How to Succeed at Master’s Study

1. Transition to master’s study

Master’s students are diverse
Master’s students are a diverse group, even more diverse than undergraduates. As the students are diverse, their expectations are diverse too. In writing this helpsheet, we’ve tried to cover some of the main issues that new master’s students may raise, but some of it might not be useful to your particular situation. Be selective in what you choose to read – making best use of your time is one of the key skills you’ll need to develop as you go through your master’s course.

How is being a master’s student different?
As a master’s student, you’re playing the same game as an undergraduate but you’re expected to be a more skilful player.

We’re going to start with a football comparison. Whether you’re the world’s best footballer or a beginner, you will have some important similarities.
- You will have the same aim of wanting to help your team to win a match by scoring goals and preventing goals from being conceded.
- You will follow the same rules of the game, being allowed to kick, head but not handle the ball.
- You need the same basic skills – to be able to pass, dribble past players, tackle and shoot.

This similarity across people at different levels occurs in higher education too, whether you’re an undergraduate or a PhD student.
- You have the same aim of answering questions or discussing a topic in an in-depth way.
- You follow the same rules for example in referencing and in writing in a formal academic style. You need the same skills in working independently, researching a topic, then making a case using critical analysis of the evidence you’ve found.

The fact that the aims, rules and basic skills are the same, and that the same language is used to describe them can lead you to think that you’ve heard this advice before. In one sense, yes you have. But in another sense, as a master’s student, you’re facing quite a different situation. The way a beginner plays football is nothing like the way a top professional plays football – they just don’t have the same control or speed. They can’t yet use their skills in the same instinctive way. The training for a professional footballer would be very different from a beginner’s training with more time on advanced skills, and less on basic level fitness. Anyone watching a
beginner play would judge him much less harshly than they would a professional footballer.

Now as a master’s student, you’re not trying to be the world’s best footballer – that’s more the role of a research professor – neither are you just a beginner, but you will be studying at a higher level than you did as an undergraduate, and so you will be expected to show more skills.

You need to show more speed, more control and be more instinctive
What does this mean in practice?
• More speed – your course may be at a faster pace than you’ve previously experienced as your lecturers will expect you to have an understanding of study skills. You’ll need to hit the ground running, getting off to a quick start. You won’t have as much time to go over materials.
• More control – your lecturers will not expect you to make basic grammatical or referencing errors. Your writing should be concise and should say what you want it to say.
• More instinctive - being critical is more like a way of being.

Your challenges will be different depending on your past experience
As each master’s student is different, your challenges will be different from anyone else’s, and can be affected by a number of factors.

How well do you know the subject of your master’s degree?
If it is the same subject as your undergraduate, you will probably have a firm foundation, but if you are transferring from another subject, or you’re coming directly into a masters, you’ll need to learn a lot about your new discipline. This may include the philosophy underpinning your new subject or the most important thinkers in this area. Threshold concepts are key principles or ideas that you have to understand before you can move forward. It’s worth thinking what they are in your studies. If you feel your background knowledge or experience is weak in a certain area your lecturers may be able to suggest solutions.

How recent was your undergraduate degree?
If your undergraduate degree was very recent, you’ll be accustomed to current UK higher education practice such as the use of evidence to support ideas. You might also have a similar home background and have found ways of managing your commitments. But if your undergraduate degree was several years ago, you may now have additional responsibilities. How will you create a good work/life balance?

How similar is the institution where you previously studied to Teesside?
You may have studied at Teesside before, but if not, how similar was your previous university? Are there any differences in the assessment practices? Don’t assume because things worked in one way in your previous institution, they’ll be the same
here. For example, you might find that there is not as much use of exams. If you’re not from the UK, you will have additional challenges of speaking in a different language and becoming accustomed to a very different culture. You might need to make sure that you’re not working under incorrect assumptions.

**How successful were you as an undergraduate?**
You must have been successful to get on your master’s course? But did you sail through all your assignments or were there parts that felt as though you’d scraped through? Were there some types of assignments that weren’t as successful? Or repeated feedback that you didn’t ever really resolve? Now is a good opportunity for you to fill in any gaps.

**How willing are you to be a novice again?**
It can be very difficult to let go of your sense of self as an expert, and be willing to start afresh in something new. This feeling can be particularly difficult if you have worked your way up to a position of responsibility at work. You may be used to people asking you for advice, not having to ask others yourself.

