

From successful graduation to successful career

Techniques to bridge the jump from further education to work
Patrick Forsyth

A man in a dark suit and blue tie is writing the word 'SUCCESS' in large, white, stylized letters on a transparent surface. He is holding a white marker in his right hand. The background is a blue grid pattern. In the bottom right corner, there is a bar chart with several vertical bars of varying heights, some in shades of blue and some in white.

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Patrick Forsyth

From successful graduation to successful career

Techniques to bridge the jump from further
education to work



From successful graduation to successful career: Techniques to bridge the jump from
further education to work

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The Author

Patrick Forsyth is a consultant, trainer and writer. He has worked with organisations large and small and in many different parts of the world. He is the author of many successful books on management, business and careers and prides himself on having a clear how-to style.

One reviewer (“Professional Marketing”) commented: *Patrick has a lucid and elegant style of writing which allows him to present information in a way that is organised, focused and easy to apply.*

In this series he is also the author of several titles including “Your boss: sorted!” and “How to get a pay rise”. His writing extends beyond business. He has had published humorous books (e.g. *Empty when half full*) and light-hearted travel writing: *First class at last!*, about a journey through South East Asia, and *Smile because it happened* about Thailand. His novel, *Long Overdue*, was published in November 2014.

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1 Introduction: preparing to jump ahead

Attendance at university, or any other further education establishment for that matter, is hard work and the achievement of a qualification is not something that “just happens”. Of course, attendance can be fun too, and additionally the fact is that much that goes on during this period can also provide opportunities to link to the world of work beyond; an active approach here can give you advantages that can stand you in good stead as you move on. Ignoring this area can see the moment pass and put you at a disadvantage just when you want all to go well. After all, the jump from university to the world of work is probably greater, and more fraught with uncertainty, than that from school to further education.

It was journalist Katherine Whitehorn who said: *The best careers advice to give to the young is “Find out what you like doing best and get someone to pay you for doing it”*. Would that it was that easy. Realistically, moving on to the world of work can present some difficulties. The world of work is competitive, employers set high standards and a qualification, however good, is rarely a passport to immediate successful selection and a job for life (if such a thing exists these days – banks used to be regarded as safe employers for goodness sake).

Thus it makes sense to link your studies to the world of work. Indeed the more consideration you give to the transition from study to work *during* your time in higher education, rather than as it ends, the easier you can make that transition and the more likely it is to go the way you want.

You may have had some experience of work as part of your course, for example on some science or business programmes you may have a year in industry, or you may have had a year working abroad as part of, say, a languages programme. On other courses, a project may have involved you working with local businesses. However, for most students their time at university is far removed from the world of work.

Two different circumstances may direct your thoughts as you look ahead, either you may:

- Know what you want to do either specifically or in general terms; perhaps you want to be a doctor, a banker or in human resources and such choices may need some refining (for example, human resources takes you so far, but into what area specifically and which sector/country do you want to work in, whether you want to be with a large organisation or a smaller one, a commercial one or a non-commercial one and so on are all matters that will need decision)
- Not know what you want to do; in which case you will need to do some thinking during your time in higher education that aims to put you in the category above.

While it is certainly possible that over time you will change your view, not least because of experiences you have during your time at university, in either case, there are a number of areas for possible action. Just how you deal with each will depend on how far along your decision making is and what direction it is taking you in. Here a range of suggestions are made and one particular area is investigated in more detail to illustrate the possibilities. Nothing here is complicated or likely to take very much time, but the positive difference such things can make is significant.

2 First steps

Your immediate goal is to obtain the qualification you are targeting and work – studies, projects, practical work and whatever else your course may involve – must be selected, arranged and carried out with that end in mind. But sometimes you might sensibly go further. Consider if additional work, experiences or projects might help you go beyond your coursework and assist you with the transition to the workplace that will be coming in due course. There are many and varied possibilities here. Some examples will illustrate the range:

- Reading, this ranging from additional books to regular reading of a magazine or journal in a specialist area
- Research and investigation on the Internet
- Meeting people or visiting organisations: ranging from a museum to an organisation that might be a future employer.

Look for opportunities and assess each possibility in this way – asking how it can help your immediate studies and how it might help beyond that. You cannot do everything and need to fit in good choices in this respect.

Study skills: career skills

Similarly you might want to spend time acquiring and developing skills inherently necessary in some way to your study but which are also what might be called *career skills* because they are skills demanded in the sort of job you ultimately seek. Such include:

- Writing; for instance, essay writing may serve to kick start the writing of reports, business documents or policy papers if you aim to work in any sort of organisation
- Presentation; many jobs demand this of you and it may even be worthwhile to engineer doing more than the minimum number during your studies just to increase the practice you get. There are other areas allied to this such as projecting confidence, negotiating skills, etc.
- Analysis, team working, project management, decision making and problem solving are all similar in nature – often needing to be deployed in the world of work
- Interview skills deployed during study, perhaps to obtain information, will be a useful basis for the job seeking process and beyond within work.

Some such things, depending on your intentions, may be much more specific. For example, studying mathematics may take you into areas with practical application in your intended area of work, as sampling technique might be relevant to statistical work or market research. Not only are such things useful, it may reduce the chore aspect of some if you have identified additional reasons to spend time and effort on them.

Faced with decisions as to how to deal with something specific, such as making effective presentations, judge the activity necessary to take you forward not just on what is necessary to your current situation, rather look ahead and judge the time and effort worth allocating in the longer term too.

Social life and activities

Life in higher education is not all work, work, work; perhaps we should say it *must* not be like that. You need to develop social skills and other interests, you need to relax and have fun. Many things may meet this need and add to the overall experience you are getting. Indeed there will hopefully be time to indulge anything you fancy. If you are into athletics or astronomy then join the relevant societies or clubs; enjoy, but bear in mind that doing well at anything will look positive on your curriculum vitae (CV) later on.

Bear in mind though that some such activities have more direct advantages, for instance you might get involved:

- With societies and activities that have a direct bearing on your studies and extend the learning you experience in a useful way. For example, if you are studying Film, Drama, History, or a language, amongst other things, there is almost certainly a student society linked to that
- In a capacity that produces additional experience and links to career skills as discussed above.
- In activities that link to desirable experience and skills, and you may just include things of general use or aim to link specifically with your career goals.

Note: it is worth bearing in mind how such things will appear to a future prospective employer, for example involvement with something directly linked to work will be seen as (and can be described as) good forward thinking.

All this is worth some thought. It is easy to join numbers of groups early on, choosing on little more than a wave of enthusiasm or to meet or stay in contact with particular people, and then find that, while enjoyable, they serve no other useful purpose. Your choices here should certainly fit your recreational needs, but if they can do more than that then so much the more useful. This is an area where a simple pie chart might help you split and manage time spent on this sort of thing so that such activities sit comfortably alongside your work and study tasks.

