Higher Education Assignment Toolkit

A resource for students preparing first assignments in higher education

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DE MONTFORT UNIVERSITY
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SSC LLN
SKILLS FOR SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES
LIFELONG LEARNING NETWORK
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Stage 1

Understanding the assignment title and getting started
Understanding the assignment title: Working out what you have to do

Why is it important?

This section will help to:
• Understand what the assignment is looking for
• Start to consider your ideas.
What is the assignment looking for?

Unpick the title

Usually you will have a title or task, and very often this will include:

• the subject
• a keyword (telling you how to write your assignment)
• the aspect of the subject matter (often a phrase ending in 'of')
• and possibly restrictions (e.g., a context for the topic).

See the following example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>KEYWORD</th>
<th>ASPECT</th>
<th>SUBJECT</th>
<th>RESTRICTION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Discuss</td>
<td>the impact of</td>
<td>celebrity culture</td>
<td>in the 21st Century</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Look at your own title and dissect it, (underline/cut out/separate the words) to identify what is included. In the title above, the key word is ‘discuss’, however this could be different, such as: ‘describe’ or ‘evaluate’.

For further definitions of key words see: ‘Glossary of academic key words used in titles’ on page 5.

Investigate the assignment brief further

You may be provided with further information from your lecturers, such as the assessment criteria or additional information you should refer to.

Key questions to find out:

• What is the format that is expected of your assignment, a report or essay?
• What is the word limit?
• What criteria are being used to assess your work?
• Are you being referred to specific sources of information?
• What is the deadline?

Make the assignment your own

Take time to understand what you are being asked to do, and don’t rush into writing straight away.

Record the information you have so far, a mind map with individual words is enough at this stage. Try re-phrasing the title into your own words, this will help you to understand it and prompt ideas for your response.
### Glossary of academic words used in titles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Account for</td>
<td>Give reasons for: explain why something happens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analyse</td>
<td>Examine something in very close detail and from a number of angles. Identify the important points and chief features, and understand their relationships.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argue</td>
<td>Present a case for and against a proposal or statement and present your own opinion at the end.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compare</td>
<td>Show how two or more things are similar.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contrast</td>
<td>Look at two or more things and draw out differences. State whether the differences are significant.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critically evaluate</td>
<td>Weigh arguments for and against something, assess the strength of evidence on both sides.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Define</td>
<td>Give the exact meaning of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describe</td>
<td>Give a detailed account of the main features or characteristics …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discuss</td>
<td>Write about the most important characteristics of something. Give arguments for and against, look at it from a variety of perspectives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distinguish</td>
<td>Identify the differences between two items.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluate</td>
<td>Assess the worth or usefulness of something. Use evidence to support your opinion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examine</td>
<td>Look at something in detail. You may be expected to 'critically evaluate' it as well.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explain</td>
<td>Make it clear why something happens or why it is the way it is.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identify</td>
<td>Recognise name and briefly describe something</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illustrate</td>
<td>Use examples to further explain or justify something. Could be visual or verbal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpret</td>
<td>Explain the meaning or significance of information or data that you are presenting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justify</td>
<td>Provide evidence that supports an argument or idea.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outline</td>
<td>Give only the main points, show only the main structure.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prove</td>
<td>Present evidence in a logical structure to support an argument for a point of view.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Relate (Two meanings) | 1. Show how ideas/theories/events etc are linked or connected  
                        | 2. Tell a story. Explain something in a narrative fashion                  |
| Review             | Survey and comment on the key aspects of something or a range of things.  |
| State              | Give the main features clearly and simply.                                 |
| Summarise          | Draw out the main points, omitting detail and examples.                    |
| To what extent…    | How far is something true, or contributes to a final outcome. Also how far is it not true? In academic writing the answer is usually somewhere in the middle. |
| Trace              | Describe the development of something; follow the order of different stages in an event or process. |

STAGE 1: Understanding the assignment title and getting started

Making connections, developing ideas...

Undeveloped ideas

I don’t know how to apply my knowledge to the question

I’ve got a series of individual points to make, but don’t know how to link them together

I don’t know what to say

I feel I’m just describing, and my points are not clear

Developed ideas

Made me think about the subject from a variety of perspectives

Felt confident in starting writing, and I now know what I want to say

Helped to focus my research and structure my writing

Helped identify the gaps in my knowledge

This section will help to:

- Develop confidence to make a start with your writing
- Expand and organise ideas
- Develop planning strategies.
How to develop your ideas

**Start with what you know**

- A really good place to start, is writing notes about what you know already about your title or assignment task. By doing this, you may discover that you know more than you originally thought.
- Choose a method of note taking to record your ideas that suits your learning style. (See ‘Planning and breaking down your assignment using your learning style’ page 9).
- Refer to your lecture notes and course materials for initial references.

**Dig deeper**

- Ask yourself some questions about the title eg. Is the subject important? Why? What are the current views or research?
- Apply these key words to your subject: What, Who, When, Where, How and Why (see page 8 ‘Making a start’), to develop your thoughts further.

**What do you need to find out?**

Now look at your plan, and take a different colour pen and underline or write notes on the things you need to find out or you don’t know. This will be your ‘jobs to do list’. By doing this, you will use your time efficiently and not waste time making notes on areas that you don’t need.

**Now, what do you think you want to say?**

Even at this early stage, having an idea of your overall argument will help you to write clearly and confidently. However, as you research your subject your initial ideas may change, so be open to the opinions of others along the way, and be prepared for this research to present you with lots of questions.

What is the balance of the points you want to make? Using the marker below, where would you place your views at this stage? 50/50, 70/30, 60/40?

```
0   10   20   30   40   50   60   70   80   90    100
```

Your argument may not be clear at this stage, and very often it is not about finding reasons for or against. Your aim is to make ‘a careful judgement after balanced consideration of all aspects of a topic’ (McMillan and Weyers 2006 p137).
Making a start

Use the format below to think around your topic, what could you include that is relevant to your title?

**WHO?**
Who is involved?
e.g., groups/organisations

**WHERE?**
Where did it occur?
Where is the evidence?

**WHEN?**
What is the timeframe/genre to be considered

**WHY?**
Why has this happened?
Why has it developed in this way?

**WHAT?**
What are the problems/issues involved?
What impact has there been?
What evidence and/or research supports your points?

**HOW?**
How has the situation been reached?
How has it developed?

Insert your title here:
Underline keyword, aspect, subject, restriction
Planning and breaking down your assignment using your learning style

The ‘Sticky Notes Shuffle’ or ‘Chop and Sort’ Approach
You will need:
• Pens/pencils (a range of colours)
• A large piece of paper (or board, or even your desk) and
• A supply of sticky notes (in different colours) or
• Paper, scissors and poster tack
Brainstorm ideas about the assignment title/question, move them around – start to build a basic shape for your assignment and identify what else you need to do.
Use colour here to link similar parts and go on to use these colours in your research and reading.

