with Others?

Take a few moments to review the content of this section and consider the skills that you are practising in order to work effectively with others, including when things don't go according to plan.

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## LEADING OTHERS

### EXERCISE 5.2



#### What are the Qualities of a Good Leader?

What does a good leader look like? Think about a good leader who you have experienced, it might be a political leader, the captain of a sports team, your boss at work or the head teacher at your school.

Write down what you think made them such a good leader.

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Researchers have spent a lot of time trying to define what precisely leadership is. At first glance it seems straightforward – we can easily identify a leader, right? Certainly, we can quickly identify formally designated leaders – presidents, prime ministers, founders and CEOs of international companies. We can also identify those closer to home who are less well known – the head of your psychology department, captain of your sports team, etc. However, it begins to get more complicated when we think about informal leadership, for example the person on the team who seems to keep everyone's morale up, or the person on the Psychology Society committee who manages to persuade everyone to agree with their way of thinking. It becomes more complicated still when we think about leadership quality – some formal leaders are excellent at what they do, whilst others ... not so much. Some inspire their followers, whilst others use their power to coerce. To find out what makes a leader effective, we need to look beyond the title to consider all these aspects of leadership.

#### What is a leader?

At a basic level, a leader could be defined as someone who has *followers*, yet this doesn't indicate whether followers are doing so because of a formal hierarchy or out of choice or desire to follow. Which brings us to *influence*; many definitions focus on the concept of influence, a leader being a person who is able to influence their followers towards achievement of a goal, which could be born from formal authority or other factors, such as expertise in public speaking – consider for example the influence of Martin Luther King's 'I have a dream' speech in 1963.

#### Leadership vs. management

When trying to define leadership it is important to distinguish between a manager and a leader. Kotter (1990) argues that good management is about coping with complexity, whilst good leadership is helping followers to cope with change. Managers and leaders take a complementary but distinct approach to three main tasks, as demonstrated in Table 5.2.

**Table 5.2** Contrasting management and leadership

Task	Management	Leadership
Decide what needs to be done	Planning and budgeting	Setting a direction (vision and strategy)
Create networks to achieve aims	Organising and staffing	Aligning people with the vision
Ensure people do the job	Controlling and problem solving	Motivating and inspiring people

## Models of leadership

Moving beyond a succinct definition of leadership, possibly a more useful strategy is to think about what a good leader looks like, to consider what qualities they hold. Again, there are many opinions, and views have changed over time, with models of leadership focusing on:

- **Traits:** focusing on the dispositional characteristics of a good leader. This approach dominated in the 1930s and has had a resurgence over the last 20 or so years, with researchers looking at the personality traits associated with leadership (e.g. Judge et al., 2002)
- **Behavioural styles:** focusing on what successful leaders do (and don't do), distinguishing between those who focus on tasks who tend to be directive and those who focus on people who tend to be participative, leading to three well known distinctions:
  - *Authoritarian leaders:* who are directive – ‘do what I tell you to do, when I tell you to do it’.
  - *Democratic leaders:* who are participative – ‘which approach do you think is best?’.
  - *Laissez-faire:* who exhibit an absence of leadership – ‘do whatever you think is best’.



### EXERCISE 5.3

#### Leader Behaviours

Having read about the behavioural approach leadership styles, which style do you think would be most appropriate in the following situations? Before answering, for each scenario think about: What is the desired outcome? What needs to be done to achieve that outcome? What should the leader do and how should they behave to support the team to achieve the desired outcome?

1. Your project group are about to miss a deadline. You have four hours to complete the work, but no one can agree on who should do what.
2. You are tasked with facilitating a small-group problem-solving activity. The facilitator's role is to guide the discussion and promote discussion, but not contribute to decision making.
3. Your student society has been tasked with planning a novel fundraiser, a meeting has been arranged for the committee to think about what to do.

There is no right or wrong answer, however authoritarian approaches may be useful when quick decisions/actions are needed while democratic approaches tend to support idea generation and collaboration. What this activity hopefully demonstrates is how the suitability of a leadership style could be contingent on the context.

- **Context:** Contingency theory (Fielder, 1967) and Vroom and Yetton's (1973) normative model attempted to take account of the context within which people lead, proposing that leadership style is fixed, however leaders will be more effective if their style matches the situation.
- **Transformational and transactional:** Bass (1985) distinguished between two leadership styles. Transactional is based on a transaction between leader and followers, where good performance is rewarded and poor performance is punished. Transformational leadership by contrast focuses on engaging with the emotions of followers, using charisma – an approach associated with leaders like Nelson Mandela. Research suggests that transformational leadership has the largest effects on follower satisfaction, motivation and performance (Judge & Piccolo, 2004).
- **Values:** prompted by concerns over unethical conduct of some leaders, authentic leadership focuses on the moral character of leaders, taking a values-based approach. Martin Luther King is an example of an authentic leader, who demonstrates four core competences:
  - *Self-awareness:* a capacity to understand their strengths and weaknesses.
  - *Relational transparency:* a capacity to present their true authentic self to others, expressing thoughts and feelings.
  - *Balanced decision making:* consulting colleagues and objectively analysing all available information to make informed decisions, which may differ from their own perspective.
  - *Internalised moral perspective:* regulating their own behaviours to align with the standards and values they espouse in others.

Research suggests a positive relationship between authentic leadership and follower satisfaction, commitment, effort and performance (Peus et al., 2012), also that the competences associated with authentic leadership can be developed (Avolio & Gardner, 2005), which is good news!

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## SELF-REFLECTION POINT 5.4



### Values-Based Leadership

Take a few moments to think about the competencies associated with authentic leadership. To what extent have you developed these skills and what could you do to improve them further?

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### Qualities of a good leader

A quick Google search for leadership qualities will present you with a vast array of views and opinions. One excellent list is presented by Harvard Business School Online (n.d.) in their e-book *How to Become a More Effective Leader*, which can be downloaded from the HBS website. The list, which also provides strategies for building skills, includes the following qualities:

- **Emotional intelligence:** an ability to understand and manage emotions, including:
  - *Self-awareness:* having a clear understanding of your strengths, limitations, emotions, beliefs and motivations.
  - *Self-regulation:* how you manage your emotions, behaviours and impulses.



