

Assignments

Academic Tip Sheet



This academic tip sheet:

- provides a few hints to help you grasp what's expected;
- explains the key components of an assignment task; and
- outlines some techniques and strategies for doing assignments.

What do I do before I start?

Regardless of your course, unit or lecturer, you should aim to develop two basic habits when doing assignments:

- Read the assignment carefully as soon as you receive it and start working on it reasonably early – they usually take longer to complete than first anticipated!
- Ask the lecturer or tutor questions if you are unclear about anything relating to the assignment. It is best to receive assistance before you attempt the assignment.

What are the components of an assignment?

Most assignments follow a basic format. Knowing this will enable you to recognise what you need to do and how to do it. Assignments generally have five components:

1. An **overview** or general statement on the topic. This provides background information on the topic and usually serves to contextualise the task.
2. A **task statement** that contains a central verb or verbs that describe the task (e.g. discuss, describe, evaluate, critique, etc.).

- Content guidelines.** Typically these are suggestions the lecturer makes to ensure that you address all aspects of the content and that you organise your work systematically.
- Style/presentation guidelines.** These refer to presentation and technical aspects such as referencing, layout, formatting, word count, etc.
- Assessment criteria** that identify the mark allocations and grading system. This may take the form of a generic assessment key or one that is specific to the task.

A technique to understand the assignment task

To thoroughly understand the assignment task and the instructions, you will need to read the assignment several times to begin with. A technique to help understand what's required is to break the question/task statement into three components, as follows:

- Identify the 'task words' (e.g., verbs such as 'discuss', 'describe' or 'analyse').
- Identify the 'content words.' These are the words/phrases that relate to the particular topic or subject matter that the assignment deals with.
- Identify the 'condition words.' These are the words or a phrase that limit the scope of the task. Typically these may refer to a time, context or manner.

While assignment instructions are meant to be precise and explicit, they can sometimes appear to be ambiguous and vague. If this is the case, discuss the assignment with some of your classmates to clarify things that you find confusing or seek clarification from your tutor or lecturer.

Strategies to demonstrate your knowledge

Generally, your learning is being assessed on the basis of the work you produce in assignments. You therefore need to effectively demonstrate your knowledge in your assignments. This is done by synthesising what you have learned from studying the literature and relating it to the assignment task. The claims you make and explanations you supply in the process of addressing the task need to be properly substantiated. Commonly, this is referred to as providing 'evidence to back up your arguments.' Using the literature in this way to support the points you make in your assignments, is an integral component of academic work. It enables you to demonstrate to the marker your knowledge of a body of literature on the topic.

Evidence

This may take various forms within an assignment, for example:

- Authority:** This is evidence gathered from experts and scholars. Such information is uncovered in your research on a topic.
- Case evidence:** This is documented cases in which your idea works or others' ideas do not work (i.e., contrary evidence). These may be obtained from your experience, from hypothetical situations or from the literature you consulted.
- Facts:** Typically this is statistical proof and other forms of objective evidence. This type of evidence is obtained from published materials.
- Examples:** These are relevant examples drawn from your subject texts or the literature to support focused points you are putting forward in your work.

The strategy is to clarify what types of evidence will be required within an assignment as this will determine the nature and extent of the research required to produce a good assignment. Remember, in your assignment you are learning not just to present an academic argument, but also how to argue using specific types of materials and ideas.

Writing style

It is expected that you will write your assignments in the academic writing style. The following are key features of the academic writing style:

- The writing is focused (i.e., it addresses a topic/question/problem).
- It is organised and systematically structured (i.e., coherent).
- It is based upon research (i.e., informed).
- The writing integrates and synthesises information from the literature (i.e., makes links to and situates the writer's position within a body of knowledge).
- The information is drawn from scholarly and current literature on the topic (i.e., draws from the work of experts/leaders in the field).
- The text is written in a formal style and tone (i.e., formal expression).
- The content is unbiased (objective) and reasoned (analytical).
- The writer uses the conventions of referencing accurately and consistently (i.e., proper attribution to avoid plagiarism).
- The technical presentation is excellent (i.e., grammar, spelling, punctuation are free of errors).

In addition to these characteristics, it is important to be aware of the typical writing patterns used in various discipline areas

(e.g., chemistry, human biology, engineering, psychology, etc.). Also, be aware that there are stylistic differences that apply to the various genres of writing (e.g., report, exposé, review, etc.). Before you begin working on the assignment, you should take note of the type of assignment, as this will influence how you present the content.

Presentation

Presentation is important in academic writing. Make sure your assignment is in the correct format and that you have carefully edited and proofread your work. Check your spelling, grammar and referencing.

Assignment checklist

- Have you read and understood the assignment task?**
- Have you developed a strategy to demonstrate your knowledge of the subject?**
- Are you clear about the writing style you will use?**
- Is the technical presentation of your assignment up to standard?**
- Have you submitted it on time and in the correct format?**
- Have you kept a copy of your assignment?**

References

- Gawith, G. (1991). *Power learning: A student's guide to success*. Melbourne: Longman Cheshire.
- Kanar, C. C. (2001). *The confident student* (4th ed.). New York: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Lea, M. R., & Stierer, B. (Eds.). (2000). *Student writing in higher education: New contexts*. Buckingham: SRHE & Open University Press.
- Macqueen, C. (1998). *Getting ahead in tertiary study: a practical guide for business, social science, and arts students*. Sydney: University of New South Wales Press Ltd.
- Marshall, L., & Rowland, F. (1998). *A guide to learning independently* (3rd ed.). Melbourne: Addison Wesley Longman.
- Race, P. (1999). *How to get a good degree: Making the most of your time at university*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Acknowledgements

This material was modified from source documents prepared by Kuki Singh, ECU, 2007. Editor: Trevor Bennett.