The ‘Family Tree’ Approach
Start with the basic title or question and break it down into smaller and smaller chunks:

Extend the ‘family tree’ as you get more ideas.

The Thought-Mapping (or spider gram) Approach
Just add more links as you get more ideas.

The ‘Tidy Table’ Approach

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment title/question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Topic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Do you prefer lists or shuffling ideas around?
Use sticky notes or a large piece of paper that you cut into pieces.
Tip: Writing for 10 minutes without stopping is also a useful start.

Are you the creative type? Do you like having lots of handouts and diagrams?
Try the thought mapping or spider gram approach
Tip: This works particularly well when using colours and symbols.

Is your approach to break down the title or question into smaller parts?
The ‘family tree’ approach is useful.
Tip: This helps you to see how different parts merge into the whole package.

Is your approach quite tightly structured and organised?
A table may help you to focus on the task.
Tip: This grid provides guidance and a clear outline of what you already know and what you need to find out.
Time planning your approach to the assignment

There is no guide to how long an assignment will take to complete. However, managing your actions and your time well will contribute towards your success. Your target dates are likely to change as you begin to work on your assignment. Be ‘SMART’ with the tasks you set yourself: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, Time Related.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Jobs to do</th>
<th>Specific jobs</th>
<th>Target date</th>
<th>Achieved</th>
<th>Revised dates</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Understand the task</td>
<td>eg., read through assignment task, produce a ‘mind map’ of initial approach to the assignment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collect and record initial information</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plan your approach</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do supplementary reading</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Produce first draft</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review first draft</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Produce final draft</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Submit your assignment</td>
<td></td>
<td>Hand in date</td>
<td></td>
<td>Hand in date</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collect your marked assignment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make the most of feedback</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Stage 2
Finding and managing information
STAGE 2: Finding and managing information

This section will help to:
• Use different sources to find information
• Plan your searching
• Evaluate the information used in your assignments
• Reference your sources and avoid plagiarism

Where can I find information?
The examples below highlight common sources of information – you will need to use several different sources for your assignments/course work/projects.

There are clear differences between each type of information, and you must consider which sources are the most suitable for your assignments.
Planning your search

Planning your searches will help you to find and assess suitable information for your assignments. Below is an example of a simple model which can be used to search for and assess information:

This model is circular – you are thinking about your topic, identifying keywords, considering which sources to use and evaluating your results, before revising your search strategy and beginning again.

This process is an important part of academic research. It will help you to organise your thoughts and arguments, to record what you have found and to critically analyse the evidence used in your assignments.
How do I start searching?

Start by thinking about what you are being asked to do. Breaking down the title of your assignment and thoroughly reading your project brief will help you to identify keywords and topics for searching.

Once you have decided on your keywords, you must think about which sources you need to search. You may need to search several different types of sources in order to find the broadest possible range of information on your topic.

Keyword Tip:
It is a good idea when searching to look at the language and terms used by academics, professionals and experts to describe or explain ideas and theories within your subject. The terminology used by these experts will also be used in academic journals, books and websites, and therefore make excellent keywords.

Revising your search strategy

You will need to narrow down your search results to find the most relevant information – evaluating your results will help you to filter out irrelevant, false or misleading information.

Revising your search strategy by changing keywords, the type of sources used and the time period searched will ensure that you use the best available evidence for your assignments.

Searching Tip:
Keeping records of the sources and keywords used and the results found will help you to replicate your searches and check for new results.

Where should I search?

• Many university, college and Local Government websites will feature links to library services and online catalogues, enabling you to check book stock and journal holdings in advance.

• Online databases feature articles from many different journals. Talk to your Librarian for about using and accessing databases for your subject.

• Information Gateways gather web sources for study and research on one site. A good example is Intute (http://www.intute.ac.uk/), a multi-discipline gateway featuring evaluated resources for study and research.

• Google Scholar (http://scholar.google.co.uk) features books, abstracts, theses, articles and academic papers from academic publishers, professional societies, universities and other scholarly organisations.
Evaluating sources: The Information Cycle

Once you have found information it must be evaluated. A practical way of evaluating the information is to consider where information comes from and how it has been produced.

Look at the diagram below – it is the same as the list of sources we saw earlier, but now the relationship between the different sources is clearly shown – this is the Information Cycle.

The Information Cycle illustrates how information is published in set patterns. Information at the beginning of the cycle (Internet) is aimed at an audience wanting quick, up-to-date facts. As the information progresses around the Cycle it becomes more detailed but also more out of date. When deciding on the quality of the information you may have to balance reliability (accurate and proven facts) against currency (the period of time over which the information was written and produced).
The Information Cycle in practice:

Information changes as it progresses along the Information Cycle from format to format:

**Internet**

The Internet is usually the first place information is posted. Information can appear almost instantaneously on the Internet, but this leaves little time for the author to write the information. As a result the information tends to be *descriptive*, explaining *what has happened* and *who was involved* – it is simply stating facts. There will also be a *lack of depth* and the information posted will be short.

**Broadcast Media**

Information is also likely to appear quickly on *television* and *radio*. Initially the information will be produced rapidly and is likely to be *descriptive*, explaining *what has happened* and *who was involved*.

Professional journalists with expertise in a particular area may be able to provide some relevant background information, and it is likely that *expert opinion* will also be sought. As time passes and more information becomes available, *longer pieces* and *documentary* features may be produced.

**Newspapers**

Newspapers are published frequently; usually daily or weekly. The articles will be written by *professional journalists*, who often have *expertise in a particular area*.

The emphasis will be on *reporting facts*, and once the information appears in newspapers the author has had more time research the information, so there may be *greater depth* such as *statistics*, *analysis* or *expert opinion*.

Newspaper articles will *not be correctly referenced* and they will *not provide a bibliography or list of sources*, so it will be difficult to identify where the author has found their information.

The articles are aimed at the *general public*, and so should use *accessible language*. 
Magazines

Magazines are frequent publications in a ‘glossy’ format. Examples include The New Scientist, The Economist and Scientific American. The articles are written by professional journalists with knowledge of a specific subject area.

There will be emphasis on reporting facts but usually with some analysis as the author has more time to reflect on the information and conduct some research.

Although articles in the professional press are likely to be longer than newspaper articles they are unlikely to be correctly referenced with no bibliography or list of sources, so it is difficult to tell what sources the author has used in their research.

The articles are aimed at the general public or a knowledgeable layperson with an interest in the area of publication, and so should use accessible language.

Journals

Academic journals contain articles written by scholars and specialist researchers. The authors have had time to conduct their own research and review the available literature.

As a result the article will be a detailed examination of the subject with analysis and primary research. Research can take months to conduct, so the article will not be current. Before publication the articles are reviewed by an editorial board comprising of other scholars and experts – this is called peer review.

The articles in academic journals are aimed at scholars, experts in the field and university students, therefore the articles tend to be detailed and written in technical language.