- *Motivation*: ability to inspire self and others to exert effort.
- *Social skills*: how you perceive emotions and interact and communicate with others.
- **Employee engagement**: an ability to bring out the best in themselves and others by:
  - Providing effective fact-based feedback.
  - Showing recognition: accrediting followers for their contributions.
  - Fostering transparent communication: providing clear information and being open to discuss questions and concerns.
  - Delegating work: demonstrating trust and empowering employees by delegating tasks to those who have the necessary knowledge, skills and abilities to succeed.
  - Being respectful: treating others as you would wish to be treated.
  - Supporting learning and development: providing opportunities for personal and professional development.
- **Negotiation**: using strategies such as keeping an open mind, setting a clear goal/target, and project a sense of power through body language, to convince and get what you want!
- **Decision making**: using strategies such as clearly defining the problem and what needs to be resolved, having a clear timeframe, gathering the right people to work through the problem with, encouraging discussion and debate and navigating group dynamics.



## REAL-LIFE PERSPECTIVE 5.1

### Lucia Martin, Final Year, BSc Psychology

I became a course rep in first year because I wanted to take on a leadership role. I realised early on how much we can learn from each other, socially and academically. I love conversing and listening to others, so my role played on this strength. I found it empowering to bridge the gap between staff and students in order to effect real change. I really enjoyed being able to be there for people at times of need, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic; providing avenues for support was a prominent part of my leadership role.

I was a course rep throughout my degree, and had the opportunity to meet and work with a diverse range of people from different backgrounds, ages and positions of authority, with different values, attitudes and personalities. As well as building valuable networks, this helped me to develop perhaps the most surprising and fundamental leadership skill, communication. I realised that there is not one 'rule book' in communication. Different approaches are needed for talking to individuals and groups, for actively listening to make people feel heard, and for de-escalation when things get tense or there are differences of opinion. Reaching this understanding helped me to work through many challenges that could stem from miscommunications, so I felt privileged to learn this early on in my role.

Another important thing I developed was self-awareness – over time I became increasingly aware of my talents and skills, but also those requiring further improvement, allowing for consistent personal development alongside my studies. As my skills developed, so did my responsibility and in my final year I became senior rep and even won a student union award.

It is important to step out of your comfort zone and undertake a position of responsibility at university as there are so many opportunities that will play to your strengths. Previously, I felt like I didn't 'stand out' in anything, but now as well as my degree I have a lot of really valuable skills that make my CV stand out.

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## SELF-REFLECTION POINT 5.5



### Leadership Skill Self-Assessment

Take a few moments to consider the styles and qualities of good leaders that we've talked about in this section. Create a list of your current strengths and give an example of a time when you have used that strength, which might be in a position of formal or informal leadership, for example, during a class debate, working on a group research project, conflict between housemates, as a member of a club or society ...

Create a second list of leadership skills that you'd like to develop further, maybe you need to work on your negotiation skills or build confidence in communication. Can you think of at least one action point, one thing that you could do to start working on those skills - try to make your action points time-bound (today, this week, this month) and realistic - something you have the time, energy and capacity for.

Please note that by completing this activity, you will be working on your self-awareness, which as detailed by Harvard Business School, is an important leadership skill!

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## EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Communication has been defined as the 'purposeful process of expressing, receiving, and understanding messages containing factual information, emotions, ideas, and needs by two or more individuals' that 'enable you to understand and be understood by others' (Sabbah et al., 2020, p. 136).

So far in this chapter, we've talked about team working and leadership, both of which involve communication (see also Presentation Skills in Chapter 4). Communication skills support a broad array of other skills that are highly valued by employers in almost every career path.

Throughout your degree you will be exposed to multiple opportunities to practise and develop your communication skills. In the context of lectures, seminars, assessments, placements and work experience, and through your everyday interactions, you will exchange views, thoughts, feelings, information and perspectives. The tricky thing can be to tease apart the skills underpinning these everyday activities. This section will break communication down to help you to reflect upon and identify the skills that you have, and those that you should continue to work on.

### Verbal communication

This involves the ability not only to speak clearly and concisely, but also to use words and phrases accurately, to break complex information down into accessible chunks, to maintain eye contact with listeners and to attend to their reactions and feelings, to listen attentively and respond appropriately. In short, the most effective communication happens when verbal and non-verbal messages are in sync.

### Para-linguistic cues

Have you ever been told 'it's not what you said it's how you said it'? Para-linguistic cues are the aspects of spoken communication that don't involve words, that is, your capacity to add emphasis, expression and meaning to speech, including:

- **Pitch and intonation:** pitch relates to how high or low your speech is and intonation relates to how we change and vary the pitch of our voice to communicate meaning. Intonation serves several purposes: it helps to interpret and understand others' thoughts, feelings and attitudes; it helps us to understand if someone is making a statement, asking a question or drawing to a close.
- **Pace:** some people will speak faster than others. The speed at which we speak can be indicative of how we are feeling, for example some people will speak faster if they're anxious, or slower if they're unwell or tired. Talking slowly might also indicate that someone is thinking or gathering their thoughts.
- **Volume:** in typical conversations people will speak at a volume that is appropriate for those participating in the conversation to hear, therefore if the volume decreases or increases it can be indicative of heightened emotions, or to grab attention.

We all have a normal pattern to our speech which the listener will become accustomed to, however when you adjust the volume, intonation or pace of your speech it tells the listener there is something they should attend to.

For further information on clear and confident communication, see: [www.youtube.com/channel/UC\\_7\\_HF34CiAthRTH9yYgVBA](http://www.youtube.com/channel/UC_7_HF34CiAthRTH9yYgVBA)

## Non-verbal communication (body language)

It is often argued that body language speaks louder than your words. Facial expressions and eye contact, body movements and gestures alongside posture and use of physical space send strong messages that can be powerful in engaging and influencing the listener, but can also create confusion and undermine the messages you are giving. Inconsistency in verbal and non-verbal cues can give mixed signals and can lead the listener to think that you are being dishonest.

If you look confident, you'll feel confident, or fake it till you make it – you've probably heard these phrases before, and there is some evidence to suggest that if you are able to give off confidence vibes, your message will be more impactful and convincing.

