

Developing originality

“It’s all been said before”

Are you struggling with the concept of originality?

At postgraduate level, assessment requirements often suggest that the grading of your work will be ‘determined by the presence of originality’ and, the ‘significant contribution’ that you will make to an existing body of knowledge.

However, the concept of ‘originality’ troubles many students. It is not unusual to be plagued by concerns that you have ‘nothing new to say’ and that ‘it has all been said and done before’. There is an additional fear that others may be concurrently producing similar work. As a result many postgraduate students become quite anxious about the level of originality in their work. To avoid this possibility, liaise with others in your field, discuss your research widely and read the work of others in your area.

While universities require some evidence of originality in postgraduate work, you must also conform to the norms of your discipline. This contradiction can be tolerated by recognising that the usually accepted components of seemingly routine work, when presented in a well argued, rigorous and appropriately supported way can also be recognised as ‘original’. Another issue is that students often have difficulty in recognising or acknowledging the originality of their own work and often need assistance to discover or recognise its presence.

The information in this pamphlet will provide you with some ideas related to the concept of originality and provide some techniques and strategies for recognising originality in your work. It will also provide ideas for developing original and creative approaches that you may be able to apply to your own work.

Re-thinking originality

Cryer (1997) suggests reassessing and developing originality can be a threefold process that requires you to:

- understand what originality can mean, how it might be interpreted and how it might manifest itself
- learn about and use lateral thinking and creative skills to facilitate originality
- allow an incubation period for these skills to develop effectively.

This suggests that there are ways to facilitate originality in your work, but they require time and effort.

Understanding what ‘originality’ means

One problem with the term ‘originality’ is that students and supervisors may understand this concept differently. If there is no discussion between students and supervisors about what ‘originality’ means, difficulties may arise. Phillips and Pugh (1994:62) note, ‘students and supervisors [may] use the same word to describe a range of different concepts [but may not] discuss with each other the definitions to which they are working’. This lack of discussion may result in inconsistent assumptions and expectations for both the student and the supervisor.

Some postgraduate students believe that they have to develop a ‘whole new way’ of considering a topic. Some supervisors assume that the student understands that it is sufficient to contribute an incremental step in understanding. Often it is through ‘trial and error’ at different periods of their candidature that students realise only a small step forward may be required.

Therefore, the element of originality in your own research is, realistically, likely to be small; highly original research is very unusual (Blaxter, Hughes & Tight, 1998:13). While you may perceive your contribution to be ‘small’, remember that it is still an original contribution – and that you may not be the best person to judge your work’s significance.

As with depth and complexity of information, the extent of originality required will also be determined by the level of your degree. If you are undertaking a postgraduate diploma the requirement for originality or significant contribution is less than if you are completing a doctorate.

For example:

Degree level	Approach	Academic goal
Undergraduate	Reproductive	Correctness of information presented (with an element of analysis)
Masters or Postgraduate diploma	Analytical	‘Simple originality’ which may include reshaping material or considering information in other ways
Doctorate	Speculative	‘Creative originality’ new approaches / new knowledge

Academic Skills

Some criteria which may merit 'originality'

- Presenting a major piece of new information in writing for the first time ✓
- Extending, qualifying or elaborating on an existing piece of work ✓
- Undertaking an original piece of work designed by someone else ✓
- Developing a new product or improving an existing one ✓
- Reinterpreting an existing theory, maybe in a different context ✓
- Demonstrating originality by testing someone else's idea ✓
- Carrying out empirical work that has not been done before ✓
- Using a different methodological approach to address a problem ✓
- Synthesising information in a new or different way ✓
- Providing a new interpretation using existing / known information ✓
- Repeating research in other contexts, for example, a different country ✓
- Applying existing ideas to new areas of study ✓

- Taking a particular technique and applying it in a new area ✓
- Developing a new research tool or technique ✓
- Taking a different approach, for example a cross-disciplinary perspective ✓
- Developing a portfolio of work based on research ✓
- Adding to knowledge in a way that has not previously been done before ✓
- Conducting a study on a previously unresearched area or topic ✓
- Producing a critical analysis of something not previously examined ✓

Adapted from Phillips and Pugh (1994, p.61-62).

If you review your work for the presence of these criteria, you should recognise that your research is original in some way. If you still cannot find the 'originality' within your work, then discuss this with your supervisor.

Additionally, talk to your colleagues, peers, family and friends. These are the people who know you best and they often provide useful sounding boards for many of the issues that confront you as you undertake postgraduate studies.

Open your mind to enhance your creativity

Sometimes our own perceptions stop us from being 'original' or 'creative' by not allowing us to see alternative and constructive options. However, it is our own creativity that is the key to accessing originality. If you are having trouble perceiving or developing originality within your research, then perhaps it is time to actively exercise your creativity.

Try the following strategies and techniques (adapted from Carter, Bishop and Kravits, 1996:144-145) to develop your creativity and discover your own originality:

- **Assume a broad perspective** – this will allow you to think widely about your research as opposed to thinking about it from a pre-conceived position.
- Spend time around **innovative people** whose thinking inspires you.
- **Read widely** and think about a range of topics.
- **Enjoy activities** such as walking, music, meditating, and daydreaming to stimulate creative ideas.
- **Give yourself time** – it is important to recognise that originality is a developing process. As you continue with your research, you will realise that there are many different definitions and ways in which your work demonstrates originality.
- **Collect your ideas** – use reflection, daily writing, mind maps, and journals to expand the material you can use to build creative ideas.
- Don't get too focused on finding only the 'right' answers; **explore alternatives**.
- **Don't always be logical or practical** – dare to break the rules and challenge conformity – sometimes too much emphasis on practicality can narrow the scope of your ideas.
- **Be open to playing and playfulness** – people often think of ideas when they are trying not to think about their research. It is often when your mind is 'at play' that it is easier to generate new thoughts.
- **Engage in brainstorming** sessions. Let yourself think freely – what seems like a crazy idea might turn into a brilliant discovery.
- **Don't fear failure** – it can open your mind to new possibilities and reveal to you the value of critical thinking.
- **Always consider yourself creative** – use positive self-talk.

Further Resources

Blaxter, L., Hughes, C. & Tight, M. (1998). *How to research*. USA: Open University Press.

Carter, C., Bishop, J. & Lyman Kravits, S. (1996). *Keys to success: How to achieve your goals*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

Cryer, P. (1997). *The research student's guide to success*. USA: Open University Press.

De Bono, E. (1985) *Six thinking hats*. England, Penguin.

Phillips, E.M. & Pugh, D.S. (1994). *How to get a PhD*. USA: Open University Press.

Academic Skills