Books

Books may take years to be published, and so are not good sources of up to date information. The strength of books as a resource lies in their authorship, they are usually written by scholars and experts in the field. Their content can be variable ranging from a simplified overview of a subject to an in depth piece of research.

Books offer a great introduction to a new subject. Books include a list of the sources the author has used to research their book called a reference list. The reference list allows you to review the original sources of information used in the book, which can be used in your assignments to strengthen your own research and arguments.
Evaluating sources:Thinking critically

Thinking critically in order to evaluate the sources you use will help you to select the best sources for your assignment. A good way to do this is by asking the following questions:

**Who has written, produced or published the information?**
Is the source biased? Can you verify the information presented?

*Example:* Political broadcasts will argue in favour of a particular idea or political party, and will therefore feature bias. The Office of National Statistics collates information from Government departments, but the statistics are independently recorded and verifiable.

**Why have they written it?**
What is the purpose of the information? Is the writer or publisher trying to sell me something?

*Example:* An advertisement will try to persuade you to buy a product.

**When was the information written or published?**
Is it still useful, and is it likely to be updated?

*Example:* For some subjects such as Science, it is important to have the most up to date and accurate information. For other subjects such as History or Journalism, accounts of the time are valuable first hand evidence, and will be essential for your work.

De Montfort University’s Evaluation Source Matrix provides a useful framework for assessing the sources you use:

http://www.library.dmu.ac.uk/Images/Selfstudy/ISEMLeaflet.pdf
Referencing and Citation

Why should I reference?

No academic research is entirely original – many ideas come from other people’s research. It is important to acknowledge this within your work because:

• Who said what (and when) is important – otherwise ideas could be misrepresented and falsified.
• Allows ideas to be traced back – the “long conversation” of academic research
• Aids the production of a good argument. You are not alone: past research provides vital back-up!
• Demonstrates you have understood where your ideas are coming from = more credibility = better marks
• Correct attribution is simply ‘honest and open’
• Academic research would be impossible without having a system in place to trace ideas back – that system is referencing.

Referencing the sources you’ve used

It is good academic practice within your assignments to acknowledge where you have found your information. There are two key elements when referencing correctly:

Citing

Information is accredited within your assignment, usually in the format of the Author followed by the date of Publication in brackets.

Example: Pears and Shields (2009) argue that…

Referencing

A list of references is usually found at the end of your assignment, arranged alphabetically by author and providing full details of the information you have used in a standard format which includes the Author, Date, Title, Place of publication and Publisher


Always ask if you’re not sure!
Quoting and Citing – what should I reference?

- If you reproduce writing word-for-word, this is a **quote** and should be in “quotation marks” or indented in the text.

- If you paraphrase someone else’s idea, it should be acknowledged and **cited** in the text.

- In both cases, the acknowledgement in the text should refer to your **reference list**. Any book read but not directly quoted or cited in the text should still be listed in the **bibliography**.

Bibliography

A bibliography includes any sources you have read as part of your research. Bibliographies can be annotated and are a useful means of directing readers to further sources of information.

Harvard referencing style

There are many different referencing styles. One of the most commonly used is called Harvard. A Harvard reference would look like this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AUTHOR(S)</th>
<th>DATE</th>
<th>TITLE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Referencing Tips:**

- **Keep a record of all the books and articles you find as you find them** (create your reference list/bibliography as you go along).

- **Give yourself plenty of time to research and write your work** (this will allow you to avoid the temptation for last-minute ‘panic plagiarism’)

- **Always cite the sources used in your assignments – both direct quotes and ideas you have paraphrased**. This is the basis of ‘good academic practice’.

For more information about citation and referencing, please see De Montfort University’s [Harvard System of referencing guide](http://www.library.dmu.ac.uk/Images/Selfstudy/Harvard.pdf) at:

Avoiding Plagiarism

Many students are uncertain as to what constitutes plagiarism. Below are two related but very different definitions of plagiarism:

**Plagiarism is…**

1. The deliberate attempt to gain advantage by presenting someone else’s work as your own
2. The substantial duplication of another’s work without acknowledgement of the original source

**The first is intentional** – where a student uses another individual or organisation's work (whether an academic, a fellow student or a third party) and submits it as their own. There are heavy penalties for students who are discovered to have intentionally submitted work which is not their own.

**The second is accidental** – where a student uses information from a book, journal etc., but does not credit the information source within their assignment. This can be avoided by accurate referencing and citation, and acknowledging your sources.

**Bad Academic Practice**

“Plagiarism by mistake”

- Universities will have policies in place to detect both deliberate and accidental plagiarism
- Both plagiarism and bad academic practice attract severe penalties – avoid them!

For more information about plagiarism, see De Montfort University’s How to avoid Plagiarism and be citation wise guide at:

http://www.library.dmu.ac.uk/Images/Howto/HowtoAvoidPlagiarism.pdf
Stage 3

Making reading more manageable
STAGE 3: Making reading more manageable

Reading for your assignment

Reading for your assignment is essential

• to show that you are aware of current academic thinking about your topic
• to find evidence to support your ideas.

First you need to have a general overview and then find information directly related to your task.

Don’t believe everything you read; you need to question what you are reading.

Identify why you are reading

• Is it for an assignment? For an exam?

• Think about the assignment title and decide what you want to find out. You’ll find it helpful to write down the specific questions you need the answers to.

• You may be starting from scratch or filling in gaps in your knowledge.

Useful techniques

• Skimming: when you read just enough to understand what the text is about

• Scanning: when you look for a particular word or piece of information

• SQ3R is a useful approach to try (see page 29).
Getting started

• A list of questions that you need answers to, will help you to stay focussed.

• Get an overview: read a basic introduction to the topic or a section on the topic in a general textbook

• Find specific information in books by checking the contents page, the index, the summaries, the headings and subheadings.

• Skim read without making notes to get a basic understanding.

• The first sentence of each paragraph usually indicates the point made. This is a good way of following the author’s argument.

Make it easier

• Don’t attempt to read all texts; choose 3 to start with and then decide what else you need to look at.

• Print or photocopy chapters or articles and highlight or underline points. Colour code points so that they link with your assignment plan.

• Read small chunks at a time and make notes on what you remember.

• Use a dictionary to look up words you do not understand.

• Start writing up your first draft before you have finished your reading. This will help you to see where the gaps are and where you need to focus your reading.

Top Tips:

• Introductions and conclusions to chapters provide summaries of the writer’s key ideas.

• Take a break; pause, think and absorb what you have read.
Note making

Good note making

- **reduces** the amount of information you have to deal with. Your notes should include main points and some examples or evidence.

- **helps** you to process, organise and understand information. You can use notes as the basis for your revision. You can summarise them further.

