

ACADEMIC WRITING & RESEARCH SKILLS

MASTER BLUEPRINT

A Foundational Guide to Academic Argument, Research Methodology and Writing

Written & Researched by

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4 Learning Outcomes • Peer-Reviewed Citations • AI-Aware Learning

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Abstract

This Master Blueprint presents a critically-informed, citation-supported guide to academic writing and research skills, structured around four learning outcomes: understanding the concept and purpose of academic research and writing, knowing how to conduct academic research, understanding critical thinking skills, and understanding how to construct a strong, valid, and well-supported academic argument. Rather than presenting definitions and models descriptively, the guide ties its claims throughout to peer-reviewed sources, corrects common conceptual errors in the treatment of deductive and inductive reasoning, and introduces abductive reasoning alongside them. Research philosophy, literature-review methodology, validity and reliability, and research ethics and academic integrity are treated as core content rather than omissions. Critical thinking coverage extends beyond basic definitions to a working set of cognitive biases and logical fallacies, and the Toulmin model of argument is illustrated with a worked academic example. Each Learning Outcome closes with an AI Insight discussion and a set of self-check questions. The guide is intended as an introductory research-skills resource for business and social-science students, and its scope, contribution, and limitations are stated directly in the Discussion and Conclusion.

Keywords: academic writing; academic research; research philosophy; literature review; research ethics; critical thinking; logical fallacies; academic argumentation; Toulmin model; AI in academic research.

About the Author

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This Master Blueprint grew out of his own coursework on the OTHM Level 5 unit Academic Writing and Research Skills, structured around its four assessed Learning Outcomes, and has since been revised to strengthen its scholarly citation, methodological depth, and treatment of research ethics.

★ **Mission Statement**

To equip every student, researcher, and academic writer with a clear, evidence-based roadmap for constructing reliable arguments and credible research — written and used with integrity.

Preface: Why These Skills Matter

Every academic assignment, regardless of subject, ultimately asks the same underlying question: can you find good evidence, reason about it soundly, and communicate the result clearly and ethically? Academic writing and research skills are the shared infrastructure beneath every essay, report, and dissertation a student will ever produce.

This edition follows the unit's four Learning Outcomes in sequence — from what academic research and writing is, through the full research process including research philosophy, literature review methodology, and research ethics, to the critical thinking skills that let a researcher judge evidence and arguments, and finally to constructing a strong, valid, and well-supported academic argument of your own. Claims throughout are tied to citations rather than presented as unsupported assertion, and a single, alphabetised APA 7th-edition reference list appears at the end.

□ AI Insight & Application

Generative AI tools are now part of the research and writing landscape. Each Learning Outcome in this blueprint includes an AI Insight section addressing where these tools genuinely help, where they introduce risk — including hallucinated references and fabricated data — and how to use them without compromising the academic integrity the rest of this guide is built on.

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Learning Outcome 1: Understanding the Concept and Purpose of Academic Research and Writing

Learning Outcome 1 establishes the foundations: what academic research and writing actually means, the conventions that mark a text as academic, the different types of research, and the analytical skills that separate strong academic writing from mere description.

1.1 What Is Meant by 'Academic Research and Writing'

Academic research and writing refers to the structured process of investigating a topic thoroughly, gathering evidence from credible sources, analysing what that evidence shows, and presenting the result as a coherent, well-supported argument or thesis rather than an unsupported opinion (Silvia, 2007). The two activities are inseparable: research without disciplined writing produces knowledge no one else can use, while writing without research produces assertion rather than scholarship (Smith, 2016).

1.2 Different Academic Writing Conventions

Academic writing follows conventions that distinguish it from everyday communication: a formal, objective tone; claims backed by cited evidence rather than assertion; a clear structure of introduction, body, and conclusion; and rigorous, consistent grammar and punctuation throughout. Every cited source is credited using a recognised citation style; this guide adopts APA 7th edition throughout, which is the style most widely expected in business and social-science research, though Harvard and MLA remain common alternatives in other disciplines (Osmond, 2015).

1.3 Different Types of Academic Research

Experimental research tests a hypothesis through controlled conditions, allowing a researcher to establish cause and effect from the results. Qualitative research instead explores the reasons, meanings, and motivations behind a phenomenon, typically through interviews, focus groups, or observation. Quantitative research collects and statistically analyses numerical data to identify patterns and relationships. These sit alongside a purpose-based classification: exploratory studies investigate a poorly understood problem, descriptive studies characterise a phenomenon as it stands, and explanatory studies test why or how something happens.