**It’s easy to feel like an imposter**
Imposter syndrome is a term coined in 1978 by psychologists, Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes. It refers to a psychological phenomenon, common among high achievers, of having a feeling of intellectual fraudulence. This can lead you to believing that you don’t really belong at university and there was some mistake in admitting you on to the course. Imposter syndrome can hit people at different stages. For some students, it’s going to university at all. For some, it’s studying at PhD level. But for many students, this can affect you at master’s level – a feeling that you’re not up to this. As master’s students have such varied experiences, this gives even more scope for believing ‘I’m not like him/her, therefore I’m not as good as him/her’. This is an attitude that you need to overcome.

**Take control**
You need to take control of any challenges that are concerning you. One of the aspects of being a master’s student is becoming a reflective practitioner. If you are anxious about your studies, step back, look at yourself from a distance and consider what it is that is concerning you – it might be that you need to develop an understanding of the basics of your new subject area, or better time management skills because of responsibilities which you didn’t have when you were an undergraduate student. It could be that it seems so long since you studied that you feel as though you remember nothing. Be honest with yourself. Just because you are a postgraduate, don’t be afraid to go back to basics for any areas that concern you.

**Where to start? Find out what your course includes**
At this point, you might feel that you don’t know what you need for your master’s course, so you can’t say what you lack. Where should you start? Go to your list of modules, which should be available online via Blackboard or an alternative VLE. Read
the module handbook for each module. Note the assessment tasks for each of the modules. Check that you understand what they’re talking about. Record the deadlines so that you can begin to plan your time.

Create a sense of belonging and engagement
New undergraduate students typically will feel part of the university by making friends with their fellow students, perhaps living with people who are also studying here, or by joining university clubs and societies. You might not be interested in creating such a social life at Teesside. As a postgraduate, it’s possible feel that you have all the bad bits of being a student (the assessments!) but none of the benefits. You might not even feel like a student at all. This attitude could quickly become dispiriting.

So how will you create a sense of belonging for your new life as a student? It might be that you can set aside a study area in your home that’s designed for you to work at. Or you can make use of the postgraduate lounge in the library. Is there a specific time in the week that will be your student time? Do you have student clothing that you could wear to signal that you’re now thinking about your studies? Could you meet up with a small number of people on your course? It might be that you need to keep in focus your motivation for completing the course.

2. Independent learning

You need to plan your time to become a successful independent learner
The first aspect of independent learning relates to being able to manage your time and motivate yourself. We’ve already talked about creating a sense of belonging for motivation and having a list of your assessment deadlines. The next stage is to create a plan for how to spend your time. Each assessment will be made up of different stages. For example, for each written assessment, you need to allow time to carry out research, to draft your content, to edit and review your content then finally to proof-read. How long each stage takes will vary, both depending on the nature of the topic and how quickly you work. Your plan should also include time to address some of the concerns that you’ve already identified.

You need to set aside time to review lecture notes and carry out any pre-reading for seminars. If the subject area of your degree is new to you, you may need to set aside quite a lot of time for background reading. It’s also important to leave some flexibility in case your situation changes.

What you use for your plan will also depend on how best you work – do you prefer to use a paper or electronic calendar? Do you want to use a wallchart? How are you going to integrate the rest of your responsibilities with your study tasks?

You need to manage your study time well
It’s not enough to plan the study time – you actually need to make good use of it too.
The Pomodoro study technique recommends that you allow 25 minutes to work on an activity, then 5 minutes to mark how far you’ve got and for a break. After four Pomodoros (2 hours), you can allow yourself a longer break of up to 30 minutes. You might therefore find it helpful to plan your study in 30 minute segments.

You can gain a competitive edge by making small improvements
Kaizen is a Japanese approach to business which is focused on continual improvement. You can adapt this for your study habits too – perhaps by fitting in time for reflection into your plan. Think about what has been working well for you and where you could improve. Are there areas on your study plan that are taking less or more time than you expected? Are there small efficiencies you could make which might seem insignificant in themselves but which could make a difference over time.

