

 **SAGE Study Skills**

The Good Writing Guide for Education Students

4th Edition

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Reading Widely

Introduction

The single most important thing that you can do to learn more and to improve the chances of success on your course is to read widely. In order to help you to do that, this chapter gives guidance on the qualities of the different kinds of texts that you will read and explains why some are likely to help more than others. The important concept of **peer review** is introduced in relation to internet texts, academic journals and books.

Key Topics

- How to get started with reading
- How to identify useful academic literature
- How to refer to media articles

You may have heard stories about people with no previous experience suddenly writing a bestseller. One day they sit down and, without planning, write for about six weeks solid, until a book is complete. With very little effort, they become rich beyond their wildest dreams. Do not believe these stories! When you look into the background of any successful writer, there is a history of writing experience behind them. It may be that they kept a diary, or perhaps they wrote a travel journal for each holiday, or edited a school fanzine. Many writers begin with a lot of hard work getting one short story published in a magazine; some writers have experience as a journalist, a teacher, an academic or some other job that requires regular writing. Whatever their background, all professional



writers succeed by very determined hard work, the ability to learn from their failures and the understanding that becoming a good writer takes time.

Thankfully, you do not have to become a professional writer in order to succeed on your course, however there are lessons that can be learned from these people. What all writers have in common is that they have practised the craft of writing. But just as important, they have read widely the kinds of texts that they intend to write. This shows us that if you want to write brilliant assignments, you need to read similar texts. Examples from previous years' students can be helpful but in particular you should read academic publications written by experts in your subject. This is the kind of writing that is the best model for your own.

As a student on a course, you read for four main reasons:

1. You read to learn more about your subject, sometimes called the **field**.
2. Texts contain the knowledge that you need as part of your course.
3. Texts give clues that can help you in your writing.
4. Wide reading results in greater success on your course.

The second and fourth points are related. Any formal course assessment is designed to assess the level of your understanding of a particular topic. The knowledge required for the highest levels of understanding is contained in published texts. Therefore, you have to read these texts and show that you have fully understood them to achieve the highest marks.

However, we want to emphasise the third point: you must learn to read like a writer. After you have read a text to understand more about your subject, read it again in a different way. Read it with questions like these in mind:

- Who is the writer's main audience?
- What issues has the writer chosen to cover?
- How does the writer organise the text?
- How do they use **subheadings**?
- What particular words and phrases do they use?
- How do they refer to other people's work?
- How do they build an argument?
- What makes the first **sentence**/first paragraph effective?
- How do they end the text?
- What kinds of texts are listed in the **reference list**; which ones shall I read next?

Top Tip

Your understanding will be stronger if you read texts first hand for yourself (the **primary source**) rather than if you read another text (a **secondary source**) describing the primary source.

The relevance of wide reading to essays and other academic assignments is perhaps more obvious than to assignments that focus on practical teaching and evaluation. You might question how wide reading improves these teaching evaluations. Your own views and reflections on your practical work are important, but you also need to challenge your opinions by comparing them with the opinions of others. Often, people who publish texts about education have taught for many years in a variety of settings so they are likely to have more experience to draw on than you. This means that they often understand the issues in greater depth. When you read and understand their work, you can benefit from their knowledge and will subsequently understand the subject in greater depth yourself.

Where to start your reading

A tutor's reading list is a very useful place to start. If the list is good, it will be up to date and will recommend key texts that are at the appropriate level for you. Many universities make these available digitally as ebooks or as links to **papers** online. Although your tutor will recommend specific texts, the authors of these are likely to have published other texts that might be useful and this can provide a place to start your wider reading. You can do a library **search** under the author's name (see Chapter 2) to find other things that they have published. Another option, apart from books and papers, is searching online. But before you decide which kind of text to read, you need to understand about the qualities of different texts.

Key Fact

A paper is an article published in an academic journal. Academic journals are scholarly publications focusing on a particular field or area of study, published on a regular basis (e.g. monthly, quarterly). Some papers are presented at academic conferences prior to publication.

The internet is a vast information resource which features the whole range of texts, including texts that are offensive, texts that are inaccurate, and other texts with a very high level of accurate and useful information. The main weakness of the internet is that it is much easier to publish a web page without having to go through a process which evaluates its quality. The process that many academic publications go through to ensure accuracy and quality is called peer review. For example, if an article is submitted to a journal that is peer-reviewed the article will first be briefly assessed by

the editor. Then, if generally suitable for the journal, it will be sent to two or more experts in the field who will read the article and write a report, indicating if they think it is good enough to be published. The editor or editors will then decide on the basis of the reports whether to publish. Ideally, this process should be “blind”: in other words, the referees should not know who has written the paper (some journals even require references to the authors’ own work in the reference list to be disguised or removed).