Choose and monitor your participation in social groups with an eye on exactly what it will involve you in and how its activities may help you, both in learning and as a relevant experience to list on your record. It may be useful to list details of the potential advantages of membership of any group you consider joining.

Assessing society membership

Such listing will enable you to assess how useful memberships might be (the fun element does not need to feature here – you can assess this much less formally). “Career” skills/experience might include such things as:

- Working as a member of a committee (or should you set your sights higher, aiming to take the chair?)
- Team working
- Managing people or projects
- Computer work
- Communications and more.

It is worth noting points like this for a single society; or you can compare two or more as is useful, after all time is limited and such choices matter.



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Paid work

Perhaps it is worth including paid work here too. Most students need to do some work during their time in higher education. Organising so that the nature of the work done is useful rather than just a source of funds is not easy; it can be difficult to find suitable part time work at all. But at least think about the nature of what you do – if you can find something with practical applications it is just one more way to get more out of the experience.

Identifying opportunities

Be open minded, curious and enquiring about everything you are exposed to. There are many links to be made and some may not be immediately apparent. For example:

- A debating society may not rank high on your list of things to do, but if you need to develop public speaking skills then that might make it a must and something to feature on your CV later
- Others may be more specifically linked: job applications to banks might benefit from anything linking to finance or economics and those to international organisations might similarly list any overseas involvements or trips during your course.

Particularly early on you should read all the information you are given in a considered fashion to make sure you are not missing opportunities. Much like this comes through interaction with other people; hence the next heading.

Networking

As you come to the end of your course it is worth considering who you might keep in contact with to help you in future. Obviously you will keep in touch with your close friends, but it might be worth thinking about any other people you have met on your course, in a student society or in your residence who may be a useful contact in future.

Remember that you will be moving from a familiar situation, one where most people who are useful or important are easy to maintain contact with, to one where a much wider range of disparate contacts may need to be assembled in relation to your progress into the workplace. This may well mean that a more overt and systematic approach is necessary; the following details summarise what might usefully be involved. Three things are important:

- Making contact and finding out about people. You are going to meet lots of new people and of course a major judgement is whether you like them. Will you get on? But it may be worth thinking about what they are doing, what societies they belong to, whether they would make a useful contact or collaborator. There is truth in the old saying that it is not what you know, but who you know. Both matter of course, but do not neglect this aspect of your personal interactions – either with fellow students or others you meet along the way (including both academic and administrative staff)
- Keeping records of people: it is very easy to find yourself grasping for names – who was the guy you sat next to at some function, who said they were into computer design or whatever? Some months on the name may escape you. It seems a bit clinical, but keep a note of anyone who you might want to re-contact; all it takes is a simple file and a few minutes now and then – for instance a mobile phone number entered into your phone can be linked to a note in a file so that some months on you are not saying – *Who's Mary?*
- Keep in touch: it is not too difficult to maintain some sort of contact where possible collaboration may be useful. Again it may only take a few minutes and allows either party to make more specific contact later with someone who is remembered. It is useful to ring the changes here, using a variety of different contact methods (including, but not exclusively, social media).

Having said all that do bear in mind that classically networking is a *mutual* process. It works best where there are common interests (of whatever sort) and where each party can help the other. Sometimes contacts made in this way, initially without firm purpose, blossom into a really useful relationship. A factor to consider these days is that of social networking sites like Facebook. Such can be useful, though they can also develop into great timewasters.

Some networking is informal and second nature – but explore what taking a slightly more formal approach can do for you. Results may soon show this is worthwhile.

Job seeking

There may be specific things to do here, especially as you get to the latter part of your chosen course. How to get a job (and skills like coming over well at interviews) are matters beyond our brief here, though it is worth saying that some research and thinking ahead about what's necessary is only sensible. Leaving that aside for separate study, there is one thing that needs some attention throughout your course and that concerns your CV.

As soon as you get into the process of actually applying for a job, however this is done, you will need a suitably written and logically laid out description of your experience, competencies and career intentions. At this stage note one thing about CVs: a standard one has limited use. They most often need tailoring to their purpose; so if you apply for a particular job you may sensibly reword some of your “standard” CV to emphasise those qualities and factors that best fit you for the particular job.

When you come to it you will write a better CV if you have opened a file as you start your course and kept notes of those things that might be worth mentioning and done so progressively. The field trip you take, the committee you serve on or chair, all such things are worth noting and it will make it much easier to draft an impressive document when the time comes if you have these notes as a kind of checklist. Remember that at this stage of your life there is a limited period to document, yet there will still be a need to make a case for yourself that differentiates you from others in the eyes of a potential employer.

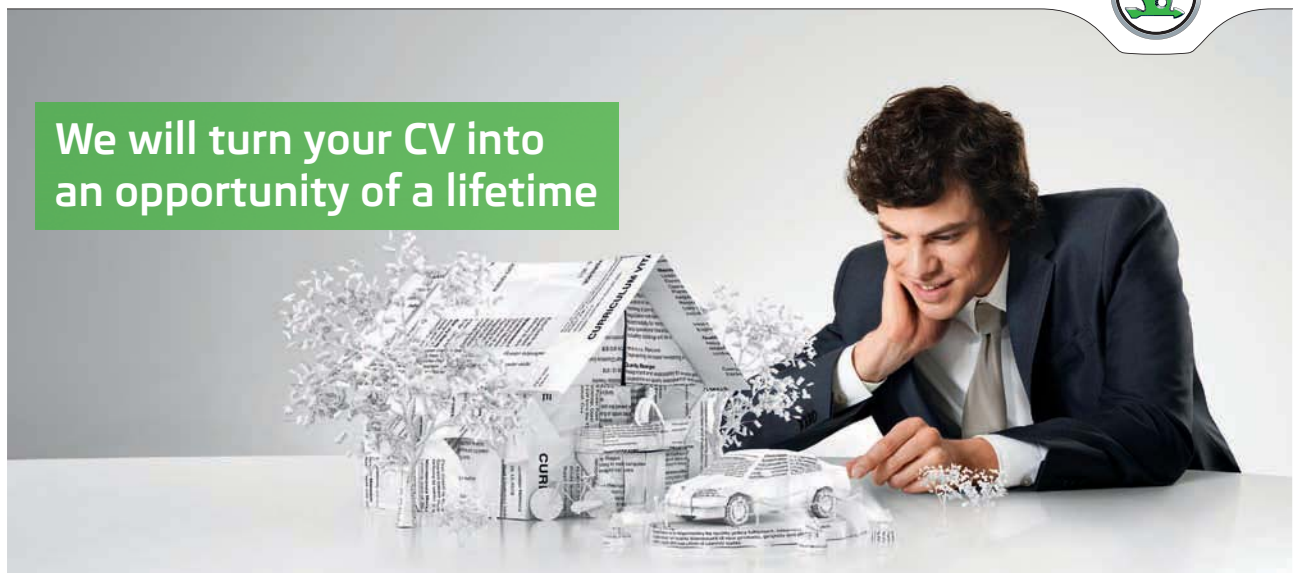
Open a CV file and keep adding to it throughout your time in higher education. You may even need to use early versions of it – to secure an industry placement as part of your course, perhaps. Doing so gives you the raw material for writing a powerful CV when it matters.