1.4 From Description to Synthesis: Writing with Analytical Depth

Merely reporting what previous authors found does not constitute a strong academic literature review or argument. Strong academic writing moves through four progressively deeper levels: description (stating what a source says), analysis (breaking a claim or finding into its parts to see how it works), evaluation (judging the strength, limitations, and credibility of that claim), and synthesis (combining evidence from multiple sources to build an original, independent argument rather than a summary of others' work). Achieving this depth depends on a set of underlying skills: paraphrasing (restating an idea fully in your own words and sentence structure), summarising (condensing a longer argument to its essential point), and quotation (used sparingly, for language whose exact wording matters). At the paragraph level, a clear topic sentence states the paragraph's main idea, coherence keeps ideas logically ordered, cohesion uses transitional language to link

sentences smoothly, and a consistent academic voice keeps the writing formal, precise, and appropriately hedged throughout (Wilson, 2019).

★ Core Definition

Academic research and writing is the combined discipline of investigating a topic using credible, citable evidence and communicating the resulting findings and argument in a formal, structured, evidence-based written form — reaching synthesis rather than stopping at description.

□ AI Insight & Application

AI tools can quickly explain unfamiliar conventions, citation formats, or research types, which is useful early in a course. They cannot decide which type of research fits your assignment brief, and AI-generated paraphrases should always be checked against the original source, since automated rewording can subtly shift meaning without the writer noticing.

🔍 Self-Check Questions

1. What is the difference between analysis and evaluation when reading a source? 2. Why does patchwriting (lightly reworded copying) not count as paraphrasing? 3. Pick a paragraph you have written recently — does it have a clear topic sentence?

Learning Outcome 2: Know How to Conduct Academic Research

Learning Outcome 2 moves from concept to practice: comparing sources of evidence, understanding the full research process and the philosophical assumptions behind it, reviewing literature rigorously, distinguishing primary from secondary research, judging validity and reliability, and conducting research ethically.

2.1 Comparing Sources of Information and Evidence

Sources of evidence range in reliability from peer-reviewed journal articles and official statistics, through scholarly books and academic databases, down to general websites and opinion pieces. Before relying on any source, weigh it against three practical questions: is the author credible and qualified, is the publication current enough to still be relevant, and has the work been peer-reviewed (McCormack et al., 2009).

2.2 The Research Process: A Roadmap

A complete research process begins with a research problem — a gap or issue worth investigating — refined into a specific problem statement, from which research questions and research objectives are derived; in some studies these are further sharpened into testable hypotheses. From there, a literature-search strategy locates existing knowledge, which feeds into a theoretical framework (the established theory the study draws on) and, where appropriate, a conceptual framework (the study's own model of how its key variables relate). These choices are shaped by the researcher's research philosophy and lead to a research design, decisions about population and sampling, and a plan for measurement. Data is then collected, analysed, and interpreted, with validity, reliability, and research ethics considered at every stage rather than added at the end. The sections that follow examine several of these elements — research philosophy, literature review, validity and reliability, and ethics — in more depth. As with any roadmap, the process is iterative in practice rather than strictly linear; early reading often reshapes the original question.

2.3 Research Philosophy and Paradigms

Every research design rests on assumptions about the nature of knowledge, even when those assumptions are not stated. Positivism treats reality as objective and measurable, favouring quantitative methods and hypothesis testing. Interpretivism (sometimes called constructivism) treats reality as socially constructed and subjective, favouring qualitative methods that explore meaning and lived experience. Critical realism takes a middle position, accepting that an objective reality exists but arguing that our access to it is always filtered through social and historical context. Pragmatism sets these debates aside in favour of whatever combination of methods best answers the research question, and is the philosophy most associated with mixed-methods research (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). These philosophical positions relate to one another through a chain of assumptions: ontology (what is the nature of reality), epistemology (what counts as acceptable knowledge), methodology (the overall strategy for investigating that reality), and methods (the specific techniques used to collect and analyse data) — each philosophical position implies a characteristic stance on all four.

2.4 Literature Review Methodology

A literature review is not a list of summaries; it is a synthesis that identifies keywords, searches academic databases systematically, evaluates each source's credibility, compares findings across studies, identifies contradictions between them, and locates the gap the current research is positioned to fill. Grant and Booth (2009) distinguish several review types by rigour and purpose: a narrative review provides a discursive overview of a topic without a formally systematic search; a systematic review follows an explicit, replicable protocol to minimise bias; a scoping review maps the size and nature of existing evidence on an emerging topic, often as a precursor to a full systematic review; and an integrative review combines evidence from studies with different methodologies — qualitative and quantitative alike — into a single synthesis. Selecting the right type, and synthesising rather than merely summarising, is what turns a literature review into original scholarly contribution rather than a bibliography with commentary.

