



Academic Writing and Referencing for your Nursing Degree

**CRITICAL
STUDY SKILLS**

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Chapter 1

Academic writing: text, process and criticality

Learning outcomes



After reading this chapter you will:

- understand what it means to be part of the academic writing community;
- be aware of the different text types you might need to produce as a student nurse;
- have developed an effective, systematic approach to the academic writing process;
- understand what it means to write critically;
- have learned about the foundations of different academic text types in nursing, in particular, the critical essay.

There are many challenges facing you as you embark on your nursing degree. You need to assimilate a great deal of information, and engage in new ideas and intellectual processes. What's more, you need to become proficient in academic writing, and learn how to produce the different types of text that are common in nursing.

Academic writing is central to your university studies, as written assignments and exams will be one of the main ways in which you are assessed. This chapter explores the nature of academic writing in universities, and helps you to develop an effective, systematic approach to the academic writing process. All assignments are different, and universities vary slightly in terms of the types of writing assignments they employ. This chapter focuses on some general principles which can be applied to most academic writing, including what it means to write 'critically'. It also discusses some of the most common features of individual text types in your discipline, with a particular focus on the critical essay.

Academic writing at university: a new start?

Reflection



- 1) Do you enjoy writing? Why/why not?
- 2) What kind of things have you written in the past (eg essays, reports, exams, articles, blogs, stories, poems)?
- 3) Do you have recent experience of writing academic essays? (If English is not your first language, were these in English or your first language?)
- 4) What comments have teachers or other people made about your writing in the past?
- 5) How do you feel about starting your first/next written assignment at university?

Nursing students in the UK come from a range of backgrounds: some come straight from A levels (or Scottish Highers); some have been away from formal education for some time, maybe working and/or bringing up a family; some come from other countries to study in the UK. This means that students starting university differ in terms of their writing abilities, their experience of academic writing, and how confident they feel about tackling written assessments.

So where do you fit in?

You may be feeling confident. You may be relishing the prospect of writing your first assignment, seeing it as an exciting opportunity to explore your subject and demonstrate your knowledge and

ideas. You may be able to draw on recent experience of academic writing and positive feedback from teachers.

Conversely, you may be feeling rather apprehensive about your first written assignment. Like many students, you perhaps see academic writing as one of the most difficult challenges of university life. There are a number of reasons why you may be feeling apprehensive. You might not have much experience of academic writing. Or maybe you do have experience, but it might have been a long time ago, or in your mother tongue, not English. You may have struggled with writing in the past and received some negative comments from teachers. All of these things can make the prospect of that first written assignment rather daunting.

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Chapter 2,
Coherent
texts and
arguments,
Editing and
redrafting for
coherence,
The truth
about writing!

When starting to write at university, it is important for students to draw on any strengths they have in terms of ability and experience. But it is also important for all students to identify aspects of their writing which can be improved on. At university, you are part of a **writing community**, comprised of students, lecturers and researchers, and all members of that community are constantly striving to improve as writers, even those who publish in journals and books.

You should commit yourself to improving as a writer throughout your degree programme, and beyond, in your professional life. It is not a question of achieving perfection; it is rather a case of committing yourself to making many small improvements over time, and not giving up when faced with a disappointment or hurdle. University lecturers see many students develop into very good writers after a shaky start. What these students have in common is a positive attitude, an ability to reflect on and critically assess their own work, and a willingness to seek and act on advice.

This book will support you in your development as a writer by helping you to approach writing in a systematic way. It will enable you to:

- analyse and respond to writing tasks;
- plan and structure your writing effectively;
- achieve clarity and coherence in your writing;
- produce writing which is accurate and academic in style;
- write critically in assignments;
- use and reference sources appropriately;
- prepare assignments to a high professional standard for submission.

This chapter sets you on your way by exploring the context of academic writing at university and providing guidance on how to approach writing assignments on your nursing degree.