One of the ideas behind Kaizen is that it enables you to feel confident about change, which should make it easier for you as you work through your fast-paced course. When Kaizen is used in business, it also includes the philosophy that all employees are actively engaged in improving the company. You can discuss your improvement suggestions with the rest of your family too – are there changes that other people could make that would help your household to run more smoothly?

Learning from your peers
Master’s courses may be more specialised and interdisciplinary than undergraduate programmes. They may be linked more closely to a specific profession. This means they can attract students from a variety of study backgrounds. This can give you an excellent opportunity to learn from peers with different perspectives. Your lecturers will want to encourage you to share your knowledge and to develop your own thoughts so there may be a greater emphasis on your participation in discussions as part of your course.

You need to be ready to develop your own ideas
As a master’s student you’ll probably find that you have more freedom to decide what study areas to focus on than you did as an undergraduate. You may find that the criteria for assignments are less prescriptive, and you’ll be able to choose your own questions and be asked to find your own answers. Your assignments may relate to your professional practice, which will be different from anyone else’s.

Initially, this freedom can be unsettling, especially if you’ve come from a subject area that had clearly correct answers. But as you adjust to the freedom, you may find this one of the more rewarding aspects of your master’s study, as you can spend time concentrating on topics that are relevant to you.

As you think about your assignments, you will be expected to work on topics that you are unsure of, and fill in any missing information yourself. You’ll need to link together a number of different ideas to form a bigger picture and to arrive at solutions for
yourself. This means that you’ll need to develop skills both in literature searching and in critical thinking and writing.

**Literature searching**

At postgraduate level, your thinking needs to be based on a wide range of in-depth and advanced knowledge. You will find this knowledge primarily by looking for research in journal articles, conference papers, professional guidelines and perhaps academic textbooks. Try to avoid websites, particularly those aimed at the general public. They won’t go into the depth that you need. Journal articles and conference papers will give you the latest thinking and research in your subject area.

Use the Discovery tool on the Library homepage as a starting point, but remember that it has some limitations. Not all of the research that we buy is available via Discovery, and you can’t build up such sophisticated searches as you can in other sources. You may need to search individual, more specialist databases as well. To find the most appropriate databases check the subject libguide for your subject area. (see [http://libguides.tees.ac.uk/subject_libguides](http://libguides.tees.ac.uk/subject_libguides))

For more help with literature searching, contact the academic librarian for your school. Their details are on your subject libguide.

**3. Critical thinking and writing**

**Critical thinking**

Critical thinking means adopting a questioning attitude. It involves standing back, viewing a situation from a distance. This examination should not just be a criticism but instead consider both strengths and weaknesses, as well as why certain features are important. You will need to show an awareness that there isn’t necessarily a straightforward answer to your questions. You will be expected to discuss complex issues in a systematic, even-handed way. This thinking may then lead to you challenging established practices and looking creatively for new ideas.

Critical thinking is a key concept within higher education. It is important at undergraduate level, but it is fundamental to your approach as a master’s student. Critical thinking needs to be based on appropriate evidence.

**Critical appraisal**

Critical appraisal relates to evaluating the quality of the evidence that you find, as well as its relevance to your particular situation. Although you will have weighed up evidence as an undergraduate, you are likely to be expected to approach your appraisal in a more systematic, in-depth way as a postgraduate. You can use tools or checklists to help you to do this. Evidence can come from different types of sources including systematic reviews, randomised controlled trials, cohort studies, expert opinions, and qualitative research studies. Therefore, it’s preferable to use a tool that is specific to the type of evidence you’re appraising. CASP produce a range of different checklists (see [https://casp-uk.net/casp-tools-checklists/](https://casp-uk.net/casp-tools-checklists/)). SoHSC students
use specific frameworks for quantitative and qualitative research which are included on [http://libguides.tees.ac.uk/critical_appraisal](http://libguides.tees.ac.uk/critical_appraisal). Alternatively, you may create or adapt your own checklist. Questions can include: author’s credentials, currency of research, quality of the publication, any bias in the author’s approach, the suitability of the research design, for example the sample and method chosen, the logic of any conclusions.

**Critical writing**

Once you have thought about your topic in a critical way and appraised your evidence, you need to make your case in your writing. You need to ensure that you are making a single point in each paragraph, and that you provide a conclusion for each point, showing that you understand the implications of your discussion.