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3 Your career plan: the need for self-assessment

“If you’re not planning where you want to be, what reason do you have for worrying about being nowhere?” So said business guru Tom Hopkins and it is a fair point. Whatever you may want or intend doing this makes sense and, as was said earlier, if you do not take steps to make a decision the problem may get worse. Make sure you use your university’s career service, especially if you are uncertain as to the career you wish to follow. Don’t think that you need to know exactly what you want to do when you leave before you can visit; the opposite is true. The Careers Service can help you:

- Get to know the wide range of careers and employers available
- Identify the career options available to individuals with your (future) qualification
- Work through your own ideas, and identify the best career options for you
- Prepare for the career you wish to follow, identifying the skills and expertise you will need, or any further training necessary
- Secure a placement as a kind of test drive, and to obtain work experience
- Maximise your chances of securing a job in your chosen field.

Making contact with the Careers Service early in your course will ensure you get maximum benefit. In any case, towards the end of your course you are likely to need an immediate focus on examinations.

If you are to influence your career, certainly if you are to positively influence it, then you need to be clear about the direction in which you want it to go. This may sound obvious and easy, but in fact implies a good deal and needs some careful thought. When I was at school I wanted to be an astronomer. This was born of a passionate interest in the subject rather than any link with my actual or likely abilities, but it was still my earliest career plan. However, on checking out what might be necessary, realism soon set in and, though the interest continues, career progress took other paths. Career planning, perhaps sadly, does not mean just conjuring up plans that are no more than pie in the sky. Aim high by all means, but proceed also on a clear, accurate and honest assessment of what might realistically be possible.

Deciding the direction you want to take must first involve some inward analysis. Again this is activity that can usefully take place during rather than after your course, not least because you want to minimize the time between your course finishing and starting a job. Spend a moment, go about it the right way and it can pay dividends; suggestions as to how this can be done follow.

We doubtless all like to think we know ourselves, but this may not be entirely true. It is easy to make assumptions, to leave key elements out of the picture and so, as a result, misjudge how our current profile lends itself to career progress, and just what sort of progress may be possible. Assumptions can link back to past experience, fears, bad experiences or a host of things.

The first step to deciding a route forward from your current position is to look at where you are at the moment (or where you hope to be once you have your qualification). This should be done systematically and honestly and you may find it useful to keep some notes of what the thinking produces. The next several sections lead you through a suitable and proven progression of self-analysis, which assesses your skills, work values, personal characteristics, and also your non-work characteristics. Of course, let's say up front your view of some of these things may change. So be it, but you have to start somewhere and can always adapt your view over time.

Areas for review are to assess your:

- Skills
- Work values
- Personal characteristics
- Non-work characteristics



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These are now addressed in turn; if you are just starting your course do not worry that you may not be able to produce a definitive list under each heading, but importantly do note that by the time you approach the end of your time at university you need to be able to make a good shot at this or it will be difficult to direct you job-seeking activities or know what you want to achieve.

Assess your skills

You might be surprised at how many skills you have. Remember that it is quite possible that things you do and take for granted, you can only in fact do because of some experience. So list all the things for which in a work context you have a genuine aptitude. Some general headings linking to the work place under which to group your abilities may be:

<i>Communications</i>	Everything from writing a report to issuing instructions
<i>Influencing skills</i>	That includes persuading, negotiating and promoting ideas)
<i>Management and team working</i>	Everything to do with managing and/or working with other people)
<i>Problem solving</i>	Analysing and drawing conclusions and coming up with solutions)
<i>Creativity</i>	Generating ideas, seeing things in the round, having an open mind
<i>Social skills</i>	Not just relating to people but having insight, helping others, facilitating
<i>Numerical skills</i>	handling figures, statistics, accounts, etc. and other numerical data
<i>Special skills</i>	Here such skills as speaking a foreign language, unusual technical skills, and so on should be mentioned)
<i>Computer literacy</i>	This is such a key part of so many jobs these days, albeit to different levels, that it deserves its own heading).

Make notes to link your growing list of experience and skills to your record as it will be seen by prospective employers on your CV. Thus do not just say “I belonged to the XYZ Society”. Say “I gained experience of communications and team working by being an active member of the XYZ Society, chairing their ABC Committee and organizing projects such as...” This sort of thing can add powerfully to your profile at a key time.

The format that follows will give you basis to create a personal version of this, as in the example using one of the categories mentioned above. This can go into whatever detail is appropriate, for example under computer literacy you might want to list specific software programmes with which you are familiar.

Influencing skills	Persuading
	Negotiating
	Promoting ideas

Main skills categories	Subsidiary skills

Even before your work career really starts you should have the full picture in mind and recorded. Bear in mind too that:

- Such a list will change over time
- You may see gaps or omissions in such a list; these you can resolve to fill in terms of adding or extending competencies.

Decide which headings along the lines of the above are right for you, and make some notes. It might be an interesting exercise to do this now while this book is focusing your mind on it, then checking and revising it occasionally as your time in higher education progresses. Some of the topics listed above will reoccur as headings in their own right and you may view things differently after a review of how important some of the skill areas are from a career point of view.

Assess your work values

It is not enough to know what skills you have. These must be viewed alongside your work values. For instance, ask if you have:

- A strong need to achieve
- A need for high financial reward
- High work interest/satisfaction requirements
- A liking for doing something “worthwhile”
- A desire to do something creative
- Specific requirements (such as to travel, to be independent, innovative or part of a team)?

A wide range of permutations may be involved here (think about it) and such may change over time. For example, travel may be attractive to the young and single but less so to people who have young children, then it may become more attractive again when a family is older.

Assess your personal characteristics

Most people do not change their habits and ways, at least they do not do so dramatically and certainly not without effort, once they are old enough to be into a career. You need to assess yourself in this respect and do so honestly. Ask for example:

- Are you innovative?
- Positive?
- Optimistic?
- Hard working?
- Prepared to take risks?
- What sort of a person, in fact, are you?

Again a simple format will allow you to record any self-analysis you do here.

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There may be a clash here. In thinking through your work values you feel that you may be suited to, and want to be involved in, something with considerable cut and thrust, that is innovative, creative and which generally puts you working at the leading edge. However, an honest assessment of yourself may show that, whatever the superficial or status attraction of this option, it is just not really you. For example, risk-taking may not be your thing and a different, perhaps more supportive role, may seem to be where you are likely to excel most. Again list what you feel is relevant about yourself here.