- **gives** you practice in writing in your own words. This will help you to avoid plagiarism (copying).

http://www.library.dmu.ac.uk/Images/Howto/HowtoAvoidPlagiarism.pdf

Notes from reading

- Always record full reference details of the source at the beginning of your notes. See the Harvard guide http://www.library.dmu.ac.uk/Images/Selfstudy/Harvard.pdf

- Choose a method that suits your ‘learning style’ and your needs. Linear notes may suit you (see page 30). Also try spider diagrams (see page 31) or column notes (see page 32).

- You could start by underlining and highlighting on print outs or photocopies.

- Identify direct “quotations” by writing in a different colour.

- Use abbreviations.

- Leave spaces in your notes, you might want to add something later.
Lecture notes

- Prepare for a lecture by referring to your course or module handbook.
- Add your own notes to the handout (use a separate piece of paper if necessary).
- Column notes may be suitable for a lecture. Have a look at the example on page 32.
- Ask the lecturer if you can record the lecture and make notes later.
- Reread your notes as soon as possible after the lecture and make any necessary alterations.

Revision notes

- Make cue cards which include just key words and brief phrases.
- Mind maps or spider diagrams are particularly useful for revision. You’ll find an example on page 31.
- A diagram allows you to summarise a lot of information on one page.

Top Tips:

- Notes should be set out clearly so that you can easily find and use the information later.
- You must have references for your notes, otherwise you cannot use them.
STAGE 3: Making reading more manageable

SQ3R
Survey, Question, Read, Recall, Review
This is a really effective way of coping with academic reading – try it!

Survey
A quick look, to see if it appears useful.
Scan contents, index, first and last chapters to get a general idea of what the text is about.

Question
Is this text going to be useful and relevant to your assignment?

Read
Read short sections and vary your speed.
Read aloud when text is hard to understand.

Recall
Note down the main points and important facts and opinions in the text.

Review
Reread the text to check you haven’t missed anything.
Complete your notes
Linear notes
Always start with the reference details of your source. Make a note of page numbers in the margin.

Headings

Subheadings
• Bullet points
• Start a new line for each point
• Leave space around each point – you may want to add something later

Remember
• Write in your own words
• Indicate quotations “when copying another writer’s words” (author, date, page number)
• Use abbreviations whenever possible
Mind maps

Pattern notes or mind maps can be particularly helpful when you’re developing your ideas and planning your assignment. You can see your ideas and how they’re linked together. Make it even more helpful by using colour and images!

Column notes
Particularly useful for taking notes in lectures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key words</th>
<th>Notes</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Main topics | Subheadings  
- underline or highlight important points  
- identify argument, evidence, opinion  
- summarise in your own words | Your questions about the content.  
What do you disagree with, or are not convinced about?  
Is there anything you don’t understand and need to look up later? |
Stage 4

Planning the structure of your assignment
STAGE 4: Planning the structure of your assignment

What are the benefits of PLANNING the structure of an assignment?

This section will help to:

• Choose a clear focus for your assignment
• Clarify your ideas
• Put your ideas in order
How to make an Assignment Plan

Clarify your ideas

• **You might already have used free writing** when you started thinking about the assignment – but it can be useful at this stage too, because your ideas may have changed after your reading and they will certainly have developed. (See page 38)

• **Use bullet points and lists** to capture the information and ideas you want to include.

• **Try using a mind map, a spider gram, a flow chart** or use **sticky notes** to get your thinking started. (See pages 39-40)

**Top Tip:**

There’s no right way to do this so find what works best for you. Time to experiment!

Choose a clear focus for your assignment

• **Have a go at explaining the main point of your assignment** in just one sentence, e.g. ‘This essay will show that students who plan their assignments before they start writing, achieve higher marks than students who do not’

• **Try to identify** three or four key topics that you consider to be essential to support or explain your main point.

• **These key topics** will really help you to focus your writing. You could use the ‘Table to make an initial Assignment Plan’ (page 41) or the mind map example (page 31) to help you to do this

**Top Tip:**

Why not give each of your topics a colour – and then colour-code your notes with highlighter pens – so you can find all the relevant information easily
Now put your ideas in order  
(This will form the main body of your report or essay)

• **What order would be most helpful to your reader?** Imagine helping a fellow student to learn about the topic.

• **Try using one of these ideas**
  - o A simple bullet point list
  - o A flow chart
  - o Sticky notes that mean you can move your topics around until you’re satisfied with the order

• Look at the ‘Essay Structure’ and ‘Report Structure’ Handouts to get your thinking started. (See pages 42-44)

---

**Top Tip:** It’s easy to sort out the structure of your assignment at this stage – but it’s harder when you’re in the middle of writing the assignment. Planning reduces stress!
Free writing – for your eyes only

This is a great stress free way to make a start on your assignment, or to begin to plan your first draft, after your reading and research. Put your notes and books away and just write…

- Set a timer and write for 10 minutes
- Don’t stop – keep writing, even if you’re writing ‘I don’t know what to write about’
- Any order, anything, (have a look at the questions below)
- You can use single words, phrases, sketches, diagrams, pictures
- Don’t worry about spelling or grammar – don’t cross anything out
- Even writing down what you don’t know or don’t understand can be a great starting point
- After 10 minutes, look back and decide what you want to use and develop.

These questions might help you…

- What’s difficult about the topic?
- What do you remember about the topic?
- Are there things you don’t understand?
- What do you still need to find out?
- What examples can you recall?
Focus on: starting or developing writing

There are many ways of doing this and you need to work out which suits YOU best. Here are a few ideas to start with – see if you think any of them might help you, or adapt them to suit your own way of learning.

**The ‘Sticky-note Shuffle’**

**You will need:**
- Pens/pencils (a range of colours if it helps)
- A large piece of paper, or a wall or a cupboard door, or even your desk
- A supply of sticky-notes (preferably in different colours)

**How to do it:**
- One idea per sticky note,
- Stick them on a door or wall or table. Look at them daily – live with your ideas. Add in new ideas as they occur.
- Move them around until you’re happy with the order – you will start to build a basic shape for your writing and see what else you need to do.

**The ‘Family Tree’ or ‘Flow Chart’ Approach**

Start with the basic title or question, break it down into topics and then smaller and smaller chunks:

Extend the ‘family tree’ or ‘flow chart’ as you get more ideas.

**The ‘Thought Mapping’ Approach**

Just add more ‘clouds’ as you get more ideas.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment title – and your focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Topics</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic 6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**The ‘Tidy Table’ Approach – example**
Try using a flow chart like this to plan your assignment. Note how the plan asks you to LINK all your topics.