An introduction to critical writing is available at [http://libguides.tees.ac.uk/critical_writing](http://libguides.tees.ac.uk/critical_writing).

For help with your writing, you can make an appointment with one of the Learning Advisors: [http://libguides.tees.ac.uk/tutorials/literature](http://libguides.tees.ac.uk/tutorials/literature).

**Academic writing**

As well as writing in a critical way, your writing needs to follow an appropriate academic writing style, without grammatical errors. Academic writing should be measured. By this, we mean that it’s cautious, emotionally neutral and formal – written in the third person and in full sentences, without slang or colloquialisms. Advice on being measured in your writing is available at [http://libguides.tees.ac.uk/academic_writing](http://libguides.tees.ac.uk/academic_writing).

This page also includes links to other guides to develop your writing, as well as a list of ‘how to’ helpsheets on aspects such as being concise, improving your spelling and proofreading.

**Referencing**

Referencing is a key academic skill, and encompasses in-text citations, paraphrasing from your sources and creating a list of references for each assignment. You will probably be confident with how to approach this from your undergraduate study, but if you want to refresh knowledge, help is available from [http://libguides.tees.ac.uk/referencing](http://libguides.tees.ac.uk/referencing).

You may well be managing more references than you did as an undergraduate, so you may find a reference management tool such as RefWorks or Endnote helpful – see the guide on reference management - [http://libguides.tees.ac.uk/referencemanagement](http://libguides.tees.ac.uk/referencemanagement).

**Reflective practice**

As a master’s student, you are expected to be able to reflect on your progress. If your degree is preparing you for a role within a profession, this reflection should include an
awareness of issues within current practice, as well as your responsibility to work within the guidelines of your professional body. These guidelines will include ethics and practising with integrity. You are likely to be asked to reflect on the challenges of operating according to those guidelines within the real world and the difficulties of making decisions in complex situations.

Many postgraduate courses are aimed at preparing you for a leadership role, so you may be asked to reflect on your personality type, your strengths and weaknesses and your values.

As an important part of reflection is thinking about the future, you may be required to consider your continuing professional development needs once you go into your chosen career.

You may find it helpful to use models such as Gibbs’ to guide your reflection. An introduction to reflective writing is available from http://libguides.tees.ac.uk/reflective

You will gain confidence as an independent researcher
Independent research is an important aspect of postgraduate study. At this point in your academic career, you will be expected to go beyond merely consuming knowledge, and start contributing to the understanding of the subject yourself. This may be as a result of individual or group research throughout your course. It may also involve playing a larger role in your research community, perhaps by attending research conferences. However, your independent research is likely to culminate in your master’s dissertation.

Your dissertation
The actual format of your dissertation will vary according to your subject. Make sure that you check the exact requirements, and don’t assume that they will be similar to your undergraduate dissertation or project. If you are uncertain what to research, your lecturers may suggest research projects or help you to identify suitable work-based projects.

Guidance is available from Student and Library Services on many parts of the dissertation including writing a literature review and getting started – see http://libguides.tees.ac.uk/dissertation_getting_started

We also subscribe to Sage Research Methods (http://ezproxy.tees.ac.uk/login?url=http://srmo.sagepub.com/) which includes resources for questions related to research methods and statistics.

For more help with literature searching, contact the academic librarian for your school. For help with writing your dissertation, you can make an appointment with one of the Learning Advisors.
Where to get help

- For help with academic writing, you can make an appointment with one of the learning advisors: [http://libguides.tees.ac.uk/tutorials/literature](http://libguides.tees.ac.uk/tutorials/literature)
- For help with finding research for your subject, you can make an appointment with one of the librarians for your school: [http://libguides.tees.ac.uk/lrs/tutorials](http://libguides.tees.ac.uk/lrs/tutorials)
- The library has a number of workshops and online tutorials that may help. Some of them are aimed at undergraduates, but they may still be helpful at postgraduate level: [http://libguides.tees.ac.uk/workshops](http://libguides.tees.ac.uk/workshops)
- See also a range of ‘how to’ resources on the Learning Hub web pages: [http://libguides.tees.ac.uk/learning_hub/resources](http://libguides.tees.ac.uk/learning_hub/resources)

If you’d like more guidance on any other aspects of master’s study, let us know – we want to revise our guidance to make it as helpful as possible.

Useful books