See Amy Cuddy's TED talk about body language and the 'power pose': [https://youtu.be/Ks\\_Mh1QhMc](https://youtu.be/Ks_Mh1QhMc)

## Active listening

Active listening involves concentrating on what a speaker is saying to demonstrate that you are engaged with and committed to the conversation, which makes the listener feel heard and valued. Topornycky and Golparian (2016) suggest that there are five key techniques:

1. **Paying attention:** including eye contact; avoiding distractions and formulating responses whilst the speaker is talking.
2. **Showing you are listening:** using verbal and non-verbal cues, including smiling, nodding and small verbal comments such as 'Yes' or 'Uh huh'.
3. **Providing feedback:** clarifying understanding of what was said by asking questions, paraphrasing and summarising.

4. **Deferring judgement:** by avoiding interruptions and allowing the speaker to finish a point before asking questions or proposing counter arguments.
5. **Responding appropriately:** in an open and honest way, treating the speaker with respect.

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## SELF-REFLECTION POINT 5.6



### Active Listening

Over the course of the next week, reflect upon conversations you participate in.

- Were you actually listening? How did you demonstrate this?
  - Were people actually listening to you, or did you sense they were focused on constructing their response?
  - How did you know they were actually listening?
  - What does it feel like when you're not being listened to?
- 

### Written communication

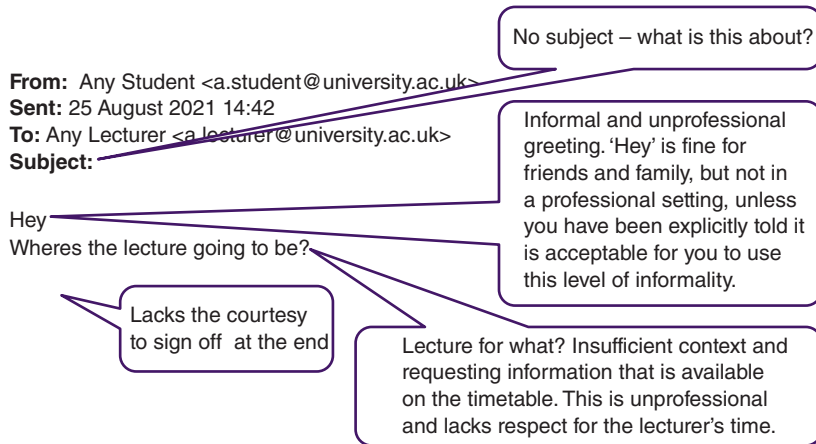
By contrast, written communication skills are those that you use to convey messages using the written word. Through writing essays, project reports, journals, blogs and discussion board posts, you will improve your vocabulary, an adaptive writing style (tailored to the aim of the writing) and capacity to put forward reasoned and well-constructed arguments in an articulate way. To do this requires skills in:

- **Clarity:** creating content that clearly identifies the subject matter and purpose of the communication.
- **Structure and flow:** constructing prose with a logical sequence.
- **Succinctness:** sharing a complete concept in as few words as possible, avoiding unnecessary detail.
- **Proofreading and editing:** taking time to revisit your work to check the flow, structuring and grammar before sending/submitting.

### Adaptive communication style

A fundamental aspect of good communication is pitching it at the right level, which means that you have to know your audience and what they need to know. The ability to adapt the way you communicate is important at university and beyond. For example, as a practitioner psychologist you might need to speak to clients across the lifespan and professionals in the same and different fields including peers and those in positions of authority. Your communication style will need to be adapted to each group, sometimes in rather nuanced ways, requiring some critical thinking and self-awareness.

For example, one of my pet hates is unprofessional emails. Have a look at the email below. How could it be improved?



**Figure 5.2** Unprofessional email

## First impressions count

Employers will test your communication skills at every stage of the recruitment process, from the spelling, sentence structure, style and level of detail in your CV and covering letter, through to the questions that are asked at interview. Candidates are often rejected because of silly mistakes in an application – if you don't have the attention to detail when you are applying for a job, it doesn't bode well for when you are an employee.

## Difficult conversations

Communication becomes very difficult when we need to say something, but we are not sure how to, because we don't know how the recipient is going to react. This can become even more challenging when discomfort about the situation leads to avoidance, frustration and potentially an explosion. It is exceptionally difficult to manage our emotions in these occasions, but emotion regulation is an important tool to work on (see section on Qualities of a good leader above). The University of York provide some good tips for managing difficult conversations at university which are centred on being:

- **Proactive:** when a difficult situation arises (e.g. someone not contributing to group work – see also section on Tips for effective group work in Chapter 3), address it rather than avoiding the situation.
- **Objective:** leave emotions out of the discussion and focus on the end-goal, being clear and specific.
- **Receptive:** acknowledge that others may have a different perspective from you; be willing to compromise.

See: <https://subjectguides.york.ac.uk/skills/conversations> and <https://hbr.org/2015/01/how-to-handle-difficult-conversations-at-work>

## SELF-REFLECTION POINT 5.7



### What are my Communication Skills Like?

Recap on the skills and processes involved in verbal, non-verbal and written communication. Reflect on your own communication skills. What are your current strengths? Where are your areas for development? What could you do over the next four weeks to practise or improve one aspect of your communication skills?

Some examples include:

- Write down a list of your communication skill strengths, with examples of a time when you have used that skill.
- Reflect on your active listening.
- Join a communication-based club or society (e.g. debate, acting).
- Contribute to university radio or to a newsletter.
- Volunteer or work for your department or university social media pages.
- Volunteer or work in a university call centre (e.g. during clearing, contacting alumni).
- Become a student rep or peer mentor.
- Voluntary or paid employment.
- Avoid speaking during lectures, seminars and tutorials.
- Watch some inspirational speakers, e.g. TED Talks.
- Take notice of the things that make a presentation interesting and engaging.
- Blog or vlog.
- Do some extra training, e.g. Future Learn, LinkedIn Learning, university library or study support courses or workshops.

## CRITICAL THINKING

As well as being an excellent life skill to develop (see Chapter 9), critical thinking is highly valued by employers (see Chapter 7). The handy thing is, your psychology degree will teach you how to become a critical thinker – but first we need to talk about what critical thinking is.

### What is critical thinking?

On first glance the concept of critical thinking has negative connotations, often novice critical thinkers will interpret ‘critically evaluate’ as detailing everything that’s wrong. By contrast, critical thinking is about not automatically believing everything that you see, read or that you are told – taking the time to question and challenge the information, to evaluate it and make informed decisions about its authenticity, reliability, balance and accuracy.