**Introduction to your assignment:** explain your focus and what you’re going to do or show

- Introduce your 1st topic
  - You may need more explanation
  - Present good example(s)
  - Present relevant evidence from reading
  - Link to your 2nd topic

- Introduce your 2nd topic
  - You may need more explanation
  - Present good example(s)
  - Present relevant evidence from reading
  - Link to your 3rd topic

- Introduce your 3rd topic
  - You may need more explanation
  - Present good example(s)
  - Present relevant evidence from reading
  - Link to your 4th topic

- Introduce your 4th topic
  - You may need more explanation
  - Present example(s)
  - Present relevant evidence from reading

**Conclusion:** key points from the whole assignment and link back to title

**Top Tip:** Brief notes in each box will help you stay on track when you start to write your assignment.
### Using a table to make an initial assignment plan

(Just use brief notes in each of the boxes)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignment title:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Your central idea (in just one sentence)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>List the main topics of your assignment</th>
<th>Key ideas and information about each topic</th>
<th>What evidence or examples will you include to support each topic?</th>
<th>Reference details for where you found your information, ideas and examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A Basic Essay Structure

Title/question
Every essay title contains an explicit or implicit question. Your essay should focus on answering that question. Try rewriting the title so that it is a question.

Introduction: (about 10% of the essay)
1. Explain how you interpret the title
2. What issues/topics are you going to explore?
3. What will be your focus?
4. What will your essay show?

Main body: (about 80% of the essay)
Use a chain of paragraphs to EXPLORE AND DEVELOP your ideas/argument.
You will probably have 4 or 5 main topics.
Each topic will need 3 or 4 paragraphs in which you will introduce the topic, and present examples and evidence to show why it is important and how it links to the essay title.
In each paragraph the reader is asking you to explain:
• What is this paragraph about?
• What is your argument on this?
• What is your evidence? What does it mean?
• How does it link to the essay title?
• How does it link to the topic in the next paragraph?

Conclusion: (about 10% of the essay)
• Do not introduce any NEW material here.
• Summarise your ideas/argument (you might also have done this in your introduction)
• Restate what you consider to be the main points
• Make it clear why those conclusions are important or significant.
• In your last sentence: link your conclusions or recommendations back to the title.

Some students find it helpful to write a rough conclusion first, before they write the essay, so they know where they’re going. They rewrite it, if necessary, when they’ve finished reviewing and editing the essay.

Reference List
Use the Harvard Referencing System to list all the books, articles, materials you have referred to in your essay:
• AUTHOR (date) Title. Town; Publisher.
• Page numbers for quotations
• In alphabetical order by author’s surname
STAGE 4: Planning the structure of your assignment

Report Writing
(Report – an account of a matter after consideration/investigation)

This is a suggested format. Check your instructions or ask your tutor if there is a specific structure required for this report assignment.

Title

Author

Date

Summary

A brief (one paragraph) account of what the report contains including conclusion/recommendations.

• Do your summary last.

Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contents</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Type your chapter heading</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 Section heading</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1.1 Subheading</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1.2 Subheading</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 Section heading</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Type your chapter heading etc</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

• List the contents in the order they appear.

• Number the section headings/sub headings, pages.

• Each section should have an appropriate title.

• List appendices

• List illustrations/figures (separately if there are a lot)

• Start with the introduction as number 1.

• Write the contents page at the end.

Continued…
Report Writing

Introduction
A brief (one paragraph) explanation of:
- Terms of reference
- Aims and objectives
- Methods used in the investigation
- Necessary background information
- Definitions of abbreviations
- Acknowledgements
(You will probably find it easiest to do this page at the end.)

Main Body
- Logical sections with clear headings.
- Section numbers next to headings.
- Figures/diagrams/charts.
- Essentials only – background information can go in the appendices.
- Written in a clear, brief and direct style.
- Written in the passive voice (not I, we, you) “The survey was carried out” not “I carried out the survey.”

Conclusion
- Draws together your findings.
- Tells the reader which findings you consider to be most important.
- Explains what you believe to be the significance of your findings.
- Shows whether your hypothesis (if you had one) was correct.
- You may wish to suggest areas for further research.

Recommendations
A numbered or bulletted list of things you believe should happen. These must logically relate to the findings in your report.
It’s not always necessary to include recommendations.

Bibliography
Harvard system unless told otherwise:
(AUTHOR LAST NAME, first name (DATE), Full Title, where published, name of publisher
All sources cited including Internet.
References should be traceable – somebody reading your report may want to follow up one of your references; they must be able to find it from what you’ve written.

Appendices
/Documents which add to the reader’s understanding of the report.)
Numbered and listed in the contents
Referred to in the appropriate section of the report.
No need to wordprocess appendices.
Stage 5
Writing your assignment
Writing your assignment

What is academic writing?

When you first start university, the term ‘academic writing’ may be a frequent topic of discussion for you, your peers and indeed your tutors. Often it is used with the expectation that you fully understand what is meant by the term. Primarily, writing at university is ‘a way of confirming – to yourself and others – that you’re understanding things’ (Kirton and McMillan, 2007). This doesn’t mean that you are expected to sound like a textbook, or even that you have to clutter your writing with long and complicated words. Quite simply, your tutors want to see evidence that you can express yourself clearly, concisely and logically. Often, this means becoming aware of your reader and of the need to guide them through your writing by offering clear signposts to each new idea you are developing.

It is worth remembering that writing is a process and not simply a finished product. You will continue to learn more about writing as you progress through your course. The important feedback you receive from your tutors will also help you to improve the quality of your work. The materials over the following pages offer you guidance on how to develop a range of writing skills which will extend way beyond your time at university.
Learning materials in this section:

- Structuring an introduction
- Structuring a paragraph in the main body of your assignment
- Structuring a conclusion
- Signposting sentences
- Ideas into sentences
- Writing in an academic style
- How to summarise, paraphrase and use direct quotations
- Using and developing new vocabulary
- Tips for writing when you don’t want to write
Structuring an introduction

An introduction is like a guidebook to your whole assignment. It gives background information into your topic area and outlines all the ideas you are going to present. Remember that most introductions will be about 10% of the final essay and will include some or all of the following:

- **An introduction to the context or background of the topic** (you could include interesting facts or quotations)
- **The reason for writing about this topic**
- **Definitions of any complex terminology that will be referred to throughout the assignment** (note that definitions are not always necessary)
- **Introduce the main ideas that stem from your topic/title and the order in which you will discuss them?**

You may want to use the grid below to help you structure your introduction; you can use the right-hand column to jot down your own ideas.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Structuring an introductory paragraph</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Introduce the context or background to the topic:</strong> Perhaps you could explain the title in your own words or use a quotation from an author who offers a supporting or contradictory statement about your topic area.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>What is the purpose of writing about this topic?</strong> Is there a problem or controversy with the topic?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Definitions:</strong> Are you using any complex terminology or acronyms that need defining? Try to use a working definition from an expert in your subject area rather than referring to a general dictionary definition.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Introduce the main ideas that stem from your topic:</strong> You cannot write about everything; for a 2,000 word assignment, select between 3-5 key ideas and introduce them in the precise order in which they will be discussed.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Structuring a paragraph in the main body of your assignment

What is a paragraph?