Key Fact

Peer review is a process which involves experts evaluating documents such as journal articles to ensure that they are accurate, original and significant, and therefore worthy of publication.

The information available on the internet can be particularly useful when you are in the early stages of thinking about a topic. But even at this stage it is important that you are selective about the sites that you use. You need to find sites that are authoritative and trustworthy. Here is a list of the kinds of sites you might come across and some ways that you need to think about them:

- A site published by a single author. This might be the site of someone who is an enthusiast about the topic, and it can be fascinating and full of useful information. The problem is that there is no way of knowing how good the information is.
- A government site. This kind of site is very helpful when gathering information about current initiatives. The information about the government’s own initiatives is likely to be accurate. Government sites very rarely feature criticisms of the government’s own policies so you need other sources in order to develop your critical thinking about them.
- An independent organisation site. This can be very useful to compare with information on government sites. It is important that you find out what the organisation’s purposes are because this will affect the information that they offer and the way they interpret this.
- Sites which summarise topics and provide links to other sites. These can be very useful but the quality of information varies. Wikipedia is fascinating in this regard. Wikipedia does have a peer-review process (anyone in the world!) but you don’t know the expertise of the people doing the reviewing.
- Newspapers and other media sites. These are particularly valuable if the topic of your writing is the media itself or a contemporary issue which is the subject of popular debate. Reporting of research by media sites can be inaccurate and misleading so should be used to take you to original research reports rather than as a **citation**.

The *Times Educational Supplement (TES)*, which can be found online, is a good example of a potentially useful site. The *TES* website is a summary of current news in education and allows you to search for past articles. Let's say that you have been asked to carry out an assignment with the topic of assessment. On 5 July 2016, *TES* published an article about the government's assessment results which appears to show that only 53 per cent of pupils attained expected standards in Key Stage 2 tests. The *TES* article is helpful because it reports on the published test results and contextualises them with information about recent changes to the assessment system. The article makes the important point that the new tests appear to be much tougher, making it harder for children to achieve the "expected standards" rather than necessarily showing a fall in achievement. Although this news article has some useful information, it is still not as rigorous or reliable as a good academic journal article (as you will see in the section below on journals).

Top Tip

Make sure you know the right way to refer to media articles:

Inappropriate: "Learner (2011) shows that middle-class parents are anxious about young children using technology." *While this may or may not be true, the citation is to a journalist who wrote a newspaper article, not a researcher who has published evidence on the issue.*

Appropriate: "The issue of parent anxiety towards young children using technology has been highlighted in the press in a recent *Guardian* newspaper article (Learner, 2011)." *This comments on the way the newspaper covered the issue rather than using the newspaper as an authoritative source to support a point.*

Journals

Let's look at our topic of assessment from the perspective of a good research journal. Peter Tymms asked the question, "Are standards rising in English primary schools?" and published the answer to this question in an article in the highly regarded *British Educational Research Journal*. He concluded that independent measures showed that the gains in statutory test results (often called SATs) between 1995 and 2000 were not nearly as strong as some people were claiming (including the government) and that after 2000 there was no further progress (Tymms, 2004). The reason that you can have a higher level of confidence that this information is trustworthy is that the

whole article went through the peer-review process. Another indicator of the quality of this particular article is the way that the author draws upon a range of objective sources of evidence, such as the results from standardised tests of reading, writing and mathematics, as part of the argument.

But how do we know that the *British Educational Research Journal* is a good journal? In the past, we would only know this primarily by making a judgement about the quality of its articles over time. The people on the journal's editorial board, who are usually listed at the front or end of the journal, are also an important indicator of the quality. Another indicator is that journals that are international in character normally have a high level of writing. But how do you know if a journal is international? In recent years, another indicator of journal quality has become more prominent. There are now companies who monitor the number of times that people refer to different articles (these are called citations – see Chapter 7). Calculations are then made about the rank order of journals in terms of the number of citations that have been made to the articles in them: the rank order is published in reports. Here is a list of some of the journals in the UK that usually feature in the reports:

- *Teaching and Teacher Education*
- *British Educational Research Journal*
- *British Journal of the Sociology of Education*
- *British Journal of Educational Technology*
- *Gender and Education*
- *Educational Research (UK)*
- *Journal of Curriculum Studies*
- *Oxford Review of Education*
- *Educational Studies*
- *British Journal of Educational Studies*

As with all league tables, things are not quite as simple as the list implies. In fact, there are various complications that have to be considered.

