

Academic writing guidelines

Writing assignments, including essays, are a significant means of communicating your ideas, thoughts and arguments and should be well supported by reference to published works. While written assignments are a form of self-expression, which reflect your own style, they are a major means of demonstrating your knowledge and understanding of the concepts, notions and issues contained in your study program. Thus your lecturers can assess your ability to think reflectively and critically about the topic.

The following guide to assignment writing has been prepared for your benefit, with the aim of providing a simple, easy to follow approach to assignment preparation and writing. Essay writing does take time and effort. This guide, therefore, has been prepared with the intention of ensuring your time is spent as productively as possible.

Stages in assignment writing:

1. Preparation
 - Define the topic
 - Brainstorm
 - Collect information
 - Prepare an outline
2. Organisation
 - Pause and consider the topic
 - Select and order information
 - Prepare a detailed plan
 - Prepare the first draft
3. Presentation
 - Edit the first draft
 - Sort paragraphs
 - Write introduction and conclusion
 - Check grammar, spelling and punctuation
 - Complete referencing
 - Write the final copy
 - Check the final copy

1. Preparation

Define the topic:

- Understanding and defining the topic or question asked is the first hurdle to overcome in assignment preparation. It is important that you correctly interpret the question, in order to present the required information.
- The actual essay needs to be clearly understood. This involves identifying the verb, e.g. "compare" or "discuss", in order to determine the type of information that needs to be presented. To help you, some common assignment terminology has been included below:

Term	Definition or guidance
Analyse	Separate a complex idea or argument into its smaller parts.
Comment	Make critical observation, using your knowledge of the topic
Compare	Requires examination of the subject and demonstration of the similarities and differences between two or more ideas, or interpretations
Criticise	Express your judgement regarding the correctness or merit of the factors being considered. Discuss the strengths and weaknesses, giving results in your analysis.
Define	Provide concise, clear, authoritative meanings
Describe	Provide an account of an event or process, emphasising the important points
Critically discuss	Look at all aspects of the issue; debate the issue, giving your reasons for and against the argument being proposed. Your opinion must be supported by authoritative evidence
Critically evaluate	Appraise, assess and make a judgement, stressing strengths and weaknesses, advantages and disadvantages.
Explain	Make the meaning clear but do not be trapped into describing or summarising events. Focus on the "why" or "how" of the issue
Illustrate	Using figures, diagrams or concrete examples, explain or clarify any idea or concept
Outline	Write an organised description of the essential parts, omitting the minor details Any technical terminology in the assignment question also needs to be identified and understood. If you have any problems at this stage of preparation, you may seek advice from the module Lecturer.

Brainstorm:

- Following clarification of the terminology, the technique of brainstorming the essay question can be used. Brainstorming is the process of writing down any spontaneous ideas regarding the essay topic, without pausing to consider whether the material is appropriate or useful. This approach takes little time and is a useful technique to focus your thoughts on the assignment topic.

Collect information:

- Collection of information is the next important component of the preparation stage. The search for reference material and reading should begin as early as possible, to introduce you to the topic. This may appear daunting at first, however browsing through the literature and using the library's computer database facilities to identify the relevant sections and articles, will simplify the task.
- When collecting information, it is important to keep several things in mind:
 - Reading should be appropriate to the topic and relevant to the question asked
 - An accurate record of the sources consulted should be kept
 - When taking notes; information from the source should be paraphrased or summarised and the appropriate page number noted.

These information collection guidelines will help provide accurate references in the presentation of your assignment.

Prepare an Outline:

- When you have collected the required information the last part of the preparation stage is devoted to preparing a brief outline of your assignment. A flow chart may be used, i.e. a point from summary of ideas linked together by arrows. The need to organise your ideas and information is an important step in the planning of your assignment.

2. Organisation

- During the preparation stage, you determine the information and evidence that is relevant to your topic. The actual organisation of your material should flow on smoothly from this stage.
- Pausing between information collection and the actual writing of your assignment will help you to organise your ideas and the information that you have obtained from your reading.
- Ordering of information is a technique, which some people find difficult; there are no set rules. Material may be ordered in a variety of styles. Refer back to the assignment topic as the order may be suggested by the question. In some situations it may be up to you to experiment and develop your own style.
- Use the flow chart or outline that you developed during the preparation stage to prepare a detailed plan of your essay. The key to planning lies in relating the various parts of your reading and thinking to the topic.
- Your argument is essentially the linking together of other people's ideas with your own and relating them to the topic. Remember that your own ideas regarding the topic are an important part of your assignment; however they may need to be substantiated by the ideas of other authors. In some cases you may need to evaluate competing ideas. In this situation you are able to express your opinion of why

one argument may be better than the other. However, your arguments should be supported with reasons and evidence obtained from the literature.