Academic writing for nursing undergraduates

Undergraduate nurses may be asked to produce a number of different types of academic writing, including essays, written reflections, exams, reports, reviews of journal articles, and dissertations. This chapter sets out a general approach to academic writing that will help you with all types of assignments. It also provides specific information on essays, written reflections, exams and dissertations. Advice on practical writing tasks in nursing is provided in *Communication Skills for your Nursing Degree*.

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Communication
Skills

- **Essays.** There are different types of essays. The main one, sometimes called a 'critical' or 'analytical' essay, requires you to explore a particular topic in depth, usually in response to a question or statement, and to explain your own viewpoint, or 'stance', supported by arguments and evidence. A 'reflective' essay requires you to analyse and evaluate a particular experience, explaining its impact on your understanding and future practice.
- **Written reflections.** Nurses are often required to produce short written reflections on their experience in practice, usually as part of a **professional portfolio**.
- **Exams.** In exams, you may be required to provide short or long written responses to questions or statements. These are usually designed to demonstrate that you have assimilated and understood the core work covered in a particular module. They may require you to recall

factual information and/or to explain and support your viewpoint on a particular issue you have examined as part of your studies.

- **Dissertations.** A dissertation is a long evidence-based or research-focused essay written in the final year of your undergraduate studies.

Each of these types of academic writing will be discussed in more detail later in the chapter.

The writing process

Writing is a process and it involves a number of stages, including:

- ‘unpacking’ (analysing and understanding) the writing task and any guidelines provided;
- drawing up a provisional plan/outline;
- identifying relevant material that you need to read;
- reading and gathering information;
- drafting, redrafting, editing;
- revisiting and reworking your plan/outline;
- formatting your text;
- double-checking the assessment guidelines;
- proofreading.

It is important to fully engage with the writing process, and to understand that the *writing* process is part of the *learning* process. Writing is not just a question of getting fully formed thoughts down on paper (apart from in exams); it is a way of *clarifying your thinking* on a particular topic. Woodford (1967) put this nicely many years ago:

The power of writing as an aid in thinking is not often appreciated. Everyone knows that someone who writes successfully gets his thoughts completely in order before he publishes. But it is seldom pointed out that the very act of writing can help to clarify thinking. Put down woolly thoughts on paper, and their wooliness is immediately exposed.

(p 744)

Top tips



Engaging with the writing process

- 1) Try to develop good writing habits. Write little and often, especially if you have been away from formal education for a while.
- 2) Adopt a write-read-edit-read approach to writing (discussed in [Chapter 2](#)). When you stop to read what you have written, stand back from the text. Put yourself in the reader’s shoes and make sure that everything hangs together, makes sense, and flows smoothly.
- 3) Try to get some feedback during the writing process. You may have the opportunity to submit a first draft to a lecturer, or you could ask a fellow student to read something and give feedback. If you do ask a friend or fellow student, it’s a good idea to ask them to *summarise* what they think you are trying to say. If you only ask them if they understand what you have written, they may just say yes to be polite!

Your exact approach to the writing process will depend on the particular context of the assignment and your individual way of working, but some essential aspects of the writing process are discussed in the following sections.

Approaching a writing assignment

A writer needs an audience, a purpose, and a strategy, and these things are interconnected (Swales and Feak, 2012, p 10). When approaching a writing assignment, ask yourself:

- Who is reading my work? (your audience)

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REFERENCEAnalysing
a writing
assignment

- Why am I writing? (your purpose)
- How will I achieve my purpose? (your strategy)

Your purpose is to meet the requirements of the assignment, and satisfy the needs and expectations of a particular reader. To determine your purpose, you need to analyse the wording of the task or question carefully. It may specify certain aspects of the topic that you should cover, and the verbs it uses, such as ‘describe’, ‘explain’, or ‘evaluate’, will determine how you treat this content. However, notwithstanding these specifications, there is no single ‘right answer’: different students will respond to a task in different ways. Your individual approach and strategy will determine:

- the selection of content (information, arguments, evidence etc);
- the way this content is structured and organised.

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Key phrases in
assignments

The person reading your essay must be able to discern *why* you have included particular content and organised your essay in the way that you have.