Assess your non-work characteristics

Realistically work and social life have to coexist alongside each other. They may do so peaceably, or there may be conflicts between them. It is not automatically necessary to career success to be a workaholic, though a strictly 9 to 5 attitude to your job is perhaps not recommended (or possible) either. And on the positive side, work and interests or hobbies may overlap constructively, the one teaching you something about the other. There will be questions to be asked here too:

- What are your family/social circumstances?
- Where do you need/want to live?
- How much time can you spend away from home?
- What are your other responsibilities and interests?

Consider family and interests specifically:

- **Family:** If you have good friends, a partner, wife or husband then priorities may need to be set, because career-building priorities can clash. It is, sadly, perfectly possible to arrive successfully at the top of the heap – a success in career terms, but with home, social life and happiness in ruins. This may sound dramatic, but the issues here are worth some serious thought. Not least, there are times when career decisions must be made fast or opportunities will be lost. If the relationships between home, family and work have never been discussed, then the person who comes home from the office to tell their partner: *I have this great new opportunity with the company, but it means living in Hong Kong for two years*, is in for some heated debate, especially if they have promised to go back to the office the next day with a decision. Such situations can occur at every stage of a career. They are not dependent on which half of a partnership instigates them and are made more complicated by changing and more complex circumstances as you get older.

- **Interests:** Interests are an important issue. All work and no play is, for most of us, a bad thing. You need to look at your interests and hobbies alongside the job and your future career intentions. Can they move forward together? How much time do you want to put into hobbies, social life and work? These are not easy questions and must be worked out over a period of time. Even so there may come times when there are clashes; especially with things that have wide impact such as working overseas. If you have thought it all through, and discussed it with other family members as appropriate, then transient problems are more likely to be just that – transient.

Once you have completed this personal analysis it then needs to be related to the outside world.

Linking your analysis of yourself with market demands

Whatever profile your various self-analysis exercises builds up, it must match realistically with the demands made by employers in the marketplace. Let's put that more specifically: it must match up with the demands made by employers in whatever sector you intend to excel in. So, whilst there are perhaps generally desirable characteristics that we might list:

- Being adaptable to change (or able to prompt it)
- Flexible
- Self-sufficient
- Thorough
- Productive and so on,

...there will also be more specific characteristics in terms of abilities and nature which will be demanded in a particular field. Indeed, a certain competence or characteristic may be an asset in one area and frowned on in another, as something like creativity might be differently regarded in an advertising agency and a more traditional business. Similarly what for some is drive and initiative, might be regarded elsewhere as aggressive and self-seeking.

Consider the implications of this: having analysed yourself and your intended field of employment then, if the analysis does not persuade you that mismatching must make you look elsewhere, you must aim to cultivate the appropriate profile for success in that field. The better the match, the better the chances are that your profile will allow you to do well, and progress along your chosen path.

Success is not however guaranteed simply by a good match. An anecdote will perhaps illustrate a point arising from this fact. A good friend had a son who had just left acting college and was intent on carving out a career on the stage. We went to see a play he was in at a small London “fringe” theatre; a production in which the cast were all young people starting out on their careers. His performance – as Macbeth – seemed excellent, and this was expressed to the friend later. “What else did you notice?” he asked and, when no answer came, he commented, “*Everyone* in the cast was excellent”. His point was that talent was not going to be the only factor in his son’s possible success. He *is* good, but he has to get ahead of a strong field just to work regularly in this field, and certainly to rise to the rank of star. So it is in many fields. Just having the right qualifications and aptitudes is rarely sufficient – others have them too – you have to have them in the right amount and at the right level; and they must show. Then if you work at it (and perhaps have some good luck too, though this is not something to rely on), you may carve out success for yourself. But never make the mistake of thinking this happens in a vacuum – it happens with others around you trying to do similar things. The workplace is inherently competitive. Knowing how well you match up is, nevertheless, a good starting point – one worth some thought.

Sum up your analysis and set clear goals

As management guru Peter Drucker said in a much copied phrase about businesses, *If you do not know where you are going, any road will do*. It is true; you need a plan and having one does make a difference. As with any business – so it is with any career. It’s surely no more than common sense, and yet conversely it is so very easy to wake up one day and find that what we have been wont to regard as planning is actually wholly insubstantial. Having said that objectives are important, another point should be made: they must be flexible. Life in all its aspects, certainly within organizations which might employ you, is dynamic. Objectives cannot be allowed to act as a straightjacket, yet we need their guidance, so their potential for acting to fix things should not be regarded as a reason not to have them.

In the business world, people talk of “rolling” plans. By this is meant a plan that is reasonably clear and comprehensive for the shorter term, then sets out broad guidelines and further ahead has only main elements clearly stated. As time goes by, the plan can be updated and advanced into the future. With your career in mind, you will find a similar approach works well. In the short term, when you can anticipate more of what may happen, the detail of how you intend to proceed is clearer; further ahead you have notes on the outline strategy and key issues. For instance, remembering to decide: *My objective is to become a marketing director*, is not much help without some clear actions and steps along the way.

Clear information

Some research may be useful alongside all this. For example, you may, as was said, want work in business and (ultimately) be a marketing director. But do you know what that entails? Really? Check it out. The box shows a typical job description for the post of marketing manager, a step below the board level job.

MARKETING MANAGER

Description

Responsible for the strategic direction of all marketing activity on specific products/services

Personal specification

- 3 + years experience in marketing – or product management
- Able to think strategically and direct delivery
- Works well in multi-disciplined teams
- Forms close knit relationships with outside agencies

Responsibilities

- Reports to Marketing Director
- Ensures product/service matches brand positioning
- Identifies target markets and works with data manager to provide external agencies with relevant data
- Plans communication strategy and liaises with all members of the campaign team to ensure effective and efficient delivery
- Analyses results of all marketing activity and presents findings and recommendations to senior management/product management
- Builds close knit teams, own and cross-departmental
- Liaises with external agencies to ensure clear understanding of the marketing strategy.



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The above is probably sort of description that would best fit a largish company, maybe in the consumer products area (where external advertising agencies are often used). Whatever interests you some checking may be useful; here a body like the Chartered Institute of Marketing might provide useful information. You need to think about sources too. Such a picture can usefully be linked to the skills such a job demands too. To continue the example, as well as knowledge and experience of marketing, such a person needs to:

- Be an effective manager (able to recruit, select, train, plan, organize, and control a diverse group of people)
- Take a long term view (i.e. direct the business, set strategic objectives and define a framework of targets, priorities and policies to drive towards them)
- Understand and be able to work with other business functions as necessary (e.g. production and finance)
- Be numerate (because marketing is concerned with profit generation)
- Know and be able to utilise new and IT technology as necessary
- Be productive (time management is important in every job)
- Make effective decisions
- Communicate effectively
- Remain close to the market and understand customers
- Achieve results, not just organize activities.