2.5 Primary vs Secondary Research

Primary research is first-hand data the researcher collects directly — surveys, interviews, experiments, or direct observation — tailored precisely to the question at hand but costly in time and resources. Secondary research analyses data or sources that already exist, which is faster to gather and provides valuable context, though it may not perfectly fit the specific question being asked. Combining both within a single project usually produces the most comprehensive, well-supported research design.

2.6 Validity and Reliability in Research

Validity and reliability are properties of research measurement, instruments, and design, not of an argument — a distinction worth stating clearly, since the two are sometimes conflated with the quality of an argument's reasoning (a matter addressed separately in Learning Outcome 4). Reliability concerns whether a measurement or method produces consistent results if repeated; validity concerns whether it actually measures what it claims to measure. Both concepts originate in quantitative, positivist research but have been usefully reinterpreted for qualitative work, where they are often reframed around credibility, dependability, and the researcher's transparency about their own role in constructing the findings (Golafshani, 2003).

2.7 Research Ethics and Academic Integrity

Because this guide explicitly promotes credible, responsible scholarship, research ethics deserves direct treatment rather than passing mention. Ethical norms exist because they promote the core aims of research — truth, trust, and accountability — and support the collaboration research depends on (Resnik, 2015). Where a study involves human participants, this means securing informed consent, protecting confidentiality and anonymity, ensuring participation is voluntary, respecting participants' privacy, and protecting them from harm. Separately, academic integrity requires avoiding plagiarism (presenting others' work as your own), fabrication (inventing data that was never collected), falsification (manipulating real data to misrepresent findings), and self-plagiarism (resubmitting your own prior work without permission or disclosure). Researchers are also expected to credit authorship honestly and to disclose any conflicts of interest that could bias their findings. The responsible use of AI tools in research is an emerging extension of these same principles, addressed further below.

★ Core Definition

The academic research process is the structured, often iterative sequence of defining a research problem, choosing a research philosophy and design, reviewing existing literature, gathering and evaluating evidence, analysing findings, and communicating conclusions ethically and with full, accurate citation.

□ AI Insight & Application

AI tools can help draft survey questions, summarise long secondary sources, or suggest search terms, and can speed up an initial literature scan considerably. They are also documented to occasionally generate hallucinated references — citations to sources that do not exist — fabricated quotations attributed to real ones, and even fabricated data presented as if it were genuinely collected, so every AI-suggested source or figure must be independently verified before it is used. Pasting unpublished data or a draft into a public AI tool can also compromise the confidentiality of research data, particularly where participants were promised confidentiality as part of informed consent, and text generated by AI and submitted as a researcher's own original work risks constituting AI-generated plagiarism if not properly disclosed. Any use of AI in the research process should therefore be disclosed in line with your institution's policy, distinguishing appropriate uses — idea generation, language polishing, source summarisation for the researcher's own review — from inappropriate ones, such as generating findings, citations, or analysis presented as the researcher's own unaided work.

✎ Self-Check Questions

1. Would a study measuring customer satisfaction through a large-scale survey sit closer to positivism or interpretivism? 2. What is the difference between a systematic review and a scoping review? 3. Name three obligations a researcher has toward human participants.

Learning Outcome 3: Know About Critical Thinking Skills

Learning Outcome 3 turns to the evaluative skills that sit behind good research and writing: what critical thinking involves, its component skills, why it matters, how to evaluate an argument, and the cognitive biases and fallacies that undermine sound reasoning.

3.1 What Is Meant by the Term 'Critical Thinking'

Critical thinking is the disciplined, objective process of analysing and evaluating an issue in order to form a reasoned judgement, rather than accepting a claim, source, or argument at face value. It means examining the assumptions, potential biases, and implications underneath the information — questioning and testing an idea rather than simply absorbing it.

3.2 Different Critical Thinking Skills

Four skills are especially central to critical thinking in everyday practice: analytical thinking (breaking complex information into its component parts), creative thinking (approaching a problem from unfamiliar angles), logical reasoning (drawing conclusions from evidence in a way that can be tested for flaws), and problem-solving (combining the other three to weigh options and choose an effective course of action). A more granular academic framework comes from Facione's (1990) Delphi Report, prepared for the American Philosophical Association, which identifies six core components of critical thinking: interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, explanation, and self-regulation. The two frameworks describe the same underlying skill from different angles rather than contradicting one another.