We all use critical thinking, pretty much on a daily basis with the choices we make, whether we believe or question the text message from your bank asking you to provide account details, and weighing up options to make the best decisions. Using the example of buying a house we might take the following steps:

1. Read the brochure.
2. Compare and contrast key features with other properties you've looked at
  - a. number of rooms
  - b. size of garden
  - c. location
  - d. parking.
3. Arrange a viewing.
4. Arrange surveys of the building.
5. Check out the local area.
6. Talk to neighbours.

Going through these steps involves researching, synthesising and evaluating the evidence and drawing conclusions, and only at that point would you put in an offer.

In this context, critical thinking therefore is 'setting out actively to understand what is really going on by using reasoning, evaluating evidence and thinking carefully about the process of thinking itself' (Chatfield, 2017, p. 6).

The first part of this definition highlights the use of reasoning and evaluating evidence, which are cognitive processes; the second half which refers to the process of thinking itself is talking about *metacognition* which we discussed earlier in this chapter as one of the four themes of employability skills. Critical thinking therefore is not only about questioning what you see, read and hear, it is about questioning your own beliefs, attitudes and opinions.

Halpern (1999, p. 72) suggests that critical thinking is 'an attitude or disposition to recognize when a skill is needed and the willingness to exert the mental effort needed to apply it' Teasing the dispositional aspect out a bit further, critical thinkers tend to be:

- Open-minded: to diverse world views.
- Flexible: to consider alternative explanations and opinions.
- Intellectually curious: seeking knowledge and understanding.
- Honest: with a capacity to face their own biases, prejudices and stereotypes.

## How to be a critical thinker - evaluating a journal article

When you read, hear or see something, think about:

- **Who said it?** Was it someone in a position of authority? Do they have credibility and expertise?
  - TIP: When reading a journal article, look for the name of the author(s), their credentials, and affiliations (where do they work, how is their work funded?). Are they suitably qualified – are they academics, practitioners or consultants?

- **What did they say?** Was it fact, theory or opinion? Facts can be proven, theory is yet to be proven, opinions may or may not be based on sound reasoning. Was all important information presented, or did they miss something out?
  - TIP: When reading a journal article, consider whether data support the conclusions being drawn; are there any hidden assumptions? What sources has the author used to evidence their points?

What would you say if I offered you £50 to jump out of a plane without a parachute?

What if I then told you that the plane was on the ground, on soft grass?

It's important to have all the information before making decisions!

- **Where did they say it?** Was the content debated, discussed or peer reviewed? What was the medium: TV, social media, magazine, newspaper, textbook, journal? The latter two are the most legitimate sources to cite in academic work, though your lecturers will probably prefer you to cite journal articles.
  - TIP: When reading a journal article, consider where it was published as not all journals are created equal. One approach is to look at the impact factor, generally the higher the impact factor (IF) the more prestigious the journal. It is not a perfect system as critics highlight that newer journals and those covering a specialist topic have lower impact factors, for example, the world renowned journal *Nature* has a 2020 IF of 49.96, whilst *Behaviour Research & Therapy* (BRAT), which is a highly influential journal in the field of clinical psychology, has an IF of 4.47.  
See: Scully and Hodge (2005) for more information on impact factors
- **When did they say it?** Was it before, during or after an important event? Could this impact on the message in any way? Was it said recently or several decades ago? Could this impact on its relevance or accuracy in a contemporary discussion?
  - TIP: when reading journals, look at the publication date. If the literature is old, is it still relevant, does it reflect contemporary ways of thinking? For example, if you are discussing the current education system, research from 1980 will be based on a very different system, which may limit its accuracy or relevance.
- **Why did they say it?** What is the rationale or purpose? How does it contribute or add value? Is there a hidden agenda?
  - TIP: When reading journals, consider the rationale for the study. Does it propose to address a gap in the literature? Is it addressing flaws in existing literature? Who has funded the research? Sometimes research is funded by industry, this doesn't necessarily make it poor-quality research, but the critical thinker will be cautious in their interpretation – is there data published elsewhere that corroborates or replicates the findings?



- **How did they say it?** Who were the intended audience – experts, students, the public? The intended audience affects the style, content and approach that is taken to its subject, also the depth and breadth of coverage. For example the *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology* is intended for an academic audience, whilst *Harvard Business Review* is aimed at practitioners – the latter will be more digestible, but may lack depth and detail. Another consideration is the tone of the message – was it overly expressive, sensationalist or emotive? This may affect the balance of the argument; sometimes a poor argument can be disguised behind expressive language – this is quite common in newspaper articles.

**Tip:** It can be fun to read papers that provide a rebuttal to a critique of work. For example, Ordonez et al. (2009a) provided a critique of goal-setting theory, which was followed by a rather emotionally laden rebuttal by the creators of goal-setting theory, Locke and Latham (2009), and a further response from Ordonez et al. (2009b).

## Being aware of biases

Have you ever had a thought or opinion, then searched for the evidence to support that view? This is what is known as *confirmation bias*, a tendency to search for or interpret information in a way that confirms our pre-conceptions, which leads to errors in thinking. As an example, I did a quick search for evidence for a link between personality and star signs, and what do you know I found some! Clarke et al. (1996) found those with both sun and moon in positive signs were more extroverted than groups in negative signs. Finding evidence to support your argument doesn't necessarily mean that your argument is sound; go and read the abstract for this paper with a critical eye, you should be able to see a flaw straight away, related to the use of multiple *t*-tests.

It is important to consider alternative ways of thinking about your thoughts, opinions and the evidence – what is the counter-evidence? Is it convincing?

## Hierarchy of critical thinking

In the 1950s, Benjamin Bloom created a framework for categorising academic goals, which has since been revised (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001) and can be seen in Figure 5.3. At the base of the hierarchy you find remembering and understanding. Being able to know (remember) and understand is the foundation for all learning; it is not possible to be as effective with the higher-order skills requiring critical thinking (apply, analyse, evaluate and create) until you have a solid level of knowledge and understanding of the material. Through your journey at university, you will increasingly be expected to move beyond demonstrating that you can describe, define and summarise information to confidently use the array of higher-order critical thinking skills required to compare and contrast, critically evaluate and to create a final year research project.

