

## ***Approaching Assignments: A Recipe for Reflection.***

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### **Abstract.**

This paper is intended to share my voice with postgraduate learners, in particular, offering a structured approach to assignments after reflecting on my experience as both learner and educator. Recognising the complexity of writing assignments was a lightbulb moment for me – describing what I read within the context of the brief was insufficient, immersing in critical thinking, I learned, is the sine qua non of assignment writing. Postgraduate learners returning to education after many years in the workplace can experience apprehension when approaching academic assignments as they juggle career, family, coursework and the need to engage in assignment writing. In essence, this paper is a catalyst for novice postgraduate learners, in particular, to experiment with a structured approach to writing assignments while encouraging the development of critical thinking, reading and writing skills.

This paper endeavours to enlarge the aperture for approaching assignments by offering a ten-step process for consideration by learners. In my experience as both learner and educator, developing the ability to demonstrate these skills is an ongoing journey of learning which takes time, patience and commitment to reflecting on feedback. Adopting a structured approach, with some key steps and ingredients, as advocated in this paper, is one way to initiate and cultivate the process of assignment writing thus developing the writer's voice.

**Keywords:** Academic writing; Assessment; Reflective Practice.

## **1. Introduction.**

The nature of this paper is reflective and aims to engage learners (in particular those returning to studies after many years in the workplace) in a call to action to experiment with a ten-step approach to assignments. While this paper reflects on critical thinking and a variety of templates to use when approaching assignments, I would direct learners to Cottrell's (2011) *Critical Thinking Skills*, which includes an abundance of activities to further develop effective analysis and argument, as the title suggests.

The process of writing for academic assignments is a complex practice, demanding the learner to acquire critical thinking skills to explore relevant literature and research while demonstrating their voice through synthesis of this knowledge and learning. Postgraduate learners returning

to education after many years in the workplace can experience apprehension as they juggle career, family, coursework and other aspects of their lives. The arrival of assignments can feed this apprehension as the undergraduate assignment writing skills may not have had an opportunity to grow and develop in the intervening years. As seasoned educators, one can forget the experience of some postgraduate learners challenged to reengage with this activity.

Murray and Moore (2006) argue that the many iterations, the “imperfections, discoveries and serendipitous loops” (p.5), along the journey to a completed paper are opportunities for learning. This paper offers a recipe for this journey drawn from experience as both a learner and an educator, emphasising the role of a structured approach aligned with a critical thinking mindset. The practical steps (see Table 1) are intended to be a catalyst for learners to get started on an assignment, overcome procrastination (Boice, 1996), gain momentum and ultimately experience the concept of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 2009) in writing. Aligned with this process is some guidance on developing the skills of critical thinking, a key foundation for postgraduate learners, to enhance ‘critical consciousness’ (de Brun, 2019). This shift to analysing, evaluating and synthesising reading material while, in parallel, developing and contributing one’s own voice takes a level of self-awareness, commitment and practice – a continuous learning journey, in this author’s experience.

## **2. Assignment Ingredients: A 10-Step Process.**

Similar to preparing a meal, there are many ingredients to approaching an assignment – the quality of the end product is determined by the attention, level of effort, skill and knowledge applied to the task at hand. For example, when preparing a Thai green curry (a personal favourite), there are many recipes to follow, however the cook must choose one, or, if skilled, draw on a variety of recipes. This paper sets out one such recipe for approaching assignments – a 10-step process to facilitate the construction of an engaging paper, just as following a recipe enables the creation of a wonderful dish. As reflected in Maguire and Delahunt’s (2017) review of Braun and Clarke’s (2006) framework for thematic analysis, these steps are not intended to be linear, rather the learner can move back and forth many times, reflecting on and re-evaluating what has been written, before submitting assignment. Flexibility, adaptability and confidence in moving through different steps will develop with practice, similar to trying out and perfecting a new recipe! Table 1 sets out a 10-step process to support novices, in particular, as they embark

on an assignment:

**Table 1: The 10-Step Process.**

<b>Step</b>	<b>Descriptor</b>
Step 1	Read and re read the assignment brief. Highlight the key themes/components you are being asked to critically reflect on.
Step 2	Immerse yourself in reading, learning and reflections from your module, using the assignment brief as a filter to focus your critical reading (i.e. choose material that is central to your reading purpose, as advocated by Wallace and Wray, 2016).
Step 3	Create a critical synopsis (one page) of each piece of reading – see questions in Table 2 to focus your critical reading.
Step 4	Critically reflect on how you can use this material to respond to the themes of the assignment brief – what claims can you make to build your argument? what evidence to support these claims? what opposing points of view can you consider?
Step 5	Be clear about what you are trying to achieve in your written assignment. Allow your voice to be heard – this takes time, patience and practice, in my experience.
Step 6	Discuss your insights with other learners within the context of the assignment brief.
Step 7	Arrange your thoughts before you begin writing - mind maps are a useful tool to capture thoughts and connections (see Figure 1).
Step 8	Create a template for your assignment e.g. an introduction to define your topic by setting out the objective/aim of assignment; headings for the main themes you plan to examine; a conclusion that draws together the main arguments of your paper (and recommendations, if appropriate); bibliography citing references.
Step 9	Begin writing an early draft and be patient as you work through a number of iterations of drafting and editing. Use your own voice to demonstrate independent judgement.
Step 10	Review paper before submitting to ensure clear critical analysis, correct grammar, spelling, coherency, flow and attention to assignment brief, referencing standards (review your institution guidelines) and word count. Ensure clarity for the reader regarding connections and signposts between sections and paragraphs.

## **2.1 Ten Steps: An Overview.**

The mix of ingredients in a recipe are key to the quality of the finished product. Similarly, when approaching an assignment, the combination of these ten steps and diligence in working through them will impact on the quality of the assignment. Get started by reading the brief a number of times (Step 1), with a highlighter in hand to mark the key words and phrases to inform subsequent research and reading material. In Step 2, one must draw from a wide range of

sources informed by the topic central to the assignment. For example, if assigned a brief to explore the enablers and barriers to engaging reflective practice, one must research literature relating to reflective practice with a focus on enablers and barriers. Beginning with Donald Schön (1983), frequently referred to as the father of reflective practice, leads the learner to other authorities on this subject e.g. Kolb (1984), Brookfield (1995), Moon (2004). After exploring and evaluating the writings of such authorities one begins to build an insight into past and current thinking on this topic, with an opportunity to contribute one's own voice to the writing. In Step 3, some questions (see Table 2), advocated by Wallace and Wray (2016), can help to guide critical reading, as the learner becomes immersed in the evaluation of such published work, to create a synopsis:

**Table 2: Questions for critical synopsis ( Wallace and Wray, 2016, p.42)**

	<b>Questions for critical synopsis.</b>
A	Why am I reading this?
B	What are the authors trying to achieve in writing this?
C	What are the authors claiming that is relevant to my work?
D	How convincing are these claims, and why?
E	In conclusion, what use can I make of this?

Completing this template for each piece of reading will provide rich material, some of which may be discarded depending on the outcome of the analysis of each piece of work. As a novice, one can gradually build on this template (see Table 3) with some more probing questions, encouraging a deeper analysis through an evolving critical stance.