The question of the ‘reader’ is a tricky one. Of course, the actual human being reading your assignment is your university lecturer – probably the one who set the task and taught the module. However, lecturers often ask (or expect) you to imagine a ‘hypothetical’ or ‘target’ reader. This is usually someone with a similar level of knowledge to your own, or someone with a similar level of education but who is not an expert in nursing. Lecturers want you to write for such a reader because they want you to *demonstrate* your understanding, and you cannot do this if you assume too much knowledge on the part of the reader. It is not uncommon to ask a student about something which is unclear in their essay, only to have them explain that ‘the lecturer already knows this!’ But this is not the point. The lecturer wants to know that *you* know this, and that you can explain it to other people, including non-experts, in a clear way. Always ask yourself:

- What can the target reader be expected to know?
- What does the target reader need me to explain?

A good writer anticipates the reader’s questions, and does not ask them to guess, fill in gaps, or work out how one thing relates to another.

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Coherent
texts and
arguments,
Editing and
redrafting for
coherence;
Developing a
coherent
argument and
expressing
criticality

Analysing a writing assignment

One of the most common – and perhaps surprising – reasons for low marks in written assessments is the failure on the part of the student to read the assignment title or question thoroughly enough. A student may go on to produce something which is interesting and of a good standard, but if they do not directly address the specific task, they will not meet the actual requirements of the assignment and so will end up failing. It is therefore essential to start any assignment by carefully analysing the assignment title or question.

You should read the title or question several times to ‘unpack’ it and get absolutely clear in your mind what is expected of you. It is helpful to highlight **key terms**, including verbs commonly occurring in academic assignments such as ‘assess’, ‘discuss’, and ‘compare and contrast’.

Assignments usually come with a set of assessment **guidelines** and marking **descriptors** detailing the various criteria that you need to meet in order to achieve success. These criteria relate to areas such as:

- task achievement;
- content and organisation;
- relevance to nursing practice;
- writing style;
- referencing.

Be sure to read and digest these guidelines and descriptors as they are the very same ones that assessors will use to mark your work.

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Key phrases in
assignmentsCROSS
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your Nursing
Degree,
Chapter 6,
Assessment,
Feedback on
academic
work

Task



Unpacking essay titles and questions

Look at the essay titles below. What are the key terms? What are you expected to do in your essay? What will be your purpose in writing? What type of content and organisation could help you to achieve this purpose? (Make some notes before you look at the model analyses provided.)

A

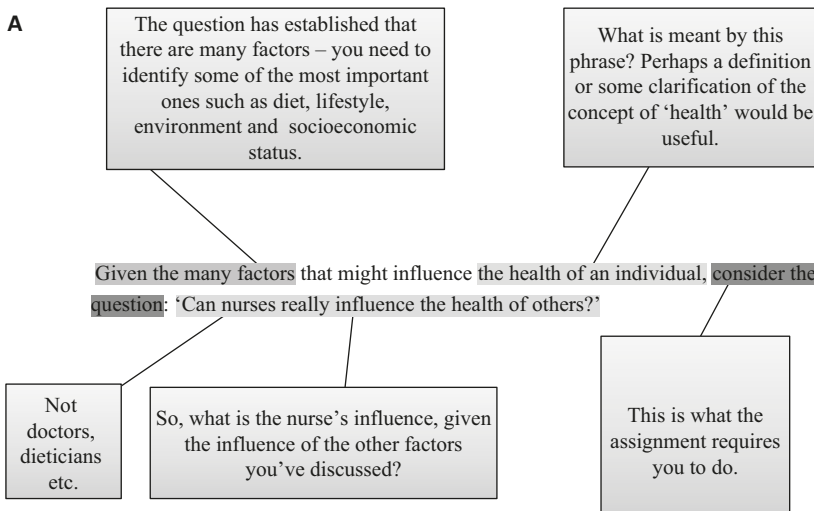
Given the many factors that might influence the health of an individual, consider the question: 'Can nurses really influence the health of others?'