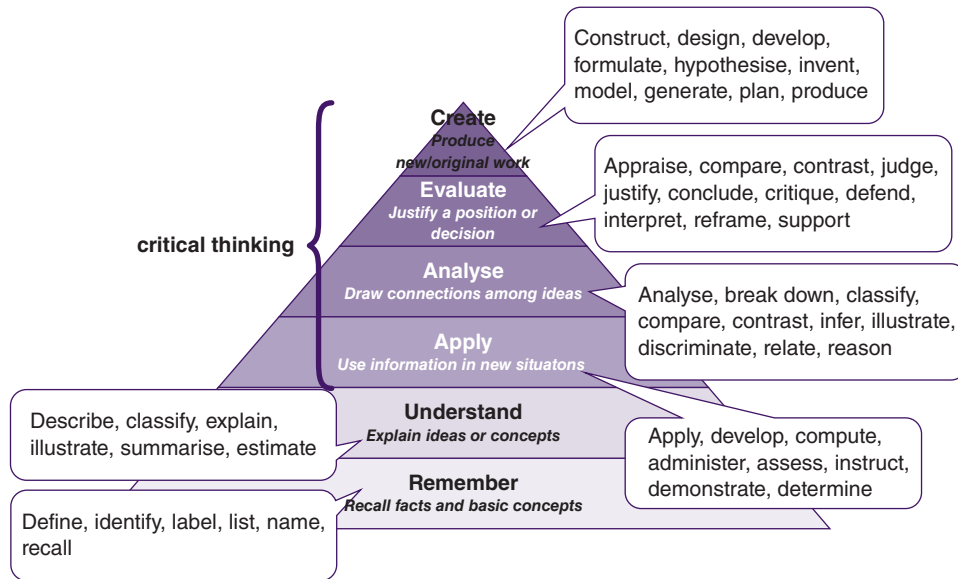


Figure 5.3 Bloom's revised taxonomy

## PROBLEM SOLVING AND CREATIVITY

In every aspect of life we have to solve problems, from learning how to juggle competing demands on our time, to budgeting finances on a limited income. The end-goal of problem solving is decision making, but to do this effectively the individual needs to identify the problem, gather information to weigh up the possible solutions before reaching a logical decision – this is problem solving.

You may have heard of the terms 'think outside of the box' or 'blue sky thinking'. These business terms relate to infusing creativity and innovation into the problem-solving process, to use creativity to generate novel solutions to complex issues. Creative problem solving is at the heart of innovation, and a highly desirable skill in the workplace. Whilst some of us may have a preference for following rules and solving issues with solutions that have been effective in the past, the majority of us can gain strategies to become more creative in our thinking.

### The process of problem solving

If you search for problem-solving models you will find a wide range, some with three steps, such as Google's approach to innovation that involves gathering data, brainstorming ideas and trying them out. Other approaches include four or five steps. Whilst there are differences, the same principles underpin the problem-solving process. Here we are going to follow a four-step process suggested by Whetten and Cameron (2011). People often jump straight to Step 4 to remove the problem, and

although this might work in some instances, rarely will a truly satisfactory solution be achieved by skipping Steps 1–3. For each step, some characteristics and strategies are suggested with a worked example, based on the thorny issue of a member of a project group not pulling their weight.

1. **Define and describe the problem:** diagnosing the situation so that you can focus on the real issues rather than symptoms.
  - *Approaches:* separate fact from opinion, gather information from all relevant sources, be specific and explicit about the problem to gain a shared understanding, identify the cause or source of the problem.
  - *Example:* a team member [JJ] is not pulling their weight in a group project.
2. **Generate alternative solutions:** holding back decision making until a wide range of alternative solutions have been put forward; there are no daft ideas at this stage.
  - *Approaches:* avoid making instant decisions based on existing knowledge, all people who are involved generate and share ideas without judgement, avoid rejecting ideas, instead build on the ideas of others (see Focus Box 5.3) , identify short- and long-term solutions, specify alternatives that solve the problem as defined. Strategies include brainstorming and mind mapping.
  - *Examples:* talk to supervisor, talk to JJ, ignore the problem, cut JJ from the group, re-allocate workload.
3. **Evaluate and select an alternative:** weighing up the advantages and disadvantages of the proposed solutions before making a final decision.
  - *Approaches:* evaluate all solutions systematically relative to goals and needs, consider possible side effects and focus on identifying the best solution rather than the one(s) that are just good enough. The solution should meet goals, but also consider the individual and group preferences. Strategies include using decision grids and voting.
  - *Example:* remaining group members discuss options; talking to supervisor before talking to JJ doesn't demonstrate problem solving, conversation or leadership skills; removing JJ or re-distributing workload has the consequence of increasing other members' workload. Talking to JJ is the most appropriate short-term solution, talking to the supervisor is the long-term solution if needed.
4. **Implement and follow up on the solution:** being sensitive to stakeholders and aware of the potential for resistance to change, to maximise the likelihood of it being accepted and fully implemented.
  - *Approaches:* consider the timing and timeline for implementation, consider incremental implementation with 'small wins', communicate openly and clearly, create opportunities for feedback, monitor and evaluate short- and long-term effects, and focus evaluation on the original problem rather than happy coincidences.
  - *Example:* Implementation: ask JJ if they are okay, actively listen, talk through the needs of the project, set short-term goals for contribution with clear timeline. Evaluation: have goals been achieved? If yes, all is well, if no, follow up conversation, consider long-term strategy.

## Problem solving in academic work

Applying the above four-step problem-solving process to your academic work, you might re-define the 'problem' as the essay question you have been set or a research question. The potential solutions might be the approaches that you could take to answer that question, the themes you wish to focus on, your hypotheses. The selected approaches will be the result of your planning, research and enquiry, allowing you to compile (implement) those arguments in a persuasive way or design and carry out a research project to test your hypotheses, allowing you to interpret, to draw conclusions and make recommendations.

## Types of problem solving

### Analytical (rational) problem solving

The four-step process described above explains a rational or analytical approach to problem solving, involving a degree of common sense. This is the most commonly applied approach by experienced problem solvers, used on a daily basis by effective managers.

### Creative problem solving

When we think of creativity, we often think of artists, musicians and poets – those who have the ability to express highly original ideas in novel ways. Extending the concept of creativity in the context of employability and problem solving, creative thinking relates to how people approach challenges and potential solutions: their capacity to take information and apply, analyse, evaluate and create in unique ways. You may here see the connections with Bloom's taxonomy – underpinning the creative process therefore is a fundamental need to have a solid level of knowledge and understanding.