- Write in the third person throughout your assignments unless stated in guidelines. This means that you refer to yourself as 'the writer'. The use of personal pronouns in your assignment is inappropriate when writing in the third person. For instance; "I will focus on..." Becomes "This paper will address..." Or "The writer will address...". If your assignment is reflective you will be guided to write in the first person – always check guidelines of individual assignments.
- At this point you begin to write your assignment, remembering to base it on the plan that you have prepared. A draft is written so that you are later able to revise your argument where necessary. It is often useful to leave a day or two before rereading or revising your draft.
- You do not need to write the introduction and conclusion at this stage. Concentrate instead on completing the drafts. Citing your references in an abbreviated form as you write will save time in the final presentation of your assignment.

3. Presentation

Writing academic assignments is different from writing personal or work documents. There are some elements which are expected in all academic assignments. Some of these elements you may not be familiar with from writing for other purposes. However, all students in the Institute of Leadership and Healthcare Management are expected to be aware of, and become comfortable with, six elements in particular. These need to be taken into account when writing and structuring your academic assignments as they are part of your assessment and consequent mark.

The six elements are:

1. Using a standard format on all assignments
2. Correct referencing
3. Using an introduction and a conclusion
4. Using headings for structure
5. Correct use of paragraphs
6. Using figures and tables

Each of these is discussed in more detail below.

1. Using a standard format on all assignments

All assignments on all programs need to be formatted as follows:

- Font type: **Arial**
- Font size: **12**
- **Double line spacing** (*How do I do that? Highlight your text. Go the Format menu, select Paragraph. In the box that pops up there is a section called "Spacing". In the drop down menu change Line Spacing from "Single" to "Double"*).
- Pages must be numbered (*How do I do that? Go to the Insert menu, select Page Numbers and click OK. This automatically places page numbers on the bottom right hand corner of each page, including the cover page*).

- You must use the **Standard front page** (*cover sheet*) for all assignments

2. Correct Referencing

- Be consistent in referencing style and citation.

3. Using an Introduction and a Conclusion

- All assignments should have an Introduction at the beginning and a Conclusion at the end, whether or not they are specifically asked for in your assignment guidelines.
- The Introduction can be one or more paragraphs and outlines to the reader why you are writing this assignment and what it will cover. Generally, in a ten (10) page paper your Introduction will be approximately three paragraphs and cover the following:
 - General background (setting the stage, why this is an area of interest)
 - Introduction to subject matter (more specific information on the matter being discussed)
 - Introduction to contents of essay (an outline of what is ahead for the reader)
- Conclusions are an opportunity to impress on the reader once again the main points of your work. They also provide a chance to leave a lasting impression. Sometimes they are specifically asked for, in which case you may go into some depth at the end of your assignment. However, at a minimum you should be concluding with one or more paragraphs. These may include some or all of the following:
 - A brief summary of what you have discussed
 - A suggested course of action
 - A statement which summarises your main point or conclusions of the argument you made

4. Using headings for structure

- All academic assignments should use headings throughout to indicate structure. Headings are signposts for the reader which indicates where you are in your discussion. They show the reader the "flow" of your thinking and are important in highlighting your ability to organise your research.
- Headings should always be in **bold** and may or may not be numbered. On longer assignments you should use numbered headings and a table of contents. It is recommended good practice to include a table of contents .

5. The correct use of paragraphs

- Paragraphs are another important element in writing academic assignments. As with headings, they indicate structure to the reader and the flow of your thinking.
- Each paragraph should be devoted to **one idea**. This idea is usually found in the first sentence of the paragraph, known as the topic sentence. Everything else in the paragraph should support this sentence by expanding on the main idea. Paragraphs should have a sense of completeness and there should be a logical break in thought from one paragraph to another as you move from one idea to the next.
- A single sentence *is not* a paragraph. Each topic or idea needs to be developed. In contrast, there should very rarely be a full page in an academic assignment that does not break somewhere for a new paragraph. A complete page of writing without a break for a new paragraph can be very confusing for the reader as there is no indication that there is a movement in the argument or discussion.
- There should be a blank line between each paragraph. This means you have to hit the return key twice as you start a new paragraph. With the double-spacing format we require for assignments this will have the appearance of 2 lines between each paragraph.

6. Using figures and tables

- Figures and tables are very useful in academic assignments for presenting information in a clear and concise fashion. The rules to consider when using figures or tables include they should be numbered, labelled and referenced.
- The numbering obviously depends on how many other figures or tables you have used in your assignment. Figures and tables are numbered separately. The labelling should clarify what the table or figure is illustrating. If you have used statistics, diagrams or models from some source this should be referenced. The only time you do not reference a figure or table is when you came up with the figure completely by yourself or you used statistics that came directly from your own personal research.
- If you decide to use a figure or table, you cannot simply insert it into your assignment and expect the reader to understand it. You must refer to it within your text (e.g. see **Figure 3**) and discuss its relevance.