B

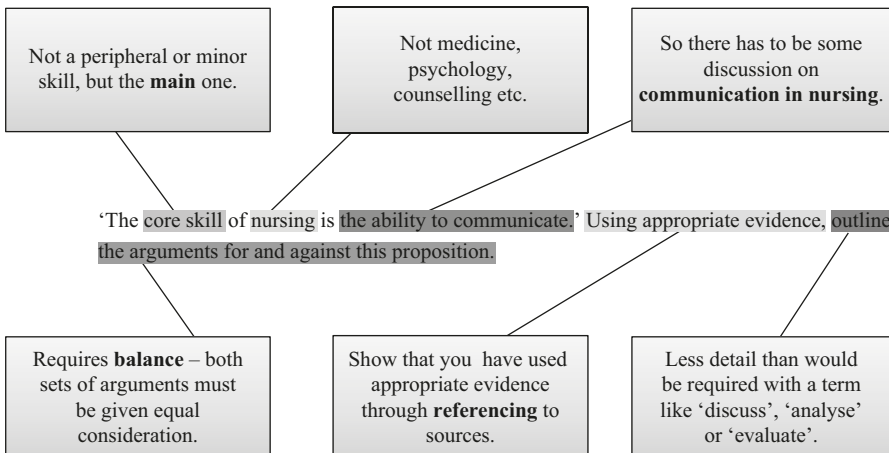
'The core skill of nursing is the ability to communicate.' Using appropriate evidence, explore the arguments for and against this proposition.

Discussion: unpacking essay titles and questions

A



B



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Chapter 5,
Preparing
your work for
submission,
Editing and
proofreading
your final text

Planning

Always begin an assignment by considering the constraints of the task: how long it should be and how long you have to write it. You could then draw up a provisional schedule which allocates time to the various sub-tasks. This schedule should leave sufficient time for you to read through and proofread the whole text several times before submitting.

A good piece of writing starts with a good plan or 'outline'. This should be primarily based on your analysis, or 'unpacking', of the task, but it should evolve as you engage in the reading and writing process. Your outline is therefore much more than a list of items related to the assignment topic: it is a developing conceptual representation of your response to the task. For example, in relation to the essay titles analysed above, your outline would reflect your position, or 'stance', in relation to the given topic, ie:

- A: the extent to which you believe, supported by your investigation of the arguments and evidence, that nurses can influence the health of others
- B: your assessment of the evidence you find to support or challenge the main proposition that communication is the core skill of nursing

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Writing
critically

An outline should identify key sections of the text (with possible subheadings), and, in a critical essay, the arguments and evidence that would feature in each one.

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texts and
arguments,
Planning for
coherence

As discussed earlier in this chapter, different students will approach the same task in different ways. Sometimes an essay title will specify broad organisational requirements. For example, in B above, you are asked to 'outline the arguments for and against' the proposition. However, you might decide either to look at all the 'for' arguments in the first half of the essay and all the 'against' arguments in the second half, or, alternatively, to examine the proposition from both angles with reference to a series of different areas of nursing. In other essays, you may have more leeway. One common approach is to examine different positions one by one, finally making a case for the one which the majority of the evidence seems to support. Another approach is to make a strong case for one particular position right from the start, while acknowledging and examining alternative (but in your view, weaker) viewpoints along the way.

Top tips**Aligning your outline and the task requirements**

When your outline is well developed, go back to your initial analysis of the task to make sure that you have addressed all the points that you originally highlighted, and that you have achieved the required balance in your response.

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Studying for
your Nursing
Degree,
Chapter 4,
Critical
thinking,
Applying and
developing
your critical
thinking skills;
Chapter 5,
Academic
resources:
technology
and the library,
The university
library

Reading and information gathering

Most academic writing assignments require you to read about a particular topic and use scholarly sources to inform your ideas. A good place to start the reading for an assignment is your lecture notes. These will provide an overview of the topic, and they will probably include links to some relevant literature, such as key chapters from core textbooks, and important journal articles, case studies, official reports etc. At the beginning of your studies, lecturers will tend to direct you to relevant sources in this way, but as you progress through your degree, you will be expected to explore the literature more widely and independently. As you develop these research skills, you will be increasingly assessed on your ability to find and select sources, and to use your critical judgement to assess their relevance and credibility. Lecturers will expect you to refer both to sources which support your position on a topic, and sources which challenge it.

