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# A step by step guide to writing assignments

**A**lmost as soon as you start your degree course someone will mention the word “assignment” and impress upon you that this requires a different technique from writing up a laboratory report (which is something you probably do at least twice a week). As time goes on you will meet the words “review”, “dissertation” and “project report”. All of these tasks require the same approach, and differ only in the amount of time that has to be spent completing them. Typically, assignments will be between 1,000 and 3,000 words, with penalties applied if you vary by more than 10 per cent either way. Word processing and including the word count are important.

## Make an early start

**T**he title is irrelevant because it is the process that should be clear in your mind from the start. As with all aspects of the course, you will know well in advance when the report is due in. Some people (you know who they are!) will start immediately, while others (the usual suspects) will leave it to the night before. There is really no substitute for getting the work under way early, and allocating an appropriate amount of time.

The benefits of making an early start are three-fold. First, you get the job done on time; you will have used the reference texts before they “disappear” from the library shelves and the element of deadline panic will be avoided. The second is that a planned approach allows you some slippage, and gives an opportunity for the unexpected weekend activity. Thirdly, and most importantly, is that it allows the ideas to form in your mind, so that you filter out the unsatisfactory or unworkable ones to produce a sharper, more focused piece of writing.

## Structure, structure, structure

**E**very assignment will need to have a beginning, a middle and an end. Sometimes there will be specific sections that require sub-headings such as introduction, aim, methodology, results, findings, discussion or conclusion. In other cases you will write a traditional essay, where the same elements need to be incorporated, but without the sub-headings.

The introduction should be succinct, and introduce the topic in an exciting and interesting manner, which makes the reader look forward to the work. An

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introduction that occupies more than 10 per cent of the final word count (excluding references) is too long.

The middle section of the work is the most demanding, and this is where most students let themselves down. Frequently they lose their way, or develop an incidental or tangential theme and relegate the main arguments to a sentence or two somewhere towards the end. A handy tip is to stop after writing 40 per cent of the draft is complete and check the title of the piece. Ask yourself "Is what I am writing answering the title of the assignment?". If it is not go back to the start of the main section and tackle it again.

The amount of research you carry out into the subject will determine the volume of information that you have to manage. Sometimes you will end up with much more than you need. If so, review your references, and select the most frequently made points — these will usually be the most important issues to cover. Then if you have space within the assignment you can bring in the less obvious or more obscure aspects. Be careful always to include at least one unusual point, to demonstrate the breadth of your reading.

When you have covered all the arguments or points that you consider relevant, stop writing. Padding is obvious. If you are still well down on your target, then it probably means that you need to do some further research, and then rewrite as appropriate. By now you should have completed approximately 85 to 90 per cent of the task.

Finally, you need to bring the work to a conclusion, reaffirm the key issues, and summarise the reasons that led to your final stance or model. This should always be done in an upbeat and convincing manner, so that the reader is in no doubt about the viewpoint being expressed. If the assignment is an objective piece of writing, then the summary should review the arguments on either side, and clearly offer the reader the opportunity to make their own decision.

## References

Referencing is vital. More marks are lost unnecessarily on this section than any other. There are several systems

of referencing, and you will need to know which one you are required to use (which may well be different for different subject areas, eg, numbers or names in the text). With increasing use of the internet, assignments are frequently submitted with a string of "www"s. These may be entirely appropriate, but academics frequently check these, and incomplete or inaccurate references often get you marked down, as do a list of references which seem to be out of date. Make sure half your references have been published within the past two or three years because this gives a feeling of currency to the piece.

## Time management

As a general rule the time spent on composition should be 40 per cent of the total time taken for any assignment. The first 10 per cent of the time should be taken up with producing the plan of the work, deciding what research you need to do, and allocating the necessary time to the project. Half the time should be given over to collecting and reading your references, and deciding what to include, then the writing should occupy the last part. Try to complete a rough draft first, only highlighting the arguments you plan to make, and sketching in the conclusions you have reached. Then leave it alone for a day or two before reflecting on the draft.

## Finish it

When you look at it again if it still seems to satisfy everything you need to cover,

start the final piece. Leave yourself enough time to complete this in one sitting (if it is less than 5,000 words) because you will develop a natural fluency as you write, and stopping and starting invariably leads to more time being spent overall, and a more disjointed assignment.

Do not be fooled into thinking that fewer words are easier to write. Often these are the most difficult, because you are required to justify the presence of every word. One only has to think of the monographs in the BP or Martindale to appreciate what detailed and precise information is communicated in a small amount of text. It is considerably less difficult to write a 5,000-word than a 1,000-word article, as my experience in producing this piece has demonstrated to me again. ✎

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