Paragraphs in the main body of your assignment usually contain a number of sentences which develop new ideas or expand upon existing ones. You may also need to construct paragraphs which offer contrasting views on the ideas you have already developed. A succession of well-structured paragraphs can help to create a coherent and logical argument. You need to consider the purpose of each paragraph:

• Is it developing a new idea?
• Is it expanding on an idea already mentioned?
• Is it offering a contrasting view on an idea already mentioned?

You may wish to use the grid below to record your ideas for each of your paragraphs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Structuring an introductory paragraph</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>An introductory sentence (this is sometimes called a topic sentence):</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This tells the reader the purpose of your paragraph and introduces the main idea you are developing, expanding upon or contrasting with another.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Examples/evidence/quotations:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You will usually need to include evidence that develops/contrasts an idea. This informs and strengthens your argument. Try and introduce your evidence clearly and remember to reference the source (either as a citation in the body of your text or as a footnote/endnote).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Evaluative sentence/s:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You may need to offer some explanation on the relevance of your examples/evidence/quotations. Why is this evidence useful? What does the author say that supports the idea you are developing? Does this evidence have any limitations?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Concluding sentence:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This draws together the main idea being made in your paragraph.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
STAGE 5: Writing your assignment

Structuring a conclusion

Your conclusion is the final paragraph in an assignment. It must summarise (very briefly) every important idea you have discussed in your work as well as draw conclusions based upon the evidence you have presented. You need to make sure that you have directly answered the question. It is always useful to link your conclusions back to the essay title.

Tips to remember:

- Your conclusion will be about 10% of the whole assignment
- You should not include any new information in your conclusion.

You can use the grid below to help you structure your conclusion. The right-hand column can be used for you to make a note of your own ideas.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Structuring a conclusion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Summarise each of your points in the order in which you have presented them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State your main conclusions based upon the evidence you have presented.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Link your conclusions back to the title – make sure you have directly answered the question and that you have clearly presented your viewpoint on the topic (you must do this without saying ‘I’).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Signposting sentences

What are signposting sentences?

Signposting sentences explain the logic of your argument. They tell the reader what you are going to do at key points in your assignment. They are most useful when used in the following places:

- In the introduction
- At the beginning of a paragraph which develops a new idea
- At the beginning of a paragraph which expands on a previous idea
- At the beginning of a paragraph which offers a contrasting viewpoint
- At the end of a paragraph to sum up an idea
- In the conclusion

**A table of signposting stems**: These should be used as a guide and as a way to get you thinking about how you present the thread of your argument. You may need to adapt certain words and phrases for your own purposes. You may also wish to add your own sentence stems to the list below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Signposting stems for an introduction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To understand the role of … (your topic*) this essay aims to provide a discussion of … (the ideas you will develop)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This essay seeks to investigate/evaluate/illustrate/discuss the impact of … (your topic) in relation to … (the ideas you will develop)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Firstly, this assignment examines … (your topic) and its links with … (your first idea) Next, it closely examines … (your next idea) Finally, it focuses on … (your next idea)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Signposting stems for a paragraph which introduces or develops a new idea</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One aspect which illustrates … (your topic) can be identified as … (the idea you want to develop)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The current debate about … (your topic) identifies an interesting viewpoint on … (the idea you want to develop)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This first/next/final section provides a general discussion of … (the idea you want to develop)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Signposting stems for a paragraph which expands upon a previous idea

- **Building on from the idea that** … (mention previous idea), **this section illustrates that** … (introduce your new idea).
- **To further understand the role of** … (your topic or your previous idea) **this section explores the idea that** … (introduce your new idea).
- **Another line of thought on** … (your topic or your previous idea) **demonstrates that** … (introduce your new idea).

### Signposting stems for a paragraph which offers a contrasting view

- **However, another angle on this debate suggests that** … (introduce your contrasting idea)
- **In contrast to evidence which presents the view that** … (mention your previous idea) **an alternative perspective illustrates that** … (introduce your contrasting idea)
- **However, not all research shows that** … (mention your previous idea). **Some evidence agrees that** … (introduce your contrasting idea)

### Signposting stems to sum up an idea in a paragraph

- **This evidence highlights that** … (sum up your idea)
- **There is general agreement that** … (sum up your idea)
- **The strength of such an approach is that** … (sum up your idea)

### Signposting stems for a conclusion

- **Clearly, this essay has shown that the main factors which impact upon** … (your topic) **are** … (summarise your main ideas)
- **The evidence presented in this assignment has shown that** … (mention the conclusions you have drawn)
- **To conclude, this assignment has addressed a number of significant issues which show that** … (mention the conclusions you have drawn)

* The word ‘topic’ refers to the subject area you are being asked to discuss and is usually referred to in an assignment title or brief.
The ‘idea into sentence’ chart

What is the idea you want to discuss?

- globalisation

What do you want to say about it?

- it gives smaller communities a voice

Add the two together

- globalisation gives smaller communities a voice

Does the sentence need ‘framing’ or introducing?

- Firstly, this essay argues that

Add to your sentence

- Firstly, this essay argues that globalisation gives smaller communities a voice

Do you want to add another related point? (You may decide not to)

- it makes the wider economy stronger

Which conjunction would link the second part of your sentence best?

- (and, if, but, so, which, thus, therefore)

- and

Put your completed sentence together

- Firstly, this essay argues that globalisation gives smaller communities a voice and it makes the wider economy stronger.
The ‘idea into sentence’ chart

What is the idea you want to discuss?

What do you want to say about it?

Add the two together

Does the sentence need ‘framing’ or introducing?

Add to your sentence

Do you want to add another related point? (You may decide not to)

Which conjunction would link the second part of your sentence best?
(and, if, but, so, which, thus, therefore)

Put your completed sentence together
How to write in an academic style

1. Create an objective, confident voice

Use the third person (this means not using ‘I’)
Most of the time you will be expected to use the third person as it enables you to show that you have an authoritative and well-reasoned argument.

You could try using:
- This essay discusses the importance of …
- This research shows that …
- It could be said that …

Consider your use of tenses
You need to be clear about whether you are discussing something that happened in the past or something that is having an impact upon the present.

The present tense:
- Smith’s argument illustrates that …
- Freud’s theory supports the view that …

The past tense:
- The Industrial Revolution had an impact upon society in a number of different ways.
- The interviews were conducted with a group of parents in the Leicestershire area.

2. Use appropriate language for your audience and purpose

Academic writing need not be complicated, but it does need to have an element of formality. Your choice of words for an academic assignment should be more considered and careful.

Avoid contractions
- Rather than; ‘don’t’, ‘can’t’, ‘it’s’, ‘should’ve’
  You could try: ‘do not’, ‘cannot’, ‘it is’, ‘should have’

Use the full forms of words
- Rather than: ‘TV’, ‘memo’, or ‘quote’
  You could try: ‘television’, ‘memorandum’ or ‘quotation’

Avoid using informal words
- Rather than: Smith’s bit of research is ok.
  You could try: Smith’s research is significant because …
- Rather than using words such as: ‘get’, ‘got’ or ‘a lot’
  You could try: ‘obtain’, ‘obtained’ or ‘many’

3. Be clear and concise

Keep words simple:
- Rather than: The denotation was obfuscated by the orator.
  You could try: The meaning was hidden by the speaker.