3.3 Why Critical Thinking Is Important in Academic Research

Critical thinking is what separates academic research from simply reporting what a source says. It sharpens problem-solving, promotes objectivity by keeping conclusions grounded in evidence rather than assumption, safeguards research quality by catching weak claims before they undermine an argument, and fosters the intellectual growth needed to reach an original insight rather than restate existing material.

3.4 Applying Techniques to Evaluate an Argument

Evaluating an argument draws on several concrete techniques used together: consider the strongest counterargument first, since it often reveals more about an argument's real strength than reading it in isolation; check that cited sources are actually reliable; question whether the argument's starting assumptions are true; assess whether the evidence offered is trustworthy and free of obvious bias; and examine whether the reasoning connecting evidence to conclusion is sound. Watching for the cognitive biases and logical fallacies below is a core part of this process.

3.5 Recognising Cognitive Biases and Logical Fallacies

Beyond outright fallacies, everyday reasoning is also shaped by cognitive biases: confirmation bias (favouring information that confirms what you already believe) and cherry-picking (selecting

only the evidence that supports a chosen conclusion while ignoring the rest) are two of the most common in academic work, since they can distort even a well-intentioned literature review. Practising intellectual humility — a genuine willingness to be wrong — and open-mindedness toward evidence that challenges your position are the most reliable long-term defences against both.

★ Core Definition

Critical thinking is the purposeful, self-regulated process of interpreting, analysing, evaluating, and drawing reasoned inferences about evidence and arguments, rather than accepting claims uncritically (Facione, 1990).

□ Cognitive Biases & Logical Fallacies

Ad hominem — attacking the person making the argument instead of the argument itself. Slippery slope — assuming one small step inevitably leads to an extreme, unlikely outcome without evidence for the chain. False analogy — treating two things as equivalent when their differences actually matter. Straw-man — misrepresenting an opponent's argument in a weaker form and then refuting that weaker version. False dilemma — presenting only two options when more actually exist. Circular reasoning — using the conclusion as one of the premises that supposedly proves it. Hasty generalisation — drawing a broad conclusion from a sample too small or unrepresentative to support it. Appeal to authority — treating a claim as true solely because an authority figure made it, regardless of the evidence. Red herring — introducing an irrelevant point to distract from the argument at hand (Govier, 2010).

□ AI Insight & Application

AI tools can generate large amounts of information and plausible-sounding argument almost instantly, which makes critical thinking more important, not less. The skill needed most in an AI-assisted research process is evaluating whether a claim, source, or AI output actually holds up — including checking it for exactly the fallacies and biases described above.

🔍 Self-Check Questions

1. What is the difference between confirmation bias and cherry-picking? 2. Identify the fallacy: 'Either we cut the entire budget, or the company goes bankrupt.' 3. Why is appeal to authority not automatically a strong form of evidence?

Learning Outcome 4: Understand How to Construct a Strong, Valid and Well-Supported Academic Argument

Learning Outcome 4 brings the unit together: the components of a strong academic argument, how deductive, inductive, and abductive reasoning differ, the Toulmin model, and a worked example applying it to an actual research argument.

4.1 The Key Components of a Strong Academic Argument

A strong academic argument rests on several interlocking components: a clear claim (the position being argued), evidence (facts, data, or examples that are relevant and accurate), reasoning (the logic connecting that evidence to the claim), warrants (the often-unstated assumption that makes the evidence relevant to the claim), counterarguments (opposing views that are acknowledged and addressed rather than ignored), and qualifications (language that states the argument's strength and limits honestly, such as 'in most cases' rather than 'always'). Together, these components — rather than 'reliability' and 'validity', terms more properly associated with research measurement and design, as noted in Learning Outcome 2 — are what determine whether an academic argument is genuinely strong and well-supported.

4.2 Deductive, Inductive, and Abductive Reasoning

Deductive reasoning moves from general premises to a specific conclusion, and produces a necessary conclusion only when the argument is valid and its premises are true — for example: all mammals have hair; a dog is a mammal; therefore a dog has hair. Inductive reasoning moves from specific observations to a broader conclusion that is probable rather than logically necessary, which is why inductive findings are typically expressed with a qualifier rather than stated as certain. Abductive reasoning, first described by the philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1958), moves from an incomplete set of observations to the most plausible explanation available — reasoning toward the best explanation rather than a certain or even a fully probable one, and is common in early-stage or exploratory research where the goal is to generate a plausible hypothesis rather than confirm one.

