

Writing at Masters Level



Introduction

Doing a Master's degree involves a lot of aspects, which will be familiar from a Bachelor's degree programme, but there are some crucial differences. This is a guide to how to approach a Master's degree and the work involved, which will highlight the areas that Master's students should be concentrating on in order to succeed.

What is a Master's?

A Master's is a much shorter course than a Bachelor's (BA, BSc, LLB, BEng, etc.) or a PhD. Most Master's are only a year or two long, and are undertaken either as a bridge between Bachelor's and PhD, or as a qualification in itself. Master's degrees tend to run all year, unlike undergraduate degrees there is no summer vacation.

They are often known by their abbreviations, some of which include:

MA - Master of Arts

MSc - Master of Sciences

MEng - Master of Engineering

MBA - Master of Business Administration

LLM - Master of Law

MEnt - Master of Enterprise

There is also the MPhil, which is a Master of Philosophy. A PhD is a Doctor of Philosophy, whilst in England a medical doctor is actually awarded a Bachelor Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery.

Master's degrees come in two forms:

Taught Master's are usually modular in form, featuring a range of optional modules the student can choose from, with a final dissertation at the end of the course, usually produced over the final semester.

Research Master's are more similar to PhDs in structure. There are often no optional modules, and the student will concentrate instead on producing a longer dissertation than a taught Master's student would. The end result will be an MPhil or perhaps an MRes (Master's by research). Some research Master's will involve compulsory modules which all students must attend.

The emphasis in all Master's is on individual original research.

Working at Master's level

One of the first things most Master's students notice once they have started is how much more intense a Master's degree is than an undergraduate degree. It is a less passive experience; you will not be guided as much by the lecturers, and will be expected to think for yourself more.

A Master's is marked differently to an undergraduate degree in two ways. Firstly the Master's do not use the same marking structure (1st, 2: i, 2: ii, 3rd, fail) - the exact levels vary according to the Master's in question so if you are curious about yours, ask your department. Master's degrees are also marked more stringently - an assignment which got you a top mark at undergraduate will score considerably lower at Master's level. This reflects the step-up in intensity - what is considered excellent at undergraduate level (original research, well-constructed arguments) is considered a basic requirement at Master's.

Do not feel overwhelmed by this. Although a Master's requires a new way of approaching academic work, all the groundwork has been done at undergraduate level. Let's look at the features of a Master's more closely.

Original research

A Master's degree is geared towards the delivery of a piece of original research. For research Master's students this will be your primary focus. For those doing taught Master's this will form part of all aspects of your degree, not just the final dissertation.

Original research is the process by which the student engages with primary sources in order to explore theory and reach conclusions.

The primary sources for each subject will vary. In humanities subjects like English and history this will involve reading original works (novels or historical documents). In sciences, psychology, sociology, etc., this will usually take the form of experiments conducted by the student. For nursing and other medical subjects you will probably be asked to relate your work to first hand experiences on the ward. For engineering and computer science related courses this will involve development of projects and products. For creative courses there will be a final show or project developed by the student. This list is not exhaustive of all Master's degrees offered by the University, but it is illustrative and should help clarify what is meant by original research.

In your original research you should also aim for originality where possible. You are being asked to look at your subject in a fresh and innovative way, and finding a new or underdeveloped area of your subject, or a new way of looking at an established area, will help you gain better marks.

Know the limits of a Master's. A Master's degree is not a PhD. You only have limited amount of time to complete each assignment, so do not go into too much depth with your research. Talk to your tutor if you feel you are uncertain about how far you should go. The word limits of your assignments and/or dissertation are a good guideline as to how much is wanted from you.

Theory

Master's are not exercises in description. You will need to find a theoretical basis for your work. Many Master's will run modules on the subject of theory, it is advisable to attend all available classes on the subject of theory as it will help you to form an idea of the theory which surrounds your subject.

Theory forms a useful framework to hang your research on. It should not be seen as a scary obstacle but as a guide to structure in the often overwhelming sea of information you will acquire. Part of the freedom of a Master's is that you will not be forced to apply a particular theory to your work if you do not want to. If you are uncertain about theoretical approaches then you can talk to your tutor about it.

Critical analysis

Another important part of Master's writing is critical analysis. There is more emphasis on this at postgraduate level than there is at undergraduate, so it is important that you are aware of it and including it instinctively as soon as possible.

There is a Study Basics leaflet on Critical Analysis, but here is brief overview of the subject.

A critical analysis is one which assesses the quality and usefulness of the sources which you are using in your assignments. This process involves considering all aspects of the source and its contents. In a scientific source this could involve questioning the conditions in which an experiment or survey was carried out in order to ascertain its usefulness. By contrast, a historical source would be analysed to look into the relationship of the author to the material (if an author writing about Napoleon's invasion of Russia is a Russian who lived through it then they will probably have a different perspective than a French author writing a hundred years later).

You can also critically analyse the presentation of a source - are the graphs readable, is the theory it posits coherent and believable, has it overlooked a whole branch of evidence?

Critical analysis is a wide subject but it will demonstrate you have engaged with the material you work with on a much deeper level than you have at undergraduate level.

Writing assignments at Master's level

All rules which apply at Bachelor's still apply at Master's. You must use language appropriate to the academic environment, and a coherent and strong structure to your work is essential. You must reference, and be extremely careful to ensure your references are accurate - there will be considerably more of them, often including original research pieces, so you might have to learn how to reference materials you have never used before.

Assignments will be longer at Master's level, even for unassessed pieces of work. Do not be overwhelmed by larger word counts. Remember, you made a large step up in intensity of work from school to university, so another step-up is well within your capabilities.

The requirements of Master's assignments mean your assignments will be different to your undergraduate ones in content, although many will still retain a similar form to undergraduate pieces. It is a good idea to read your course handbook and talk

to your tutor as early as possible in the year in order to establish what you should be producing.

As with undergraduate work, clarity is important. Do not use over-elaborate vocabulary and grammar just because you think you have to. It is more important to be understood. You will not be penalised for using clear and simple wording if it explains your arguments and evidence perfectly.

Contact time

If you are on a taught Master's you will have timetabled contact time with your tutors for some of the year. Once you reach the dissertation stage, like those who are doing a research Master's, you will find you will have to have a system of less regulated contact with your tutors and supervisors. Work out with your tutors and supervisors a system of contact in advance - not all academics can see you the next day, so it is best to find out when contact is possible, and if necessary, create a timetable of meetings to discuss progress.

Taught Master's components

If you are on a taught Master's you may find yourself attending lectures, seminars, labs, tutorials, or a combination of various types of class. These will often be very similar to their undergraduate equivalents, but as with all aspects of a Master's, they will place higher expectations on you.

You might be expected to read more sources in a shorter time period, become more involved in seminar discussions, or attend longer lectures or labs. You will also be expected to attend all scheduled classes unless you have a good reason not to. Master's degrees taught elements are harder to just 'catch up on' than their undergraduate equivalent, and a more diligent attitude is necessary for your own benefit

Time management is crucial for the Master's student - with a heavier workload you will find that a good weekly plan, and a firm grasp of deadlines, is essential. This is especially true with the dissertation which will be the longest assignment you will have done yet at university, usually covering a period of several months. It is important to set yourself deadlines for drafts, especially if you have asked your supervisor to look at it for you -

they will want you to deliver drafts when you say you will, and to a high standard.

You might find these other Study Basics guides useful:

Critical analysis of a journal article

Writing your assignment

Writing a research proposal