The list above reflects journals based in the UK in order of the total number of citations. But there are other categories that can be used to sort the journals, such as impact factor, which is the average number of times articles from the journal published in the past two years have been cited in the year of the journal citation report. Another problem is that some subject journals, such as for drama, are not featured in the list. Journals about the teaching and learning of reading, writing, mathematics and science are included because so many people are researching those areas. Even if a journal has a higher number of citations than another journal in the list, it may not be included if that field of study is judged by the company who publishes the

reports to be well represented. And the final issue is that there tend to be a lot of American journals. In part, this is because there are many excellent American journals but it is also because America has large numbers of researchers who are likely to know their own journals better than others. Partly as a result of these and other issues, different kinds of lists have been developed, for example Scopus (www.info.sciverse.com/scopus/access). These kinds of lists are one possible source to help you decide which are the better journals when trying to decide which reading to prioritise.

Reading and citing the most appropriate journal articles is useful at all stages of higher education but is particularly important at master's degree level and beyond. However, although the *British Educational Research Journal* is excellent, it is unlikely to be the place where you will start your reading because the articles are written at the level of professional researchers and academics. Peer-reviewed journals differ in the level of writing and the nature of their peer-review procedures. For example, the journal *Education 3–13* is also peer-reviewed, but not in the same way that the *British Educational Research Journal* is. It also tends to cover more professional topics and is written in a way that you will probably find easier to read in the early stages of your course.

Books

The better journals explain the way that they peer-review articles as part of their “information for contributors”, and this is how we know that they are peer-reviewed. For books, things are a little more complicated. Most education publishers require authors to prepare a proposal for a book (and often a sample chapter) which is then sent to referees. The proposal is sent, not the complete text of the book. This means that what the author writes in the book, if it is published, may not be peer-reviewed. Some publishers do send complete texts to be peer-reviewed and the author then has to respond to any suggested changes. But it is very difficult for you to know which publishers are the most rigorous. In addition to academic peer-reviewers, publishers of books also use likely readers of the book as peer-reviewers, such as teachers. Professionals bring a different kind of review that in general will focus more on the relevance of the book to professional practice.

Books can be very useful because they give the author space to cover a wider range of topics in great depth. This means that a really good recently published book can give you a very good overview of the field and an up-to-date reference list. This can be a very useful starting point for your reading, although locating such a book is not always easy.

Key Fact

A field is an area of study.

The word **handbook** when used as part of the title for an academic book can be important. The word has a different meaning from the everyday idea of a handy book. A really good academic handbook is typically international in scope so it will have contributors from around the world who are experts in the field. It also attempts to be comprehensive in order to establish a clear picture of the field at a particular moment in time. These books are usually edited collections, meaning that an editor or editors will have invited contributors to send in a chapter. The editors will then offer comments about the chapter to encourage the contributor to improve it and to ensure it fits well with the aims of the book. The editors and the contributors will already have a track record in the field and will usually have published widely so you can have more confidence that this kind of book is academically rigorous.

Top Tip

Work towards using high quality journal articles in addition to books to support the points in your assignments.

If you find that some articles and books seem to be very difficult to understand at first, don't worry. Part of the process of learning is the growing ability to cope with more and more demanding texts. When Dominic started work on his master's degree he was advised to read research methodology articles. At first, it was as if some of the articles were written in a completely different language because they seemed very difficult to understand. In a way, you could say that they *are* written in a different language. The highest levels of writing in a subject use short key phrases to summarise complex ideas. The writers assume that their audience has knowledge of the field and so will not need certain things explained. In other words, all subjects have **jargon**. When you see the word "jargon", you probably think about it negatively as something that people use just to sound good. It is true that jargon can be used sloppily. But when used well, it saves writers having to explain particular concepts in full and at length.

The final distinction to understand is the difference between texts which give guidance about practice and those which are more theoretical and include research findings. The practical books will be useful if your assignment expects you to show that you can think clearly about your practice. The more theoretical books can be used as a citation (see Chapter 7) to support your academic arguments in an assignment. Some books are very good at mixing **theory**, research and practice, although these are less common. Typically, you will find that in education assignments you need to use a mixture of theoretical and practical sources.

Dos and Don'ts

Do

- read texts yourself first hand rather than relying on secondary sources
- use the internet in the early stages of an assignment to help you get to grips with the main issues
- read recently published texts before you move to older texts.

Don't

- use newspaper articles to academically support the points that you are making in an assignment
- leave your reading until the last minute
- rely too heavily on one text.

Activity

To get started with reading widely:

1. Identify a text from the reading list for your course, or a text that is central to your field.
2. Read the text thoroughly, then look at the references and make a note of the most relevant, recent texts which relate to your topic.
3. Choose one of these texts to read, then make a note of their most useful references. Keep repeating this process to develop your understanding of the topic further.

Ask yourself: Which authors are writing about which aspects of the field? Which authors seem to be most respected and widely referenced? Which do you find most interesting?