Aim for the right word for the right occasion:
- Example 1: Crusade against crime
- Example 2: Campaign against crime
  The word ‘crusade’ has connotations of a battle and is more aggressive in tone than the word ‘campaign’.
  ‘Campaign’ implies a more considered approach.
STAGE 5: Writing your assignment

Make every word count:
- Rather than: The theorist called Sigmund Freud wrote a significant piece of work called On Narcissism which offers valuable insights into …
  You could try: Freud (1914) offers valuable insights into …

Avoid any vague words or phrases:
- Ensure that your reader knows who or what you are referring to when you use words such as: ‘it’, ‘them’, ‘they’.
- Words such as ‘people’ and ‘ideas’ have the potential to be vague. So, avoid saying: ‘according to many people’. Ensure that you explain which people or which ideas.
- When talking about events that have happened in the past, avoid phrases such as: ‘in the past’ or ‘in recent times’. You need to be specific.

Avoid using clichéd phrases:
- A cliché is a phrase or expression that is overused to such an extent that it loses its value. For example, ‘as bright as a button’ or as ‘clear as mud’.

4. Use language sensitively
Avoid expressing strong opinions too directly. Academic writing is concerned with presenting your discussion in an objective way, so there is no need to assert your opinions too strongly.

Lean towards caution
We need to be aware that our views are contributing to a much wider debate surrounding your given topic. Your use of language must show that you are making suggestions which contribute to this wider discussion:
- Rather than: ‘This view is correct because …’
  You could try: ‘It could be said that …’, ‘It appears that …’, ‘It seems that …’

Avoid using taboo language
- In academic writing it is important not to offend your reader – you want her/him to trust your judgment and authority. Using swear words or making offensive comments will upset the balance of your writing and undermine your point of view.

Do not stereotype, generalise or make assumptions
- This especially applies to individuals or groups on the basis of their gender, race, nationality, religion, physical and mental capacity, age, sexuality, marital status, or political beliefs.

Your use of language should always remain neutral.
- Rather than: fireman or policeman
  Try using: fire fighter or police officer
- Rather than: mankind
  Try using: humankind
How to summarise, paraphrase and use direct quotations

What is summarising?
Summarising involves taking the main ideas from a piece of text and rewriting them in your own words. A summary is significantly shorter than the original text and tends to give an overview of a topic area.

Tips for summarising
• Highlight the main ideas in the text you want to summarise (do not include any minor details)
• Combine these ideas together in your own words
• Correctly interpret the original
• Do not include your own opinion or add extra information
• Use your own words and not those of the original author (unless using quotation marks)
• Remember to cite your source using a recognised referencing format
• Keep reminding your reader that you are summarising the work of someone else:
  • The author goes on to say that …
  • The text further states that …

What is paraphrasing?
Paraphrasing means to rewrite an author’s ideas in your own words. This still means that you have to cite the original text. Often you are referring to a text in greater detail than you would in a summary. You may only be paraphrasing a sentence or two. Paraphrasing enables you to explore and interrogate individual ideas at a deeper level.

Tips for paraphrasing
• Read the text several times to understand the meaning
• Extract the main idea from the sentence and think about it on its own
• Frame the idea in a new sentence
• You could try and structure the sentence differently (try starting with the main idea)
• Now return to the original and make sure that the meaning is still the same and that nothing has been misinterpreted
• Remember to cite your source using a recognised referencing format

What does it mean to use direct quotations?
Using direct quotations means to copy an original piece of text word for word. To show that you are doing this, you need to enclose all the original text in quotation marks. It can be particularly useful to directly quote an author when:
• The author’s style is clear and engaging
• The author’s views support your own exactly
• When it is important that your reader knows exactly what an author has said about a topic

Tips for using direct quotations
• It is best to use small quotations as it means that you can make an evaluation on a single idea rather than many ideas
• Enclose the quotation in quotation marks (either single or double are fine, but be consistent)
• If you do quote more than three lines of text, indent the whole quotation (you do not need quotation marks when you do this)
• If you do not need to use all of the quotation, then you can use ellipses [...] to show that parts are missing
Using and developing new vocabulary

Vocabulary refers to the body of words known to an individual. When you start university you will be exposed to a range of new words and terms that may be unfamiliar to you. The key to learning these new words is to turn them from words you know (passive words) into words you use (active words):

words we know (passive words) → words we use (active words)

In order to make these new words useable, you need to learn what they mean and how to use them. One way of familiarising yourself with them is to produce a chart similar to the one below. An Art and Design student, for example, might produce a chart like this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Context (use your new word in a sentence)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>superimpose</td>
<td>Place or lay one thing over another, typically so that both are evident.</td>
<td>Blake superimposes fabrics to create depth and intensity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>art-deco</td>
<td>A style of decorative art characterised by precise and boldly delineated geometric shapes.</td>
<td>The art-deco movement evoked an awareness that pattern could be bold and daring.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Tips for developing your vocabulary:

- Read as much as you can, including text books in your field. Absorb the language of your subject and make a note of how writers in your area use language. What sort of words and phrases do they use? You could always keep a list of useful words and phrases.

- A dictionary and a thesaurus are useful tools to help you to develop your vocabulary. A good dictionary will provide you with a definition of your word and a guide to its pronunciation. A thesaurus will offer you a list of synonyms (alternative words) and can help you to expand your vocabulary.

- Try to gain some ownership over your new vocabulary by using it when you write and when you speak. It is not until new words are actively used by you, that the language is fully absorbed.

- To develop your understanding of terminology in your subject area, go to your subject text books for a working definition rather than a dictionary.
STAGE 5: Writing your assignment

Tips for writing when you don’t want to write

• Start by writing down any thoughts you have for your essay. This helps to get rid of the expanse of white page. (Remember you don’t need to show these thoughts to anyone else at this stage).
• Try different approaches such as mind-mapping, flow charts or free-writing.
• Discuss your ideas with others in your group. Discussion can be a useful way of generating new ideas and also encourages you to see other perspectives.
• Try writing in a different location or writing at a different time of day. Make a note of which locations/times suit you best.
• Type out your topic headings, references or bibliography.
• Type out any quotations you think you might use.

An action plan for writing:

| 1 | Consider your short term and long term writing objectives. Work out what writing needs doing now or in the next few days, and what needs thinking about for the future. |
| 2 | Make a timetable. This makes the workload organised and manageable. Work out what can be achieved in a day/week/month and be realistic about what can’t be achieved. |
| 3 | Plan to write regularly. Short bursts of 20 minutes are often more successful and manageable. Set yourself a daily target; 200 words seem more realistic and achievable than a whole project or assignment. |
| 4 | Break big sections of writing into smaller parts. Focus on the individual paragraphs rather than the whole essay. |
| 5 | Finish your daily quota of writing at a point where you feel confident in what you are saying, even if it is mid-way through a sentence. When you return to your writing, it will not be so difficult to start again. |
Stage 6
Drafting, editing and proofreading
Why write several drafts? Why not just write it one go?