4.3 The Toulmin Model

Developed by the philosopher Stephen Toulmin (1958), this model breaks an argument into six parts: the claim (the main assertion), grounds (the evidence supporting it), warrant (the reasoning connecting grounds to claim), backing (support for the warrant itself), rebuttal (acknowledgement of counterarguments), and qualifier (a word signalling the strength or limits of the claim, such as 'often' or 'in most cases').

4.4 Worked Example: Applying the Toulmin Model

Consider a research argument that remote working improves employee productivity in knowledge-based roles. The claim is that remote working increases productivity for this group of employees. The grounds are survey and output data showing measurable productivity gains among remote

knowledge workers post-implementation. The warrant is the assumption that fewer office distractions and flexible scheduling translate into more effective use of working time — an assumption that itself needs to be stated, not left implicit. The backing supports that warrant with time-use research showing reduced interruption frequency in remote settings. The rebuttal acknowledges a credible counterargument: that productivity gains may not hold for roles requiring close, real-time collaboration, where remote working can introduce coordination costs. The qualifier keeps the claim honest by stating it applies 'primarily' to individual, knowledge-based tasks rather than to all roles universally. Laid out this way, the argument is stronger and more defensible than the bare claim alone, precisely because it makes its evidence, assumptions, and limits explicit rather than implicit.

★ Core Definition

An academic argument is a persuasive discourse that presents a claim supported by evidence and reasoning, structured so that a reader can evaluate — and be persuaded by — the logic connecting evidence to conclusion (Toulmin, 1958).

□ AI Insight & Application

AI tools can be genuinely useful at the argument-construction stage: suggesting plausible counterarguments to strengthen a rebuttal, checking whether a warrant has been left implicit, or flagging where a qualifier is missing. They cannot verify that the underlying evidence is real, and they cannot take responsibility for the argument's soundness. The governing principle throughout this guide is simple: AI may assist the research process, but the researcher remains responsible for the accuracy, originality, integrity, and ethical use of the final work.

🔍 Self-Check Questions

1. Why is a deductive conclusion only 'necessary' rather than automatically true? 2. In the worked example above, what work is the qualifier doing that the claim alone does not do? 3. When might abductive reasoning be more appropriate than deductive reasoning?

Discussion

Read together, the four Learning Outcomes make a consistent argument about how academic writing and research skills should be taught: definitions and frameworks are more useful, and more defensible, when they are tied to their scholarly origin and applied through a worked example than when they are presented as free-standing rules to memorise. Grounding critical thinking in Facione's (1990) six-component framework, research design in an explicit account of research philosophy, and argumentation in Toulmin's (1958) model with a worked illustration gives a student not just a vocabulary but a method they can apply to an unfamiliar assignment.

This revised edition also corrects errors that, left uncorrected, would have taught students something false — most notably the earlier overstatement that deductive conclusions are simply certain, and the earlier omission of abductive reasoning, research ethics, and research philosophy entirely. Addressing these gaps required expanding several sections substantially, particularly Learning Outcome 2, which now carries a heavier conceptual load than the other three. Instructors using this guide in a shorter taught unit may reasonably choose to treat research philosophy and the full literature-review typology as optional extension material rather than core content, without weakening the guide's treatment of citation practice, critical thinking, or argumentation.

The guide's main limitation is one shared by any introductory resource of this kind: it summarises a substantial methodological literature rather than substituting for it, and students undertaking a dissertation or a methodologically demanding research project should consult a dedicated research methods text — such as Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2019), cited throughout — rather than relying on this guide alone for methodological decisions with real consequences for their research design.

Conclusion

This Master Blueprint has presented a citation-supported, critically-informed introduction to academic writing and research skills, addressing four learning outcomes and correcting the conceptual and bibliographic errors identified in peer review. By tying its claims to scholarly sources, treating research philosophy, literature review methodology, and research ethics as core content rather than afterthoughts, and illustrating both critical thinking and academic argumentation with worked examples, the guide aims to leave students able to apply these skills to genuinely new material rather than reproduce a memorised checklist.

The guide's contribution is pedagogical rather than original empirical research, and it is offered on that basis: as an introductory research-skills manual for business and social-science students, to be used alongside — not instead of — the dedicated methodological texts it cites throughout.

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