It is clearly beyond the space available here to analyse even this one job in more detail, let alone every job that might interest you, in the space available. But the principle is clear. You need to make sure you know sufficient about the field you aim for and base what you do on this knowledge.

Making objectives useful

Objectives should be SMART. This well-known mnemonic stands for specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timed, thus:

Specific – expressed clearly and precisely

Measurable – it must be possible to tell if you have achieved something (the difference between saying you want to be “very successful” or to be “marketing director”)

Achievable – what you aim for must not be so difficult as to be pie in the sky; otherwise the plan that goes with it similarly becomes invalid and of no practical help in taking things forward

Realistic – it must fit with your self-analysis and be what you want; it might be a valid objective to aim for something possible but not ideal (promotion might be possible within a department, but your real intention is to get out beyond that) but this will not be helpful. Action is needed with more ambitious objectives in mind

Timed – this is important; objectives are not to be achieved “eventually” but by a particular moment: when do you aim to be marketing director, this year, next year or when?

There is no need for you to complete elaborate documentation here. Any objectives and any plans are purely for your own guidance, but a few notes on paper may be useful and there are times (such as when your spell of higher education is finishing) when it may be useful to think of current events alongside the notes you have made. If you not only know which road you should be on, but have taken steps to make sure you go purposively along it, then that is a good start. It certainly helps answer the first two important questions the answers to which help direct your career: *Do you know what you want?* And, *Are you aiming high?*

If you have never thought things through before in this kind of way, then I recommend doing so to you. It may take a moment initially, but once done needs little time to keep updated. If you always base all your career choice, career management and development activity on such sound analysis, clear thinking and specific objectives then it is more likely that both your long term action and the way you spot and take advantage of opportunities along the way will take you where you want to go.

Research to assist your progress

There is an important point to accept here, and it is one reinforced by the old saying that “information is power”. Your career plan can only succeed if it is based on fact. So, you may need to know such things as:

- What prevailing salary levels are in a particular function or industry
- How many companies operate in a certain field or are located in a particular town
- Or, what qualifications are normally essential entry requirements in your kind of job in, say, Australia.

Whatever it is you should check, check carefully and, if necessary check again. Sources have never been more prolific. If it needs a telephone call, a visit to a good library or an hour on the Internet, so be it. It is your life and career and it is surely too important to base on hunch, hearsay or out of date information.

Listing the many possible sources that might be relevant to research to assist a career plan is beyond the space and brief here, but some, when you have discovered them, should be noted carefully; you may well need them again.

An action plan

Certainly towards the end of your course, these thoughts should take on the form of an action plan. This is may well be a plan that you show to no one else. It does not need to be written up like a report, indeed it may be brief, but you should have a record of certain things in writing. Keep this safely, perhaps with other related documents and information (for example, your draft C.V.).

Your plan should list specifics:

- Goals you set yourself, for example to be at a particular level by (date)
- Stepping stones along the way (say to join a management committee as the first step to moving up a level)
- Means to an end (for instance learning to speak French so that you might be considered for work overseas).

In addition it may also be worth listing thoughts *requiring* more work to realise them – *I must find a way to get an opportunity to travel* – and then amending these into more specific objectives.

Such systematic analysis effectively provides a template for thinking about the way ahead. Such things can seem daunting or a chore, but are eminently worthwhile. Once done, and this takes a moment, they are not difficult or time consuming to update and are with you for life.

As you move on from your time in higher education you want to have gained as much as possible, in every way possible, from the experience. As this chapter illustrates, maximising the experience is not something that “just happens”. Rather it needs some thought and it needs working at. Doing both is certainly worthwhile. And, though it is obvious enough, remember that it is too late as you leave college or university to be realising that a little more thought or a greater involvement in something during your time there would have given you a better overall experience and a better stepping stone into the world of work.

Some of the thoughts expressed in this chapter may seem to look too far ahead; perhaps too far ahead to worry about. But you know what the speed of change is like, you know, from these pages not least, that the workplace is competitive and you will have heard the phrase lifelong learning (and be aware too how some careers demand what is called Continuous Professional Development – CPD – to ensure those working in them keep up to date). So it makes sense to regard a little thought and action ahead of time as something that can make things easier and more certain; forewarned is forearmed. The appendix to this chapter sets out the key approaches necessary once you start the job seeking process in earnest.

4 Appendix (to Chapter 3) Top tips for effective job seeking

This is a task to be approached carefully and more information about the process may well be necessary, however here briefly are some top tips. It is a prerequisite of successful job seeking to:

- *Prepare a first class CV:* to which it should be added that there is no such thing as a standard CV. By that we mean that often (always?) the CV will need amending to produce the emphasis appropriate to an application for a particular job. This may seem a chore, but it is certainly worthwhile. Your CV may need to vary depending for instance on the industry in which the job exists, the size of the organisation, its location and, not least, the precise configuration of the job and the skills and experience that it is most important for an applicant to possess. It should logically, given the nature of marketing, concentrate on abilities and achievements. Given that a CV should be neatly typed, word processing makes doing this simple enough.



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- *Compose a first class individual covering letter:* while a CV can be a true reflection of someone's abilities, many are the result of advice and some are written by someone other than the applicant (e.g. an agency). Employers know this, so in a small, but significant, way the content and tone of a letter can add to the information that is weighed in the balance to decide whether an applicant goes forward to interview stage.
- *Be realistic:* employers use a variety of criteria to make the recruitment process manageable. It is said that the ideal recruitment advertisement prompts one reply – from a candidate who is both suitable and appointed. This may never happen, but the reverse, the job of analysing and screening a couple of hundred replies is a daunting, time consuming and expensive task. The result is that requests for candidates are designed to focus the process, securing a smaller number of applicants from those who are exclusively “on spec”. It is not always the case that a non-graduate say, to take a simple factor, could not do the job and would never be appointed. Rather it is that when an employer says “graduates only” it reduces the number of applications and keeps the process manageable. So, be realistic. Apply for jobs that are stretching your credentials a little by all means – nothing ventured nothing gained, so by all means aim high. But do not hide the fact that you are somewhat off-spec (if you are) it will be seen anyway. Explain why despite this you feel you should be considered and ultimately do not be surprised, or resentful for that matter, if your rate of strike is less with this sort of application.
- *Research the employer organisation:* if – when! – you move to the next stage, you really must not go into an interview and ask what the company does! Employers like it if an interest has clearly been taken (it is not so complicated: get their annual report, check their website and the press, send for a brochure) and the information you discover can help you decide what kind of things to raise at an interview.
- *Prepare for the interview:* in the sense of both checking out good interview practice (it may well not be something you have done so often), and preparing for each one. The latter means thinking through what you might be asked, what you should ask, making some notes and aiming to create a link between your experience and credentials and the job itself.
- *Be yourself:* there is a danger that all this care and preparation may come over as a stilted approach. Employers want to know about you, the real you. Of course you want to paint a full picture and leave out nothing that might weigh in the balance in your favour, but for all the checking of details, the way your competence shows through the way you present yourself counts for a good deal too. Certainly if you appear hesitant, unsure or appear to be hiding things that will not help.