No checking...

I lost marks because my sentences rambled

I missed the point completely – I can see that now. What a waste!

I repeated ideas and the order was a bit random – I’ll check next time

I knew what I wanted to say but didn’t write it very clearly – I’ve got to resubmit it now

I left it to the last minute so no time to check – embarrassing!

When I read it out loud, I noticed I’d missed words out and that lots of my sentences were so long they didn’t make sense (even to me)

I checked my references – thank goodness. It took a while but it was worth it – I got positive feedback about them and a good mark

Checking and improving...

I checked my essay using my original plan and could see where it was confusing for someone reading it

I could see that my sentences and paragraphs were really muddled – but wasn’t sure how to correct them. I got help from CLaSS

This section will help to:

• Organise the process of editing and proofreading
• Edit your first draft
• Proofread your final draft
How to edit and proofread your writing

What’s the difference between editing and proof reading?

• Editing and proof reading are not the same! Editing happens as you write your assignment while proof reading is the last part of the writing process.

Aim for 3 drafts of your writing:

• First draft: Focus on getting your main ideas and information down.
• Second draft: Take a cold hard look at your first draft and edit it for content, structure, style, evidence and referencing.
• Third draft: This is the proof reading stage when you check carefully for errors in grammar, punctuation and spelling. This is the final refinement of your writing.

Editing your first draft

Now’s the time to take a good hard look at your first draft

• What’s your main point? Is it clear to someone reading the assignment? Could you write it in one sentence?
• Have you provided convincing evidence to support your main point? Have you acknowledged opposing views?
• Will your structure make sense to a reader? Does it follow the conventions for academic essays or reports?
• Check that all your information and ideas relate clearly to the assignment title and your main point.

Proofreading your second draft

Now check for misspellings, mistakes in grammar and punctuation

• Read for only one error at a time, separating the text into individual sentences eg. check for spelling first, then grammar, then punctuation. Find out the sort of errors you make and learn how to correct them.
• Read every word slowly and out loud. This lets you hear how the words sound together.
• Read the paper backwards, working from the end to the beginning. The focus then is entirely on spelling.

Note: You might need to do more than two drafts!
C hecklists to help you edit and proofread your assignment

Editing your essay can seem tedious but is a necessary part of the writing process. Editing something you have written invariably makes it better. It is actually a simple task if tackled in an organised manner.

Top Tip: take it slow and check for one thing at a time.

1. Print a copy of your essay and begin by looking at the content:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Begin with the introduction</th>
<th>Does it state your intentions and the structure of the essay?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Look at each paragraph</td>
<td>Does it contain relevant information and have clear links to the next one?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Look at the conclusion</td>
<td>Does it sum up your argument and answer the question?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. Read your work out loud or get someone to read it to you. If you hear something you don’t like, change it and see if it sounds better.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pause in your reading as punctuation indicates</th>
<th>This helps you determine how your essay flows and sounds and whether your punctuation needs changing.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Check for spelling errors</td>
<td>Read the work backwards as it will not make sense and so the spelling will be easily noticed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set your essay aside for a few days</td>
<td>This will allow you to go back and critique it with a fresh pair of eyes.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Understanding feedback from tutors

It is important to look at feedback from your tutor in order to improve on your marks. Here are some comments from tutors and questions to ask yourself in order to improve on your next assignment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feedback from tutor</th>
<th>Questions to ask yourself</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Failure to answer the question</td>
<td>Did you interpret the question correctly? Did you look at the action words? (e.g. compare, contrast, evaluate)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too long or unfocussed</td>
<td>Have you kept to the point? Did you refer back to the title?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too short or lacks sufficient content</td>
<td>Did you explain your points fully? Did you use examples? Did you research the question thoroughly?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusion of irrelevant information</td>
<td>Did you understand what the question required you to do? Did you answer it and not just give information you were comfortable with?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Top Tip:
Could those questions relate to the fact that you did not read the question properly or plan your essay with questions for reading?
### STAGE 6: Drafting, editing and proofreading

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feedback from tutor</th>
<th>Questions to ask yourself</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Badly organised, rambling</td>
<td>Have you used an essay plan? (eg. Thought mapping or spider diagram?) Did you check for repetition?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lacks fluency, poor style or presentation</td>
<td>Did you link your points/paragraphs? Did you check your spelling and grammar?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor introduction</td>
<td>Did you introduce the topic and explain what you were going to do?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor conclusion</td>
<td>Did the conclusion indicate how you answered the question? Did you avoid including new information?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Top Tip:**
Could those questions show that you need to organise your structure, proof read your work or remind yourself what introductions and conclusions are for?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feedback from tutor</th>
<th>Questions to ask yourself</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unbalanced answer</td>
<td>Have you presented both sides of an argument? Is it objective?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reaching conclusions without good evidence</td>
<td>Have you presented the evidence for your conclusion? Have you proved it?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too descriptive</td>
<td>Were you critical and evaluative of information you found? Did you have a theoretical background and examples to support your points?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Top Tip:**
Was your reading focused on the aims and objectives, different points of view and linking theory to practice?
Proofreading (checking your work)

This is the final stage of the editing process (revising your work) and is done when you have completed your assignment.

Proofreading is important as you will be marked on your style, content, structure and presentation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proofread for only one error at a time eg. spelling</th>
<th>You may have some idea of the sort of mistakes you make so you may want to prioritise spellings for example, and then reread to check for another error such as punctuation.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>If you try and identify too many things at once, you lose focus and proofreading becomes less effective.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read slowly and read every word</td>
<td>Try reading out loud, which forces you to say each word and also lets you hear how the words sound together.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You pick up errors that you miss when reading silently.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separate the text into individual sentences</td>
<td>If working with a printed copy, try using a ruler or a piece of paper to isolate the line you are working on.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read each sentence separately looking for grammar, punctuation or spelling errors.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Circle every punctuation mark</td>
<td>This forces you to look at each one. As you circle, ask yourself if the punctuation is correct.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This helps you to clearly focus on any mistakes.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read the paper backwards</td>
<td>Helps check spelling. Content, punctuation and grammar won’t make any sense; the focus will be entirely on spelling.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Start with the last word on the last page working your way back to the beginning, reading each word separately.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Useful Tips:

When you’ve just finished it put it aside for a while; decide whether you are going to work from the computer or a printed copy; alter the size, colour or font to trick the brain into thinking it’s a different text, allowing you to see it from a different perspective; find a quiet place to work and do it in blocks of time rather than in one go to enable full concentration.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Electronic Resources
