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Writing your Assignment

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Introduction

An assignment is something you'll be asked to produce as part of your course, and is usually assessed. There are many different types of assignment, so make sure you understand which kind you have been told to do. This guide will give you some tips to help you get started.

Depending on the kind of assignment you have to produce, you may also find our guides around writing business reports, scientific reports and reflective writing useful.

Don't leave it to the last minute

You don't have to start the assignment as soon as you're given the brief by your tutor, but it's useful to have a look at the instructions so that you have an idea of what you have to do (and how long it might take you). Remember that the library only has a certain number of copies of each book, so don't leave it too late to find key texts.

Make sure you understand the instructions

Do you have to write an essay (a continuous piece of writing) or a report (which might have headings for each section, diagrams, graphs and so on)?

How many words does the essay / report have to be? (Check with your tutors about rules regarding word limits.)

When do you have to hand it in?

Do you have a choice of questions to answer? If so, pick one which interests you and about which you think you will be able to find lots of good information.

What is the question actually asking for?

You have to make sure to answer the question or complete the assignment correctly – you could write a fantastic essay, but if you haven't done what you were asked to do, you won't get a good mark.

Look for clues such as the 'process words' or 'action words' – are you being asked to **compare** two theories? Are you being asked to **evaluate** something (in effect, this means you are looking into how good something is)? There's a list of common 'process words' at the end of this leaflet.

If the question is particularly long or complicated, it will help if you break it into sections and look at each section individually at first.

A good way of checking whether you have completely understood the instructions is to try explaining them out loud, either just to yourself or to someone else – checking with others on your course can help you to be sure that you have all interpreted the instructions in the same way.

Do a quick plan before you start

Think about what you already know, and what you need to find out. What sort of things might you need to include? Do you need to look for a definition of a term before you can do anything else? By doing this, you will know what you are looking for before you start your research, and you'll be able to direct your reading towards relevant material.

Collect your information

Make sure to use a good range of sources – your tutors usually want to see a mixture of books, journal articles, good quality websites and other sources relevant to the topic. There will be some useful sources on your reading list, but you also need to find additional information elsewhere. If you're not sure where to start, have a look at the reference list in a good source on the topic that you already have and see what books / articles that author used. You might find that there's a particular journal which keeps cropping up in other people's reference lists, so you could start by searching for that.

Online databases are very useful, and you might find that you can print off many of the journal articles you need from your home computer. However, you need to have an idea of what you are searching for before you start, as typing in a keyword might give you thousands of results!

Every time you make notes from a source, keep the reference details with the notes so that you know exactly where each piece of information came from (see our referencing guidance for further support). That way, you won't need to hunt around at the last minute, trying to remember which book you used.

Write a more detailed plan

Now you've got lots of information, you need to work out which bits to use in your assignment and in what order you need to mention them. A plan is a way of organising your thoughts and information, so it doesn't matter what it looks like. You might write a list, draw a flow diagram or spider diagram, record yourself speaking, or even use a notice board to arrange the information into a suitable order. There are also a variety of apps, online tools and planning software you can use, such as Inspiration, which can help you to order your thoughts. Doing this before you start writing will save you a lot of time in the long run, and your essay will flow rather than jumping around between different topics. Think about the order in which you need to explain your points, which references need to go where and so on. One of the most common negative feedback comments from tutors is that a student's assignment is badly structured, and by planning beforehand you will be structuring your assignment before you even begin writing it. Tutors can tell very easily whether a student has planned the structure of their work or not!

Getting started

If you're finding it hard to start writing, break your tasks down into small chunks. Look at your plan and see what you need to do – do you need a paragraph which explains a theory, or a section which discusses a particular author's work? Start with something small like this, and write something – it doesn't need to make sense, in fact it could just be a list of points or things you've found out about that author or theory. You can put it together as a proper paragraph later. Once you start writing and have something on the page or screen, you should find that it becomes gradually easier to carry on.

Don't forget your introduction

Always start your essay or report properly by including an introduction. Your introduction lets the reader know where the assignment is heading, so you might choose to start with something like “The purpose of this report is to...”, or you could start by defining a key term from the title of the assignment.

Some people find it easiest to write the introduction first, whereas others leave it until the end. Neither approach is right or wrong, so write the assignment in whichever order feels best for you. The introduction might be up to around 10% of the word count (e.g. up to 200 words for a 2000 word assignment).

Don't forget your conclusion

At the end of the assignment, you need to summarise the key points you've made. You won't be introducing any new material here, but you might be effectively answering the original question and stating why the evidence has led to that answer. You may need to refer back to some of the most important sources you have discussed in the assignment, so there will probably be a few references. Your conclusion could be up to 10% of the word count for the assignment (200 words for a 2000 word assignment).