7. Other Considerations

Item/issue	Guidance
Word count	The prescribed word count of the assignment should be observed and this should be included on the front page of your assignment. All text except for reference list and appendices are included in your word count. 5% of the mark will be deducted from each assignment that is submitted with 10% above or below the required word limit. The actual word count of each assignment must be clearly indicated on the front sheet.
Contents page	This should be included and should contain subheadings of sections used with the corresponding page numbers. The starting page of the subsection only should be stated. It is vital to include page numbers (centre on the bottom of the page) on all assignment for feedback purposes.
Revision & editing	Be sure to check your spelling, grammar, paragraphs and punctuation prior to submitting your assignment. If these areas are poor, then what may have been a high quality assignment becomes mediocre. It is often helpful to read your assignment aloud, adding the punctuations in the appropriate places as you do so. Marks are allocated for presentation.
Confidentiality	Institutions or individuals should not be named or identified in assignments unless you are citing referenced studies or research.
Appendices	Appendices can be used to include data or charts that are not easily included in the text. However, appendices should support the main body of the assignment and not replace it, i.e. if you feel you are in excess of your word count this is not a reason to include important information in an appendix. Each Appendix used should be labelled in the order that you refer to it in your assignment (Appendix 1 or A, Appendix 2 or B etc.). Appendix 1 or A is the first appendix you refer to in the text and so on. Appendices should be included after the reference list in your assignment.

Feedback & grading	You will receive feedback on your assessments/assignments on standard feedback forms. The pass mark is 50%, unless otherwise stated, and awards for different programmes are included under the marks and standards available from "Programme general documents" on your VLE course site. Remember that all marks are provisional until after the meeting of the Board of Examiners at the end of the academic year. Assignments will not be returned to students therefore it is your responsibility to keep a copy of all assignments submitted (please note: hard copies of all assignments, where submitted, are destroyed on completion of the grading process).
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Assessment submission guidelines

Format:

Unless directed otherwise by your module coordinator, you must submit one (1) soft copy in PDF format of your written assignment via your BB module site.

Your assignment **must** follow the specific guidance provided as well as the guidance provided below. Assignments which are missing required details (e.g. Student #, word count, etc.) and/or are incorrectly formatted (e.g. incorrect font, incorrect spacing, etc.) **will not** be accepted for grading.

Front/first page:

The front page should contain the following information:

- Module name
- Assignment Title
- The title and year of the Module
- The student's ID Number
- Due Date
- Word Count (this must be clearly indicated as a penalty may be incurred for over or under word count (appendices and references not included in word count) - please also see "7. Other Considerations > Word count" below)

You must not write your name on your assignment except where asked to do so, e.g. dissertation.

Second page:

Table of contents.

Understanding Plagiarism

- Plagiarism refers to passing off someone else's work as your own by copying it without acknowledgement. Plagiarism is a serious offence and is not acceptable.
- It is **your responsibility** to familiarise yourself with the plagiarism policy
- Not recognising the intellectual input someone else has made to your work, and passing off their work as your own is plagiarism. It's also unlikely that you will not understand the point you are making if

you have not written it in your own words, which may cause you problems later on, e.g. when you are revising for your exams. Your lecturer will also be able to detect any differences between your usual writing style in your work, and material which has been written by someone else. Some students may not be aware that using material from a website without acknowledging it is plagiarism. Equally, it is not acceptable to use huge chunks of texts from websites or articles/books and put the reference at the end. This is not your own work. You are expected to draw on your own examples from practice, first and foremost, and then support some of this with evidence from the literature.

- **Paraphrasing** refers to taking the ideas, words or work of another person, putting it into your own words and referencing the source. Provided you ensure that credit is given to the author this is acceptable academic practice. If a particular piece of writing proves difficult to paraphrase, or you want to include it in its original form, then it must be enclosed in quotation marks or indented within the text and a page number must be included for the source of the direct quote.
- Borrowing ideas that are not your own, provided they reinforce the point you are making, and provided that they are **acknowledged**, is acceptable. You are far more likely, to get better marks when you express ideas in your own words and demonstrate your understanding, rather than borrowing them from others. Your arguments are stronger if you can back up what you say with evidence. It shows that the points you are making in your work are supported by other people. However, "lengthy quotes" are not always a good idea - be sure to ask yourself if they reinforce your argument.
- Plagiarism is considered a serious offence, which is deemed a breach of examination regulation. It may result in a fail grade and/or disciplinary action. *Please remember that you do not get extra marks for the number of references used, it is the way in which you use these references to support your arguments that give you the better marks.*