Creativity enables us to 'elevate' problem solving to the next level, to see problems in new ways or to identify new possibilities that have the potential to create meaningful change or innovation. A creative idea is one where you sit back and think – 'wow, I wish I'd thought of that'. Consider the humble Post-it note, created for 3M by Dr Spencer Silver whilst researching adhesives in a lab. Creative problem solving 'separates career successes from career failures, heroes from goats, and achievers from derailed executives' (Whetten & Cameron, 2011, p. 174).

To find out more about the invention of the Post-it note, see: [www.3m.co.uk/3M/en\\_GB/post-it-notes/contact-us/about-us/](http://www.3m.co.uk/3M/en_GB/post-it-notes/contact-us/about-us/)

## Process and forms of creative thinking

Whilst creative problem solving may seem like a super-challenging process, Whetten and Cameron (2011) go on to highlight that it is a skill that can be developed; the first step towards developing the skill is to understand the process. They propose four stages:

1. **Preparation:** gathering and examining information, defining the problem, generating potential solutions. In contrast to analytical problem solving, creative problem solvers will engage with this process flexibly, with an open mind.
2. **Incubation:** letting ideas 'percolate', typically an unconscious cognitive process where various concepts are considered and unrelated thoughts may be merged.
3. **Illumination:** the lightbulb moment when an insight is recognised.
4. **Verification:** evaluating the solution for suitability against pre-defined criteria.

Whetten and Cameron (2011) suggest that innovative ideas can emerge at any stage, and they go on to propose a number of different forms of creativity:

- **Imagination:** the creation of unique and radical new ideas, for example Netflix.
  - *qualities:* radical 'outside of the box' thinking, risk taking.
- **Improvement:** developing incrementally better alternatives or additions to existing options, for example the addition of breakout rooms to Microsoft Teams and Zoom.
  - *qualities:* systematic, careful and thorough.
- **Investment:** adopting a competitive approach, working harder and faster to achieve a goal ahead of a competitor. For example, the battle between Apple and Samsung to maintain competitive advantage.
  - *qualities:* goal focused, determined, hardworking, resilient and competitive.
- **Incubation:** where groups or networks of people come together to work collaboratively on a problem. For example, collaborations between pharmaceutical companies and universities in the development of Covid-19 vaccinations.
  - *qualities:* team working, shared values, collective mindset, psychological safety (see Focus Box 5.3).

The approach to creativity will depend on the circumstances, including the resources available, and the urgency and magnitude of the problem or situation.

### Creative problem solving in academic work

In the context of writing an essay, Stage 1 will involve reading and interpreting the question, conducting a literature search and reading to gain knowledge and understanding and to generate ideas. Stage 2 will involve consideration of the literature, comparing and contrasting research, theories and concepts. Stage 3 relates to the moments when you have an epiphany and can suddenly see connection or relationship that had eluded you before. Step 4 will involve some further reading, to test the strength and validity of your argument.

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**FOCUS BOX 5.3**

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### Psychological Safety

The concept of psychological safety is described as 'a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking' (Edmondson, 1999, p. 354), meaning that members feel able to propose ideas, seek feedback or highlight errors without the risk of ridicule or rejection. A body of evidence suggests that psychologically safe teams are better at problem solving and learning, have better wellbeing and perform better than their non-safe counterparts (Edmondson & Lei, 2014).

What does a psychologically safe team look like?

- Body language is relaxed - lots of eye contact, relaxed posture.
- Members feel safe to make spontaneous contributions without fear of ridicule.
- Members feel safe to ask questions and to admit to not understanding something, or to making a mistake.
- There's lots of laughter.
- Members are able to offer ideas and creative suggestions.
- And critically, they feel safe to challenge and to debate others' thoughts and opinions.

Launched in 1998 Google has become well-known for its innovation and creativity. A study conducted by the Google HR team looked at what makes a Google team effective. They conducted over 200 interviews, looking at a wide range of individual and team factors. They found that a number of individual and team characteristics influenced team effectiveness, but the most important, by some distance was psychological safety. To find out more about this research and work that Google has done with psychological safety, see: <https://rework.withgoogle.com/blog/five-keys-to-a-successful-google-team/#>

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### Barriers to creativity

Consider this scenario: you have been set an essay for a compulsory module which is due in two weeks. You read several papers and draft an essay plan, you know what you have to do, but when you start trying to convert the plan into eloquent prose and articulate arguments you get stuck. You sit at your computer with your fingers poised on the keys, but nothing comes. When we take time to reflect on our thoughts, feelings and behaviours we can often identify factors that have affected our ability to pursue our goals and hinder our creativity. Some of these factors are internal to us (e.g. energy, motivation, attitude, abilities) whilst others are external (e.g. time, pressure, resources). Being aware of some of these barriers, particularly those that can be controlled or managed, can help to prevent or reduce creative blocks.

### Pressure

A degree of pressure can kick-start motivation and engagement. Consider, for example, a piece of coursework, you may have had four weeks to work on it, and as the deadline gets closer the increased pressure heightens arousal and can lead to optimal performance; however if you leave it too long and

start working the night before, the level of pressure is likely to impair your performance and induce a sense of stress and anxiety. In the context of creativity, if you are required to be creative, and feel a sense of pressure, a similar result of impaired performance, or idea generation, is likely.

### Conceptual blocks

Creative blocks are mental barriers that affect the way that problems are defined and can prevent our creativity. Conceptual blocks are often personal, implicit and unconscious; for example, our attitudes and perceptions about a person or situation can inhibit our openness to experience, explore and experiment. Equally what we already know about a situation or problem can interfere with our ability to ask the right questions or to see or identify new information.

### Lack of knowledge

We have discussed at length how knowledge underpins critical and analytical thinking; it is noteworthy here as a barrier to creativity, but we do not need to pursue this further.

### Values and motives

Theory and research in the field of human motivation suggests that our best performance, engagement and satisfaction comes from being intrinsically motivated. That is, we are interested in the task or challenge, that we value and have a sense of excitement about the challenge, rather than being motivated by external drivers and pressures, whether they are perceived positively (e.g. a bonus, award or high grade) or negatively (e.g. redundancy, punishment, failure).