Academic texts can be long and difficult to read because of the technical content, much of which may be new to you. It is essential that you devote enough time to reading, but it is also important that you develop effective reading strategies so that you use that time efficiently. When you approach a book, chapter or journal article, first adopt a 'global' approach, ie identify:

- what you expect to find out from it, and how these things relate to your assignment;
- the main message (the author's purpose in writing), and how this relates to your assignment;
- the main points made by the author(s), and how they relate to the main message of the article, and to your assignment.

As you think about how what you are reading relates to the assignment in hand, you might use highlighting, annotations, or note-taking to reflect this. You should also mark or make a note of parts of the text that you think you may need to read more closely at some stage.

Top tips



Strategies for effective reading

- 1) Use features such as contents pages, indices, abstracts, introductions and conclusions to help you assess the relevance of a book, chapter or article and find specific content.
- 2) Note how textbooks and journal articles on a particular topic are interrelated. Important books and articles are likely to be referenced by other scholars, and your initial reading may provide links to other sources that could be useful for your essay. This becomes more important as you progress in your studies.
- 3) You are likely to encounter unknown words in academic reading. Some of these might be subject-related technical terms, such as 'dopamine' or 'apnea', which you should familiarise yourself with; others may be formal words which are uncommon outside academic writing, such as 'analogous' or 'dichotomy'. If English is not your first language, there may be quite a number of words which are new to you. There is a limited amount of time you can spend reading, so you need to make decisions about how much time to spend investigating unknown non-technical words. Looking up every word you don't know will eat into your reading time and disrupt the reading process. What's more, it is unlikely that you will be able to remember all of these words in the future. Try using these two questions to determine whether or not you should look up a word:
 - Does the word prevent you from understanding the general meaning?
 - Is the word repeated a lot in this text or related texts?

If the answer to these questions is no, then attempt to guess the word using the context to help you, and read on; if the answer is yes, look up the word.
- 4) As you take notes, take care to make a note of the reference, including page numbers. It will waste a lot of time if you have to wade through all your sources again when you are compiling your list of references.
- 5) Try to paraphrase, ie take notes *in your own words*. This will benefit you in these ways:
 - as you strive to express ideas in your own way, you will process them and get a good sense of how well you understand what you are reading;
 - if you express things in your own words from the start, there is less of a risk of plagiarism in the final version of your assignment.

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*Studying for
your Nursing
Degree,
Chapter 4,
Critical
thinking,
Active reading*

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*Chapter 3,
Referring to
sources*

Advanced skills



Understanding research article introductions: the CARS model

You will be expected to read and refer to research articles throughout your studies, but as you progress, you will be increasingly expected to take the initiative in finding and selecting particular articles that are relevant to your assignments. The first thing you should look at when considering an article is the **abstract**. This will give you a good idea of whether the article is useful and relevant. If you then decide that you want to find out more, you should begin by looking closely at the **introduction**. This will be easier if you know what to look for. Article introductions typically move through a series of rhetorical stages, or 'moves', ie parts of a text designed to have a particular effect; this is known as the CARS (Creating a Research Space) model (Swales, 1990, p 141).

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Studying for your Nursing Degree, Chapter 3, Becoming a member of your academic and professional community, Academic phrasebank

- **Move 1** involves 'establishing a territory', ie showing that the research area is central or important. This is often achieved through a review of items of previous research in the area.
- **Move 2** involves 'establishing a niche', ie establishing an individual position in relation to the research previously conducted. This often means indicating a 'gap' in the research, by raising questions about or seeking to extend current knowledge in some way.
- **Move 3** involves 'occupying the niche'. This can be by outlining the nature or purposes of the current research, announcing principal findings, and/or indicating the structure of the paper.