Use other authors' work

You are rarely asked to write about your own opinions in your assignments. The most common exception to this

is in reflective writing, which is covered in another Study Basics guide. In most cases, you are expected to research other authors' work and to present their arguments, studies and theories in your essay or report. You will therefore need to look for themes, similarities and differences – do some authors agree with each other? Do others disagree? Why? Have two authors carried out the same experiment but claim to have found different results?

Remember to look at your sources critically – have a look at the Skills for Learning guidance around Critical Analysis.

Don't forget to tell the person reading your assignment where each piece of information originally came from – see our Referencing guidance for more details on how to do this correctly.

Academic writing style

There are a number of things to be aware of when writing academic assignments. The most common issues are shown here.

1. Don't use shortened versions or contractions such as "don't" and "won't" in academic

writing. Always write the full version, “do not” or “will not”.

2. Don't use slang. To get used to the kinds of language you need to use, try reading some journal articles and looking at the way the authors write.
3. Don't use “I”, “we”, “you” and so on – unless you have been specifically told you can. (You are allowed to use these words in reflective essays, and in some subject areas you may be told that you can use “I” when specifically asked for your opinion, but in the majority of academic writing you will **not** be permitted to use the first person). You can still get your opinion across in your essay or report, by discussing the strengths and weaknesses of the studies you are discussing.

Edit your work

Don't feel that once you have written a paragraph you can't change it – read it through and edit if you need to. You might choose to do this as you go along, or you could leave it until later. Make sure that your points are clear and that your sentences make sense.

Get your draft assignment written

Once you've written a draft or first version of your essay / report, it's best to stop working on it for a while. Hopefully you haven't left your assignment to the last minute and have time to ignore it overnight or even for a couple of days. Then come back to it and read it through.

Proofread your draft

Some people find it easy to write their assignment directly onto the computer, whereas others write everything out longhand and then type the finished work up afterwards. Whichever way you work, you'll find it easiest to proofread your draft if you print it out or use a handwritten version. It is very difficult for most people to proofread accurately whilst using a computer screen.

Tips for proofreading:

1. Read your assignment out loud, either to someone else or just to yourself. Your ear will pick up on things which your eye might not notice, so you'll hear when sentences aren't clear or when you haven't explained something very well.
2. Ask someone else to read it through for you. It's best not to ask another student from your course to do this – ask a friend or family member who isn't an expert on the subject. That way, they will be able to tell you whether you have explained things clearly as they won't have too much prior knowledge of the topic.
3. If you've managed to leave enough time between finishing writing the draft and

proofreading it, you might find that extra points have occurred to you which you now want to add. The intervening time gives your brain the opportunity to process what you have written, and possibly to identify any gaps in your information.

4. Don't ignore this stage of the assignment-writing process! You **must** read through your work before you hand it in to make sure that it answers the question and makes sense.

The final edit

After proofreading, you might want to make a few additions or changes, move sections around or even completely re-write parts of the assignment. Before you hand it in, have one final look through it and make sure to check the following:

1. Your grammar
2. Your spelling (try the F7 key if using Microsoft Word – make sure it is set to UK English and don't rely on it to pick everything up correctly as it is not a substitute for proofreading, but it is a useful tool).

3. Have you answered the question or done what you were asked to do?
4. Is the assignment the right length?
5. Have you used the correct font size and style, line spacing and so on (check whether you have been given instructions about this – not all Schools have the same rules).
6. When you've checked all this, the assignment is finished. Don't worry about it any more and hand it in – it'll probably never be absolutely perfect, so don't keep adding and changing unnecessarily.

Don't ignore your feedback

Your feedback is there to help you. It will show you what you have done well, and what you need to work on for next time. It can be tempting to ignore your feedback when you have passed an assignment – you might breathe a sigh of relief and put the feedback in a folder, never to be looked at again. However, it's important to read it and to learn from it, to ensure you're doing the right things in future assignments.

You may find other guides in our Skills for Learning range useful when writing your assignments. For example, have a look at our Referencing and Critical Analysis leaflets and e-learning packages.

Some 'process words' or 'action words' you might encounter

Compare	Look for similarities and differences between two given themes. You could reach a conclusion about which is preferable and justify this clearly.
Contrast	Set two things in opposition to bring out the differences.
Criticise	Judge the merits of a theory or opinion on a given subject. Always back this up with evidence or reasoning.
Describe	Give a detailed account of something.
Discuss	Explain an issue and then give both sides and consider any implications.
Explain	Give details about why and how something is.
Evaluate	Make an appraisal of the value or effectiveness of something. Has it proved useful to the discussion or argument?

- Justify** Show grounds for decisions or conclusions you have made and answer any objections likely to be made about them.
- Outline** Give the main features or general principles of a subject, omitting minor details and emphasizing structure and arrangement.
- Summarise** Give a concise, clear explanation of something, presenting the chief factors and leaving out minor details.

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