- *Be honest:* there is research (by a quality newspaper) that suggests that something like a quarter of applicants lie on job applications forms, and then presumably at interview. Put the best face on things by all means, but resist the temptation to say you were studying for a post graduate degree of some sort when you spent the time selling shell necklaces on a beach in Goa. It should not be surprising that many employers check, indeed this may be most likely amongst those you would consider the most desirable sort of employer.

Note: you do not want to lose opportunities for want of information, so when you get to the job seeking stage you may want to check exactly how it is best to make such approaches



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5 An example: written communication

The format of the series of which this book is part is essentially brief. So, although a number of things have been touched on and it may be useful to investigate one particular one are in some more detail.

Many a course involves writing essays, reports on projects and so on. Doing so can easily be regarded as a chore. So here we look ahead at the implications of the way you handle written work: how it affects not only your study and grades and ultimately the nature of the qualification you obtain, but also how acquiring the skill of good writing can assist you thereafter. There is a long term opportunity here to be taken; as Mary Calins said, *Success doesn't come to you, you go to it.*

The immediate benefits

Let's summarise first: while noting the contribution that careful research, analysis and preparation make, there is no doubt that being able to write well has a direct effect on your life, work and results at university. It:

- Enables you to complete your work, assignments and obtain good grades
- Saves you time by enabling you to get assignments completed, and completed well, without endless uncertainty, revision and editing
- Contributes to you being seen as having a positive profile with academic staff (and maybe others) as a serious student. This is true of everything from putting in written work on time to the quality of the work itself, and the impact of being well thought of may have wide implications
- Ultimately quality of writing is a significant factor in influencing the grades you get in exams and in whatever qualification you receive as you finish your course.

As such embracing a suitable and appropriate writing style is something well worth any effort it takes to achieve. It is important to make a good start, viewing your early efforts constructively and working to make any changes that may be necessary to achieve what you want. It may seem daunting initially, yet it is very much an area where practice makes perfect – in other words this is something that gets easier (and quicker) with practice.

Beyond that, how does this relate to the world beyond study and the world of work in particular?

The wider world

Let's put the example of writing skill in context. Whatever you may move onto after your time at university, you are going to find that the world of work is very different from what you have been used to; if you thought the change from school to university was a shock to the system, be ready, because the change to the world of work will be much greater. Not least it is competitive. As Richard F Stiegele said, "*The business world is an extension of the kindergarten sand box – but with quick sand*". Other kinds of organization are not so different.

Whatever you may do, work is likely to be a major part of your life. Most people want two things from this: rewards (including financial reward) and job satisfaction. If you are going to spend a major part of your life working, then it is surely best to do something you like. Remember what the journalist Katherine Whitehorn was quoted as saying earlier. This is important in terms of the work you choose or realistically, as sometimes happens, that you fall into, and also in working to ensure that you maximize the job satisfaction and rewards you get from whatever you do.

We do not choose and undertake our work in a vacuum, of course. Decisions need to be made in context of the broader world. And this broader world of work has changed radically in the last decade. As the twenty first century moves on any individual is right to wonder how their career will progress and whether it will give them what they want.

Yet you may be sure: uncertainty and change are the order of the day.

Years ago there was more certainty about how a career would progress. Many organisations once had defined career paths for people and, although progress varied somewhat, once on a specific path the direction in which you would be able to go was reasonably clear. In some fields this was particularly so. Banks make a good example, yet banks have changed too, more than many kinds of organization and, many would say, not for the better. They are certainly no longer an example of a safe career. Now, though this kind of prescribed career path does still exist, in general it is much less common.

There are currently few, if any, safe havens, and few, if any, organisations that seem likely to be so again in a situation where change is the norm. Organisations are always likely to be under pressure and the well-being of their employees is often a lesser goal than sheer corporate survival. All sorts of factors contribute to there being a different workplace and work culture than that of the past, such include:

- Organisations being under greater market and financial pressure
- Changes in the way business and organizations operate (think of the IT revolution or international pressures, for instance)
- Lower staff numbers and more pressure on individuals
- Reduced budgets and thus a reduced ability to fund personal development for employees

- Changed terms of employment (for example, check out how the pension schemes offered have changed in the last few years)
- More competition between employees to succeed
- Higher unemployment
- A general increase in both the amount and speed of change
- The greater likelihood of employers having to take sudden and negative action to protect themselves (such as making people redundant).

Despite all this (and try to resist seeing any of it as of little relevance; it will be) you no doubt want to thrive, prosper and get on; and you probably want to enjoy your job while you do so. And remember it is said that if success was easy, there would be no such thing as failure. So what is the moral? How can you ensure that you do well? The simple answer is that there is nothing you can do that will *guarantee* success (if there ever was). But there is a great deal you can do to make success more likely. High on the list and especially relevant here is to be sure to develop what I have called “career skills” that make success in a whole range of activities more likely. Such include:

- Communications skills
- Interpersonal skills (not least working with other people)
- Analytical thinking skills
- Problem solving.

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One could list many more, but key amongst them are communications skills and several aspects of that, including making presentations, can be developed at university. One of these is written communication. Now we are not suggesting that the skill of writing a good essay and that of say writing a good business proposal or report is exactly the same, but the one certainly makes a good foundation for the other.

So, time and effort spent on writing during your course is likely to have benefits that go well beyond creating the good academic essay. The first additional use may be in something that overlaps with your university work, yet also goes beyond it – the written aspects of finding a job. CVs, covering letters and applications are all important; indeed they make a difference as significant as between getting an interview (or a job) or not.

A variety of applications

In work, and indeed outside it, the range of circumstances in which the quality of your writing can assist is legion. The list that follows identifies several and you may well find more.

- *Job seeking:* letters of application, addendums to application forms, correspondence with employment agencies
- *Employment:* correspondence with your employer from day one on: everything from a short (but important email) to more lengthy explanations or requests
- *Work:* documents that a job involves you in writing: everything from reports or proposals to correspondence with people ranging from colleagues to customers and in formal or electronic form
- *Networking:* keeping in touch with a range of people useful to you in job and career (even an entry on a social web site needs to be clear and may need to impress)
- *Personal:* a wide range of things may be involved here from making a complaint (and seeking compensation) to applications for a loan.

An example illustrates all this. Sometimes even seemingly everyday chores necessitate such skills and the careful application of them makes a real difference to a variety of outcomes. As a simple example, I once had a travel insurance claim turned down. I won't bore readers with details – suffice to say that, though it took more than four months, when a cheque for several hundred pounds finally arrived I believe the prime reason was the way a carefully written series of letters had been deployed.

In the workplace environment written communications from the humble email upwards can have even more dramatic results. It is a skill to acquired, fine-tuned and kept sharp because it is likely to assist you on a regular basis through your career.