Awareness of the CARS model, and other typical rhetorical patterns, can help you to read and understand difficult articles. Furthermore, understanding the language associated with these rhetorical features of academic writing can help you develop your own academic writing 'toolkit'. You can find many examples of useful phrases which 'move a text forward' in the Academic Phrasebank:

www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk/

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Chapter 2, Coherent texts and arguments

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Chapter 2, Coherent texts and arguments, Developing a coherent argument and expressing criticality

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Chapter 3, Referring to sources

Writing essentials

There are three things which are especially important in academic writing.

- 1) **Relevance.** Be sure to make everything you write relevant to the task or question. If the relevance of a point is not immediately clear, then try to make it clear; if you cannot make it clear, leave it out. You will usually have a strict word count, so it is vital not to waste words on irrelevant material which cannot contribute to your mark.
- 2) **Coherence.** Lecturers often comment on the need for a piece of writing to be 'coherent', or deduct marks for 'lack of coherence'. To be coherent, a piece of writing must **make sense** to the reader. Coherence is tied up with issues discussed earlier, such as having a clear purpose and direction, and writing with a target reader in mind. It is also defined by clear organisation and expression. Coherent texts are *crafted*: they need careful planning and editing. The concept of coherence is examined in detail in [Chapter 2](#).
- 3) **Criticality.** Most academic writing is 'critical' writing, ie it is analytical and evaluative, rather than just descriptive. This will be discussed below and in other chapters.

Writing critically

A basic requirement in assignments is to make it clear that you have understood important concepts, theories and arguments. In your first year of study, this level of intellectual engagement and understanding is sufficient to pass an assignment. However, as you progress through your nursing studies, you will be increasingly assessed on your ability to demonstrate that you have approached concepts, theories, arguments etc *critically*.

Stance

Criticality is related to the idea of having a clear **voice** (Argent, 2017). This means having something to say, and being in possession of an independent **viewpoint** or **perspective** on a given topic. In the academic world, this is known as your **stance**, ie, your position in relation to the topic (what *you* think about it) and to the reader (what you *want them* to think about it). There are two questions to consider:

- 1) How can you explain your stance?
- 2) How can you justify your stance and persuade the reader that your stance is valid?

Consider the following essay title:

Discuss the value of health promotion in tackling alcohol misuse.

Many people would be prepared to offer an opinion on this topic without thinking about it too much: 'I suppose health promotion must do some good, otherwise governments wouldn't

bother'; 'In my experience, people don't take a blind bit of notice of official health campaigns.' Or they may be reluctant to voice an opinion: 'It's not something I've really thought about.' But your lecturers are not interested in this kind of response; they are interested in a viewpoint that emerges from your *critical engagement* with information, evidence, ideas and debate in academic literature, in this case, the literature dedicated to the issue of health promotion as a way of tackling alcohol misuse. After *carefully analysing and evaluating the literature*, you may come to the conclusion that a) health promotion is of immense value in tackling alcohol misuse, b) health promotion has little impact on alcohol misuse, c) health promotion may have some value, but other factors may impact equally or more – you may perhaps remain undecided in the face of conflicting evidence. These thoughtful conclusions are very different from the casual opinions stated at the beginning of this paragraph.

Argument

To explain and justify your stance to the reader, you need to present an **argument**. An argument is a way of organising and expressing a viewpoint. It involves a process of **reasoning**, and, to be valid in the academic world, it must be based on solid, convincing **evidence**. This will partly emerge from your analysis and evaluation of the stance, arguments and conclusions of other scholars, and of the evidence they use as support, according to objective criteria (is the argument logical? Does it lead logically to their conclusions? Is the evidence sound? Does it support their claims?). You will need to compare alternative viewpoints and judge them according to the same criteria. It is on the basis of this analysis and evaluation that you will decide whether to accept the arguments, treat them with caution, or reject them. Your own argument can also be based on a more direct assessment of evidence. For example, you might look at a study on the impact of health promotion on alcohol use in Finland. You may decide that the findings and conclusions are convincing and widely applicable, or you may judge that the study is too small to be significant, or that it is only relevant to a particular social context.