## Enhancing creativity

Whilst creative problem solving is challenging, it can be learned and developed. Whetten and Cameron (2011) suggest the following tips:

- **Share ideas:** by working with others to generate ideas and share knowledge we can enhance our knowledge and consider different perspectives.
- **Head-space:** it is important to give yourself time, as creativity cannot be achieved under time pressure. Time spent pondering, considering and reflecting on the information you have gathered can help ideas to germinate.
- **Zen space:** find a space where you can be physically removed from pressure and distraction, again to help create space to reorganise and reconceptualise your thoughts.
- **Read something new:** broaden your knowledge and understanding, to increase the likelihood of being exposed to novel ideas and perspectives.
- **Self-awareness:** take time to understand, to become aware of your own barriers, including challenging your attitudes, considering unconscious bias, and identifying when, where, why and how you are most creative.

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## SELF-REFLECTION POINT 5.8



### My Facilitators and Barriers

Spend a few minutes to think about a time when you developed an innovative or creative solution to a problem and answer the following questions:

- What things help you to be creative?
  - What hindered or stopped your creativity?
    - Were they internal, or external?
  - Are you more inspired or creative when you are alone, or with others?
  - Was any part of the creative process enjoyable or 'fun'?
  - How does pressure affect your creativity?
- 

## COMPUTING SKILLS

This section of the chapter covers skills that are arguably more tangible, easy to identify and rate in terms of your knowledge and skill level. As such this will be one of the shorter sections, but no less important, because computing skills, or IT literacy, are essential for the vast majority of graduate jobs. The skills you will gain at university will be invaluable, providing a real boost to your CV (see also Effective Use of IT in Chapter 3).

Whilst you are at university, you will use a PC or laptop and IT skills to conduct a number of activities through which your IT literacy will develop.

### Accessing resources

Throughout your time at university you will use a range of systems to access and engage with your learning and development, and these might include:

- Virtual learning environments, such as Blackboard, Canvas and Moodle.
- University website, such as study advice, library, disability and wellbeing support, policies and procedures.
- Databases and search engines, such as Web of Science, PsycInfo and Google Scholar.
- External sources of personal and professional learning and development, such as YouTube, LinkedIn Learning, Future Learn.

To start with, these systems can feel overwhelming and complicated, however with time and experience you will gain skills in:



- Searching and navigating resources that are internal and external to the university.
- Evaluating the suitability, relevance and accessibility of material.
- Organising digital resources using appropriate cloud or computer-based filing systems. Any system is only as good as the way in which it is set up and organised; taking time to think through your approach to organising files is time well-spent.

## Conducting research

Research involves the systematic investigation of materials and sources in order to gain knowledge and understanding, to test hypotheses and to answer questions. Throughout your degree you will become increasingly competent in conducting research to produce written work such as essays, case studies and research proposals, and to conduct your own empirical research. The IT skills you will learn and develop through engaging with research include:

- **Searching for information:** using databases and search engines such as Web of Science, PsycInfo and Google Scholar.
- **Brainstorming:** using mind-mapping software, digital whiteboards.
- **Research design:** using power analysis software such as G\*Power.
- **Data collection:** using survey tools such as Microsoft and Google Forms, Qualtrics and Survey Monkey.
- **Quantitative data handling and analysis:** using software such as Microsoft Excel, SPSS and R.
- **Qualitative data handling and analysis:** using audio and video equipment, voice recognition and transcription software, textual analysis software such as NVivo.
- **Referencing:** using software such as EndNote or Mendeley.

## Communicating

We have discussed communication in depth in this chapter, the aim here is not to replicate that information, but to tease out how technology can be used to facilitate, enhance or hinder written and oral communication.

### Written

You will gain skills in a range of different modalities of written communication. Often this will involve word-processing software, such as Microsoft Word; however you are also likely to use discussion forums, online messengers, and blogs as well as email. Each of these modalities will involve an overlapping though distinct set of skills, including:

- **Typing:** speed and accuracy using a physical keyboard and potentially a touch-screen.
- **Word processing** (e.g. Microsoft Word): creating and editing documents, formatting, organising and re-organising information, saving, retrieving and printing files.
- **Email:** composing and editing email content, sending, forwarding replying emails to one or many, using copy and blind copy.

## Email

Although email is a form of written communication, due to its prominence at university and in the workplace it is worthy of a little more attention. Email has the advantage of enabling us to share information quickly with a large number of people who can respond directly to the sender, or to the group. However, with the average worker receiving more than 100 emails per day, it can be difficult to tease apart those that contain important information or action points from those that are less important, completely irrelevant or occasionally harmful or malicious (e.g. scam and phishing email).

Email can often feel unmanageable due to the potentially limitless volume; therefore many professionals have signed up for the email charter: <https://email-charter.github.io/>

See: [www.liverpool.ac.uk/csd/email/effectiveuseofemail/](http://www.liverpool.ac.uk/csd/email/effectiveuseofemail/)

## Netiquette

*Internet etiquette*, or *netiquette*, has become a significant focus of professional communication; in much the same way as there are appropriate and inappropriate ways of behaving in face-to-face communication, the same is true in digital formats, though there are added complexities including the potential anonymity of digital communication and challenges in interpreting information with a lack of visual cues from facial expressions and gestures. Often, organisations (including universities) will have netiquette rules, emphasising standards of behaviour akin to face-to-face interactions, such as respect, courtesy and fairness, but also emphasising the importance of avoiding 'flaming' i.e. if you read something that annoys or offends you, to take time to defuse before sending a speedy reply, which cannot be retracted.

## Oral

We increasingly use IT to enable and enhance face-to-face and online oral communication.

- **Video conferencing:** effectively setting up and running meetings and interviews using platforms such as MS Teams and Zoom, organising breakout groups, monitoring chat functions, sharing materials, muting and unmuting participants, recording and transcribing.
- **Telephone:** using the phone is something that often makes us uncomfortable, but communicating over the phone will be an expectation in the workplace, so gaining experience and exposure in using the phone will be worth it!
- **Podcasting and vlogging:** using audio and video equipment to record audio and video content to share.
- **Visual aids:** using presentation software such as PowerPoint or virtual tools such as Prezi to provide visual aids to add context and impact to presentations.

## Social media and networking

There is a wide array of choice when it comes to social media; we each have our preferences and different methods will serve different purposes. The University of York has an excellent guide to

using social media for sharing information, gathering views and opinions and building a professional network, which describes the most appropriate platform for different purposes.