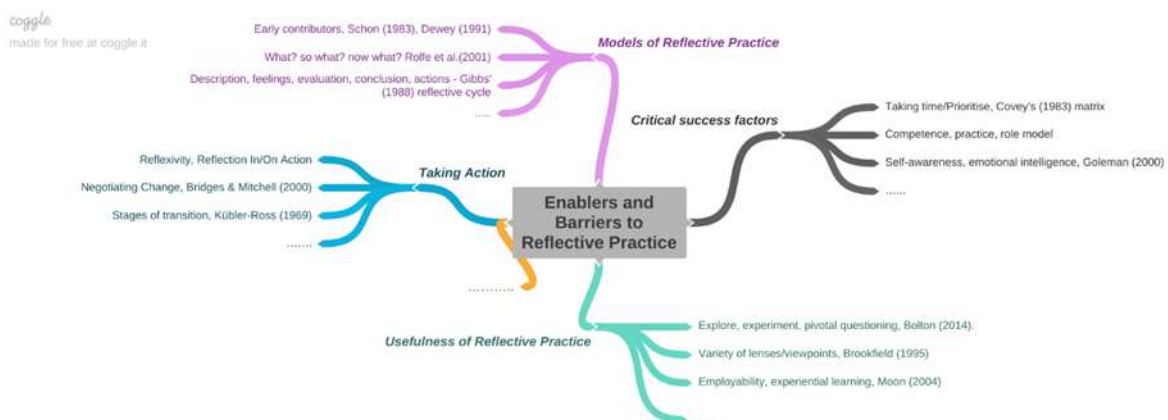
Addressing each of these questions after reading an article or paper contributes to developing a critical thinking lens, thus enriching critical writing abilities, which is further explored in the next section. Step 4 is anchored in the output of the previous step, critical synopses, and involves discriminating between what is most informative for the theme of the current assignment. Constructing compelling arguments from the selected materials accelerates the writing process, while building confidence in finding one's voice is Step 5. With some research completed, Step 6 advocates engaging with peer learners to verbalise these insights which may be a catalyst for further iterations of Step 2 through Step 5.

**Table 3: Taking a critical stance (adapted from Cottrell, 2011).**

<b>Taking a critical stance</b>
What are the key argument(s) presented by the author?
How well are the arguments substantiated? e.g. are the arguments convincing?
What contributing arguments or reasons?
Reflecting on these insights, what judgements can I make?
In what way are my beliefs influencing my interpretation and judgement?
What is the intention of this article?
In what way is this relevant to my assignment?

Organising these insights on a mind map, Step 7, can be really helpful in realising the progress in developing the assignment content.

**Figure 1: Example of a mind map on reflective practice (created using [coggle.it](http://coggle.it)).**



Creating a template of the overall assignment structure, Step 8, provides a framework to guide the learner through the writing process and will, in time, signpost the reader through the completed assignment. For example, an introduction, the key themes, conclusion and recommendations – these components will vary according to the brief. Now that the key ingredients have been considered, Step 9 is the iterative process of writing, reviewing and revising. Finally, before submitting, it is prudent to have another set of eyes read through for coherency, flow and spellings (Step 10) – a colleague or friend unfamiliar with the topic of study is ideal.

## 2.2 Aligning with Critical Thinking.

Aligned with these steps is a focus on developing a critical thinking mindset to enable critical reading and writing, essential components to writing assignments and to continuously develop as a learner. The activities involve developing the ability to read around a topic, synthesise what is being read, develop cogent arguments, draw on critical thinking skills and get one's voice down on paper. To truly engage with this ten-step process requires awareness of these demands and skills of critical thinking, which a learner may struggle with at the outset. However, over time, with heightened awareness as competency develops, there is a whole world awaiting which stimulates confidence and a new voice to contribute to the wider learning community.

Critical thinking is considered “...*a basic competency akin to reading and writing*” (Fisher, 2011, p. v). Many definitions abound, building on the earlier work of Dewey (1991), who Fisher (2011, p. v) asserts is “...*widely regarded as the father of the modern critical thinking tradition*” . For example:

“...*reasonable, reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do.*”(Norris and Ennis, 1989, as cited in Fisher, 2011, p.4)

“...*the ability to see logical flaws in arguments or to weigh up the evidence for explicit claims.*” (Goatly, 2000, p.1) made by an author.

“...*the ability to interpret, analyse and evaluate ideas and arguments.*”(Fisher, 2011, p v).

Cottrell (2011) advocates developing these critical thinking skills to “...*bring precision to the way you think and work.*” (p.4). Such skills, Cottrell (2011) maintains, allow learners to reach depth in their subject matter which informs critical debate and compelling arguments addressing the main theories and concepts.