Written communication in the workplace

Writing is easy; all you do is sit staring at a blank sheet of paper until the drops of blood form on your forehead. This was said (by Gene Fowler) about creative writing, but it might come equally to mind if you find yourself contemplating a report that needs submitting to the boss in two days' time. Most jobs come with paperwork – some of this is routine administration, some is very important.

Just like presentations, written communication, that is reports, proposals, even minutes and memos, can have a great deal hanging on them. Decisions that you want to go a particular way may be influenced not only by the quality of the thought, idea or proposal but by how the case for it is made and how it is expressed in writing; success may also be linked to other skills, for instance that of persuasion, but that goes beyond our brief here. Consider a report. Imagine one you might have had to read. If it was clear, well structured, and descriptive; if it had a clear introduction and a succinct summary that really tied together the key issues, then it makes much more likely that it had an impact on you. Good writing also makes it more likely you will actually read something all the way through; I suspect plenty of things you must read at university reinforce this point. Never forget, with an eye on your career, that everything you write says something about the writer. Thus any report speaks volumes about the skill, knowledge, expertise, competence of the writer – and their clout. Yours must do the same.

Again, this is a skill that can be developed. Consider a personal example: my career took a path that made certain kinds of writing very important, first with proposals and reports when I first went into consultancy, then later with books and articles. Not only is there often much hanging on these things, but also they have a permanence that, say, a presentation does not. Written documents stay around, perhaps to haunt you, and bosses are quite capable of producing for discussion at an appraisal meeting, a copy of a report written nine months or more previously. Anyway, in this case I saw the writing on the wall as it were, and concluded that writing was something I had to work on and improve. I read about it, attended seminars and, most important, became much more aware and critical of what I did. My style improved. I do not delude myself that I am the best writer in the world but can produce sufficiently workmanlike writing in a number of areas (including a novel, “long Overdue” published in 2014) to earn part of my living from it.

Writing is also a skill that you can spend a lifetime fine-tuning. So it should be with your business writing – regular work on it will improve it. And an effective and appropriate style will reflect well on you in any job and in the view taken by other people regarding your future.

One form provides an example of how to view such things: the now ubiquitous e-mail. There is a grave likelihood of many such communications being dashed off. How many do you receive that are abbreviated to the point of shoddiness – or, worse, that do not make complete sense and must simply prompt a reply to seek clarification? Of course, sometimes they can be short and informal and that's fine – but always make clarity your first consideration, and do not allow them to become less formal than the occasion, and recipient, demand.

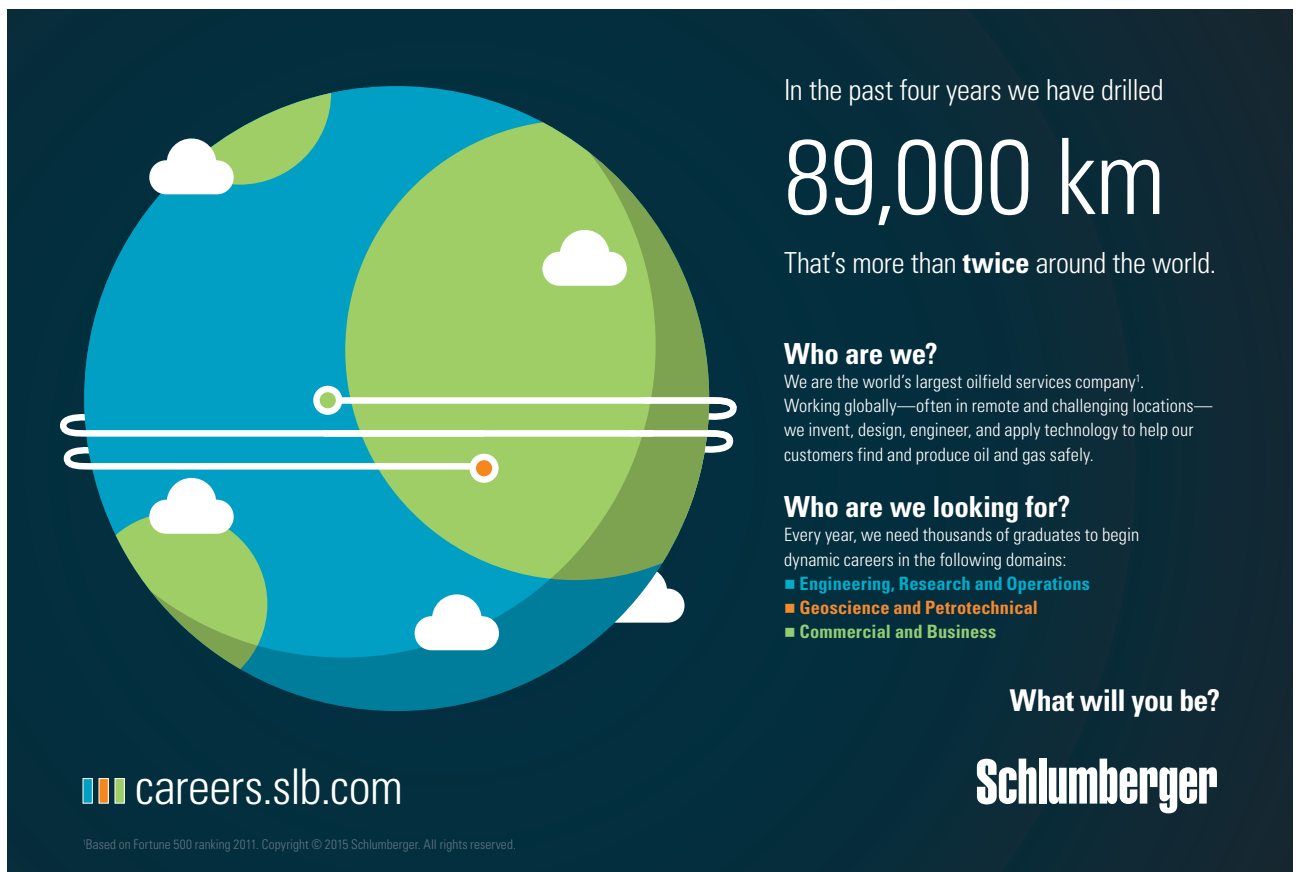
A last point may provide an added incentive for you to work on your skills in this area. As your writing ability improves (something that was said early on here) you get to do it faster. This saves time and is a worthwhile objective in its own right. You have only to look at the quality of much of the paperwork that circulates around many an office to see that prevailing standards often leave something to be desired; so write right and you have another essential skill that can differentiate you and make you stand out.

The remaining thought here is that, however much of a chore writing something may seem at a particular moment, you should remember that by working on your writing skills you are not just boosting the likelihood of getting good grades and all that goes with that in the university context, you are also developing a “life skill”; one the usefulness of which can extend very much further.