- **LinkedIn:** a professional networking site that can function as an online CV, but can also be used to build a professional reputation through your connections and people corroborating or 'endorsing' your skills and experience, and for recruitment as many recruitment agencies will search LinkedIn for professionals who demonstrate the skillset a recruiter is looking for. This makes LinkedIn the only platform that you are likely to want potential employers to see.
- **Twitter:** for day-to-day conversation, for highlighting successes and keeping up-to-date with topical information.
- **Facebook:** largely personal for keeping up to date with friends and family. Can be valuable to share information with a large audience, for example to share information and links to online research (once ethical approval has been given).
- **Instagram:** largely a personal platform to share life and interests.

The key always is to remember the reach and longevity of information on social media and check your privacy settings to avoid setting an impression of yourself that you may not want your employer or potential employer to see. Consider for example England Cricketer Ollie Robinson, who was suspended from the England team after it was revealed that he had made some inappropriate tweets over ten years earlier, when he was a teenager.

See: <https://subjectguides.york.ac.uk/skills/social-media>



## SELF-REFLECTION POINT 5.9

### Personal Development Planning - How Tech Savvy are You?

Spend a few minutes thinking about the technology that you have experience in. Write a list of the software and tools that you have used and rate a) how skilled you are, b) how skilled you would like to be by the end of the year on the following scale:

1. I'm not very good at this yet.
2. I'm getting there, but I've got a long way to go.
3. I'm good at this, but I can gain some more advanced skills.
4. I'm very good at this.

Finally give one concrete action point that you could do right now to bridge the gap. Try to make the action point SMART:

- **SPECIFIC:** be clear and focused  
e.g. I will watch a YouTube tutorial on using MS Styles.
- **MEASURABLE:** what does success look like?  
e.g. I will be able to use styles in my next assessment.

- **ACHIEVABLE:** your goal should be challenging, but achievable?  
e.g. My internet works, I have the time and I have enough background knowledge of MS Word.
- **RELEVANT:** be realistic about whether this action point is worthwhile - don't go through the motions to tick a box.  
e.g. I have to complete a project with lots of headings, using Styles will help to create a table of contents.
- **TIME-BOUND:** set a date by which you'll complete your action point, a deadline increases the likelihood of achieving it.  
e.g. I will watch the tutorial after my lecture this afternoon.

Software or digital tool	Your skill level now and at the end of the year		What can you do now to start to bridge the skill gap? Try to give one concrete action
	Now	End of year	
Microsoft Word	2	4	Watch YouTube tutorial on using styles for headings.

## FINAL REFLECTIONS

This chapter has focused on enhancing your understanding of the concept of employability, and identifying the knowledge, skills and abilities that employers of psychology graduates value. By learning about and reflecting on the knowledge, skills and abilities that you are gaining through your degree, you will be more able to confidently articulate these in the context of recruitment. When asked in an interview 'tell me about a time when you have had to manage competing demands' you will be able to relate back to the time management skills you have developed as an independent learner when you have overlapping deadlines. When asked to 'tell me about a time where you've had to solve a problem', you could relate this to the steps of problem solving and consider how you have used these in a group project situation.

By taking what you have learned in this chapter and using it to reflect on what has gone well and not so well, and on your strengths and the areas that need a bit more work, you will become increasingly self-aware. Armed with these metacognitive strategies you will be more inclined to adopt an attitude of life-long and continuous learning, which will put you at a distinct advantage during your degree and beyond, making you stand out from the crowd.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### Employability skills (general)

#### Websites

York University: <https://subjectguides.york.ac.uk/skills>

#### Textbooks

Morgan, P. (2017). *The business student's guide to study and employability* (1st ed.). London: SAGE.

### Presentations

#### Websites

YouTube: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xwa4c6xVpMg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xwa4c6xVpMg)

Mindtools: [www.mindtools.com/pages/article/PresentationNerves.htm](http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/PresentationNerves.htm)

Ted Talks: [www.ted.com/talks](http://www.ted.com/talks)

Amy Cuddy on Body Language: [www.ted.com/talks/amy\\_cuddy\\_your\\_body\\_language\\_may\\_shape\\_who\\_you\\_are?language=en](http://www.ted.com/talks/amy_cuddy_your_body_language_may_shape_who_you_are?language=en)

### Team working

#### Websites

Belbin Team Roles: [www.belbin.com/about/belbin-team-roles](http://www.belbin.com/about/belbin-team-roles)

University of Birmingham: [www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/metallurgy-materials/about/cases/group-work/index.aspx](http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/metallurgy-materials/about/cases/group-work/index.aspx)

### Leading others

#### Websites

Harvard Business School ebook: <https://info.online.hbs.edu/leadership-ebook>

### Effective communication

#### Websites

DoE recommended free course: [www.futurelearn.com/courses/communication-and-interpersonal-skills-at-work](http://www.futurelearn.com/courses/communication-and-interpersonal-skills-at-work)

Harvard Business Review: <https://hbr.org/2015/01/how-to-handle-difficult-conversations-at-work>

York University: <https://subjectguides.york.ac.uk/skills/conversations>

YouTube: [www.youtube.com/channel/UC\\_7\\_HF34CiAthRTH9yYgVBA](http://www.youtube.com/channel/UC_7_HF34CiAthRTH9yYgVBA)

## Critical thinking

### Textbooks

Chatfield, T. (2017). *Critical thinking* (1st ed.). London: SAGE.

## Problem solving and creativity

### Websites

Manchester University: [www.careers.manchester.ac.uk/findjobs/skills/problemsolving/](http://www.careers.manchester.ac.uk/findjobs/skills/problemsolving/)

Brainstorm like a Googler: [www.fastcompany.com/3061059/how-to-brainstorm-like-a-googler](http://www.fastcompany.com/3061059/how-to-brainstorm-like-a-googler)

YouTube: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=U2MCAEotzm4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U2MCAEotzm4)

Post-it: [www.3m.co.uk/3M/en\\_GB/post-it-notes/contact-us/about-us/](http://www.3m.co.uk/3M/en_GB/post-it-notes/contact-us/about-us/)

## Computing skills

### Websites

YouTube Tutorials: YouTube Technology for Teachers and Students: [www.youtube.com/channel/UCYUPLUCKMiUgiyVuluCc7tQ](http://www.youtube.com/channel/UCYUPLUCKMiUgiyVuluCc7tQ)

Liverpool University (effective use of email): [www.liverpool.ac.uk/csd/email/effectiveuseofemail/](http://www.liverpool.ac.uk/csd/email/effectiveuseofemail/)

York University (use of social media): <https://subjectguides.york.ac.uk/skills/social-media>

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