Some learners perceive being critical as the same as being negative and finding fault with the written work of another. Such an understanding can result in a reluctance to criticise the writing of learned authorities which, Cottrell (2011) opines, should be abandoned. However, being critical involves taking a balanced view, “...*looking at both positives and negatives of a claim or a theory, as well as the why of what is good or poor, works or fails.*” (Cottrell, 2011, p.8). A caveat when engaging critical thinking skills - note the tendency to unconsciously reframe evidence that challenges the learner's deeply held beliefs rather than reflect on and shift these

beliefs (Syed, 2015). The learner, being part of this critical stance, brings values and beliefs which influence the understanding of the text – a heightened awareness of personal values and beliefs, or unconscious biases, enriches the outcome of analysis and interpretation. In essence, critical reading requires the reader to be aware of their own expectations and prejudices in addition to recognising that, similarly, authors hold such prejudices, assumptions and beliefs (Wallace and Wray, 2016).

### 2.3 Learning from Feedback.

The experience of receiving an unfavourable result following submission of an assignment is a challenge for a learner (and indeed the educator) and can instil a feeling of failure. Listening to, and acting on the feedback received can be transformational, revealing blind spots in one's writing and resulting in deep learning if the learner truly engages. Syed (2015) argues that "...we need to redefine our relationship with failure..." (2015, p. 14), and writing assignments, in my experience, demands such a perspective.

A useful checklist for learners to reflect on before final submission is set out in Table 4. This checklist was informed by personal experience of delivering feedback on assignments while addressing some common observations from teachers on the challenges evident in student writing, set out by Gottschalk and Hjortshoj (2004):

**Table 4: Assignment pre-submission checklist.**

Question.	√
Does the content clearly address the assignment brief?	
Do I demonstrate clarity in my thinking and writing?	
To what extent is there evidence of critical thinking and independent judgement?	
Do I build compelling arguments by making claims, supporting with evidence and drawing conclusions?	
Is my paper structured with an introduction, main body and conclusion?	
Do I use headings to signpost the reader?	

Is my paper presented in accordance with the assignment guidelines?	
Did I proof read my paper (and revise if necessary) for referencing, overall coherency and accuracy of spellings?	
Is my paper an engaging read?	

### 3. Conclusion.

Engaging the ten-step process and the assignment checklist, alone, are insufficient to create an impressive postgraduate assignment, in my experience. Immersing in critical thinking, can be a game changer. Transitioning from conscious incompetence to unconscious competence in developing and demonstrating these critical thinking skills increases the chances of attracting a higher grade – moving beyond description, demonstrating the ability to analyse, evaluate and present arguments while clearly weaving the learner’s voice into the words. In summary, aligned with the 10-step process are three key areas of attention for the learner - reading to comprehend, reading with a critical thinking mindset and demonstrating the learner’s voice in the written assignment.

#### 3.1 Call to Action.

Developing as a critical writer requires commitment, time, effort, practice and actively listening to feedback to enhance these skills and, for me, is a lifelong journey. On the quest to becoming a good writer, Branson (2004) proposes the first step is becoming an avid reader. Taking quiet time, Raelin (2002) argues, supports the process of inquiry while facilitating self-reflection, clear thinking and pivotal questioning – quiet time is an essential commodity when working through the above steps, the time spent in each step is dictated by the learner and their timeline for submission. Approaching academic assignments presents challenges, to both seasoned postgraduate learners and novices, in particular those lacking practice in assignment writing and the demands of critical thinking. Experimenting with some of these steps on the journey to submitting an assignment, while embracing the skills of critical thinking, I would argue will set a learner on a path to becoming a good writer. While this paper offers a process for consideration, many may reply “*I know all that, but I just can’t do it*”. I can truly empathise with this response. For me, a game changer was awareness of my tendency to procrastinate and to allow my



progress to be blocked when stuck at a challenging stage in my reading and research, all impacting on levels of stress as a deadline approached. Getting started can begin to displace this feeling of stress (Boice, 1996) - scheduling some time each day, to read and write, with a clear focus on the assignment brief is one way of igniting the writing process. Following through on this commitment by writing for five-minute blocks throughout the day can make all the difference...another learning journey begins!

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