While not all writing chrysalises will become butterflies, some students will move on to bless the day that they took a moment to get these skills right and will reap the benefit of doing so in later years.

And finally...

A final thought as we come to the end. At this point, if I have met my objectives, you will be aware of two things. First, you will know the importance of having good essay writing skills both throughout your time as a student and, if this is at the start of your career, adapted in various ways on into the workplace. The time it takes to write a good essay may be little more (or the same) than is needed to write a lacklustre one, but what it will do for you is so much more.



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Secondly, you will know something of how to go about acquiring and deploying suitable writing skills. The process of getting to grips with this is not complex. Some time and effort is certainly necessary, but the overall process is essentially manageable. It is something best tackled early in your course so that you can benefit from being able to create good essays and do so more easily throughout your time at university.

One thing is sure to help. All writers are commended to read widely. The essayist Richard Steele said, *Reading is to the mind what exercise is to the body*. He was probably talking about the content, the power of reading to inform, but it is a truism that exposure to writing, particularly if you take note, can progressively teach you a good deal about everything from grammar to style. Every kind of reading can help: a novel may contain powerful language and description and something like popular science writing can help with the process of explaining difficult ideas in a comprehensible way.

Your course itself may involve a good deal of reading. A university professor told me recently that students studying history on the kind of course with which he is concerned are often surprised at the number of books they must read before they get to the final exam. So opportunities abound in addition to any recreational reading you may undertake. In addition it may help to read books about language and writing. Reference books abound, but there are other books that are interesting and entertaining and fun to read. Such include:

- Radio 4's John Humphreys' books *Lost for Words* and *Lost for Words* (Hodder & Stoughton)
- Lynne Truss's *Eats Shoots & Leaves*, which became a bestseller and is surely the most amusing guide to punctuation ever written
- *Strictly English* by Simon Heffer (who acts as writing style guru for *The Daily Telegraph*) is a longer review of written language; also very readable
- *English our English* by the late Keith Waterhouse is probably the best of all, a short, impassioned treatise on how to write effectively. Sadly and inexplicably this is out of print, though there are copies on Amazon for just a penny (and on other such web sites too no doubt).

In addition, more routine books could also be useful. Writer's Digest Books publish a whole list of books for writers, some concerned with specific genres such as fiction, others – such as *Write Tight* by William Brohaugh (subtitled “How to keep your prose sharp, focused and concise”) – focus on specific techniques useful in this context.

Reading adds to the process of acquiring the *habits* of good writing which can develop over time. And habit is the factor that ultimately reduces the chore aspect of good writing. You always need to think, you also need to check (I have lost track of how many times I read over the text of this book before sending it to the publishers!), indeed good checking, let us restate, is essential. Poor checking can so easily mean something is marked down, its effectiveness diluted and mistakes included that could have been avoided without difficulty. Examples abound and some have been quoted already; a final one comes from a university web site, which states that students should enter a password of “Between 7 and 8 characters”. Even those studying mathematics might wonder what this means. But good writing *is* possible and if you achieve it then it makes a real difference.

The more interest you take in language, the more you notice what makes it good or bad, then the more it will influence you. There is no harm in copying examples of style and approach that appeal to you, nor is there in adapting and tweaking things for your own purpose.

For instance, I noticed only recently the device of the very short sentence turned into one word sentences to create added emphasis. It. Really. Works. And, like much else, provided it is not overused, it adds to the power to make the point you want. And making a considered point and making it well can without doubt help you towards a successful graduation.

This example features a skill which is certainly useful in the world of work. There are, of course, more: ranging from a variety of computer skills to presenting and working in teams. If you have some that seem particularly relevant to you then it may be worth thinking through in a similar way.

There is little more to say. If you have read right through this book then you have had an opportunity to review the essential approaches necessary to university success. Of course all courses vary to some extent, but you will doubtless need to work hard and in a way that suits the course – and these essentials are not only likely to assist you do that and make life a little easier, but also make success a little more certain. The one factor that is always involved is you – a thought to which we turn briefly in the Afterword.

6 Afterword

If you want to do something you find a way. If you don't want to do anything you find an excuse.

Traditional proverb

Now a final thought reflecting what's been said. Right now, if you are at the beginning of your studies, you are in a strong position and face a significant opportunity. The time ahead may well be demanding and some hard work is assuredly going to be necessary, but you have the opportunity to maximise its effectiveness. Deploying the right approaches, and taking steps so that you can do so – studying, considering, trying and fine tuning what needs to be done – can make the course you take smoother and the likelihood of a good degree classification surer. If you are already further through your course as you read this, then such action may need taking more urgently; more so to link to the next stage in your life and to the world of work.

Overall the fact is that you need to:

- Manage your time well
- Go about your studies in the right way
- Develop your independent and critical thinking
- Exercise self-motivation and self-discipline
- Take on board skills such as writing and presenting
- Work with the various academic and other staff in your place of learning
- Utilise the various processes and systems involved in a considered and practical fashion.

Just how well you do all this will directly affect the outcome of your degree; but there is nothing that has been reviewed here that is beyond the determined and motivated student. There is not so much recommended that it cannot be manageably integrated into your life and work. The danger is twofold: first, that you underestimate the need for all this (the *I can wing it* approach) and therefore never actually set out to work in this sort of way to the degree that will help. Secondly, that you leave serious consideration too late – then whatever you do and however seriously you may take it, you risk not catching up and failing, at worst perhaps by a small margin to achieve whatever it is you want.

Logically most people accept that further education is a great opportunity, that it needs to be worked at and that doing so needs a new skills armoury if progress is going to be smooth and not unnecessarily complicated. Yet not everyone succeeds. Of course, some people fail because their chosen subject defeats them. So be it. There may be nothing some could do to avoid this. But how much worse to fail and know that you could have succeeded: the classic *If only...* situation. The rewards of a considered approach are huge, not just to the outcome of your degree, but also to the way in which this whole period of your life will go. You want it to be interesting, enjoyable, satisfying and fun, and there is no intention here to suggest that you should not find it so: indeed the approaches described here make establishing a balance between the various aspects of student life, so that it is all enjoyable, smoother and thus more likely to be made to happen. As is making it assist you on a longer term basis.



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Enough; I am in danger of preaching when the intention is only to lay out some sensible suggestions, albeit in a way that encourages you to take them up, use and benefit from them. After all graduation is not a destination. It's a stepping stone. Both making sure you get there and then on to wherever it may take you thereafter are both down to you. You will be better able to succeed if you are well informed and take a little time to go about things in the most effective way. You need to insist to yourself that certain things are priorities. As John Adams, the second president of the United States, said "*We cannot guarantee success, but we can deserve it*". Finally, remember that while luck can play a part, good luck is not to be relied on as a panacea. Thus it is logical to end not by wishing you luck, but by wishing you well.

"The rules of success won't work unless you do" (Traditional proverb)

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