It is not sufficient to look at facts, ideas and issues in isolation. You must demonstrate a good understanding of how these things interrelate. For example, you might compare and contrast several studies on the causes of alcohol misuse to determine if their findings are similar. If they are, this could provide powerful evidence to support a particular argument. If there are differences, you should try to find possible reasons for the differences. Could it be down to the different methodologies used, or are there other variables (eg age, gender, social context) which need to be taken into account? How do these facts impact on your own position?

Nuance

Students sometimes lack confidence in expressing their viewpoint in case it is 'wrong'. But your viewpoint is as valid as anyone else's, so long as it is supported with reasoned argument and sound evidence. However, being confident in your stance does not mean being rigid or close-minded. In fact, your stance should be **nuanced**. This means acknowledging strengths, weaknesses and grey areas. It entails, for example, sometimes *qualifying* your arguments or introducing *caveats* ('health promotion is a good way of tackling alcohol misuse *but* only if there is a consistent message across partner institutions'), or taking account of small but important differences in perspective (studies might have similar findings but interpret them in slightly different ways; two scholars may broadly agree that there is currently a lack of training on alcohol issues for nurses who work in General Practice, but have different ideas on how this should be remedied). A nuanced stance shows that you have been circumspect in your investigation and that you have not rushed to judgement. You must also be sure to recognise any limitations with regard to your own evidence, arguments or conclusions, and to clarify your position regarding which issues can be said to be resolved, and which remain open to debate.

Nuance is very important in nursing essays which involve an examination of professional ethics and values. These are obviously complex issues, and it is expected that this complexity will be reflected in your discussion.

Expressing stance

Stance is conveyed through the way you treat your content, and through the way you organise and express your ideas. There are particular language features associated with the expression of stance (Biber, 2006; Argent, 2017). This will be explored through the task below, and in Chapter 2, where the organisation and expression of argument is explored in further detail.

Task



Writing critically

How is stance conveyed in the typical examples of student writing below? (Consider, for example, how the writers signal their analysis, evaluation, reasoning, interpretations, feelings and attitude.)

A

Research into psychosis has often focused on the role of the family. In the 1950s (when 'schizophrenia' was the more widely adopted term), the focus appeared to be on the family's role in the *causation* of psychosis. Consider, for example, Lidz et al's notion of 'pathological families' (1965) and the 'double-bind' hypothesis of Bateson et al (1956).

Around the same time as these 'causal' hypotheses were being promoted, the anti-psychotic drugs were discovered. Drugs, by their very nature, are treatments designated for the individual, and this fact, coupled with the prevailing view of families as toxic agents led, unsurprisingly, to what could cynically be called the first family intervention strategy – that of excluding the family.

B

One important element of communication in nursing is *active listening*, whereby nurses fully concentrate on and reflect on what patients say (Jagger, 2015). According to Mobley (2005), active listening is an effective way of signalling empathy, as it conveys to an individual that they have the full attention of the person they are talking to. One aspect of active listening is verbal communication on the part of the listener, such as restating and summarising the speaker's message (Jagger, 2015). Another important element of active listening is non-verbal communication. It is widely held that words form only a minor percentage of communication (Hargie et al, 2004; Sherman, 1993), and that a large part of any message is conveyed through 'paralanguage', such as tone of voice and intonation, and body language, such as posture, eye contact, facial expressions, gestures and touch (Argyle, 1988). This fact impacts considerably on the active listener, who not only has to be aware of the message conveyed through their own non-verbal communication, but also of any non-verbal cues from the speaker: 'One sigh may be communicating a lifetime of emotions' (Freshwater, 2003, p 93).

Discussion: writing critically

In these texts, examples of reasoning include:

- **discussion of cause and effect**

This fact, coupled with the prevailing view of families as toxic agents **led**, unsurprisingly, **to** what could cynically be called the first family intervention strategy – that of excluding the family.

This fact **impacts** considerably **on** the active listener.

- **giving reasons for something**

Active listening is an effective way of signalling empathy, **as** it conveys to an individual that they have the full attention of the person they are talking to.

- **exemplifying and explaining** (in the third example, the colon introduces an elaboration of the point)