



# Writing Assignments

## Student Learning Skills Worksheet 1 / Student Support

January 2008

One of the main types of assessment used at tertiary level is the **Written Assignment**. It is essential that students of any discipline be able to organise and express written ideas in a readable, grammatically correct format, using appropriate style, referencing and layout. Developing practical skills in researching and organising material for written submission is important, as your capacity for analytical thought and expression is assessed through written assignments.

### Where do you start?

Your computer can be a powerful planning tool. To start, open a new word document. Then follow these **seven steps** to writing your assignment:

1. **Brainstorm** - the topic, the question/s
2. **Research** - the topic
3. **Skeleton** - develop an outline (the outline can become your essay)
4. **Revise** - reorder and add to your outline (keyboard shortcuts Ctrl X to cut, Ctrl V to paste)
5. **Write** - expand your outline
6. **Revise** - extensively and often
7. **Reference** - as you go, so you don't miss any out (tools like Refworks are useful – the UB Library offers classes in how to use it)

Be prepared to produce several drafts before reaching the final version. Negotiating each stage will be less painful if you have a clear understanding of the tasks involved and you allocate enough time to cover each task. There is no substitute for getting an early start.

### 1. Brainstorm

The topic for a written assignment is usually specific in its requirements, yet allows for a variety of answers. For example, a topic like "Discuss learning theory" is not very specific and would be difficult to examine in any depth (particularly in a short assignment). However, "Discuss, with direct reference to recent research, the effects of motivation on early childhood learning" is much more constrained. This topic allows sufficient scope to present different ideas and viewpoints without feeling that you must write an encyclopaedia.

**Remember: a successful essay must answer the question!**

### Break down the tasks

The process of specifying a topic involves breaking down the question to clarify what is required in your answer. Examine the question closely and consider:

- What specific questions are being asked?
- How might I structure my answer?

Break down the tasks by isolating any **action words** to help provide clues about what is required. Some examples of action words are:

**Analyse** - break into parts and describe or argue

**Define** - review and give a precise meaning

**Compare/Contrast** - examine for similarities and discuss any differences

**Criticise** - put forward supported, contradicting arguments

**Discuss** - look at reasons for and against

**Describe** - give details using examples to illustrate

**Evaluate** - look at reasons for and against and draw conclusions

**Explain** - give supported reasons for; interpret meaning of some phenomenon

**Justify**: provide reasons for a decision, viewpoint

**Illustrate** - use examples to clarify the meaning

**Outline** - highlight main features without going into detail

**Summarise** - present main ideas in the same format as the original

#### For example:

Describe Lehmann's marketing theory and comment on its impact on the Australian wine industry.

Action words and their implied task:

**Describe**: Give a **concise description** of your understanding of Lehmann's marketing theory and how it applies to the Australian wine industry.

**Comment**: Critically examine the marketing issues in relation to the current challenges facing the industry.

Knowing what must be covered allows you to generate questions to answer during your research.

### 2. Research

Once the question is broken down into tasks, you are in a position to start planning your paper. Start with what you know already about the question and create a word file, which builds up into a skeleton outline.

#### Gather relevant material

Your unit course materials should provide relevant clues. What books and website are recommended by your lecturers? Your first task is to determine unit recommendations. Your lecturers are marking your work - what materials are they recommending?

Next, log on to the **myUB Gateway**. From the home page, find the Resources box and click on the Library link. The UB Library website allows you to search for books and other materials. You can request items from other UB campus libraries or through the BONUS program.

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Search for academic journal articles related to your topic using **NavigatePlus** (access through databases) or **E-Journal A-Z** (alphabetical list of electronic journals to which UB subscribes). In most databases you can specify only scholarly journals, fulltext or timeframes. Look for fulltext scholarly articles if possible. Save them on your USB or email them to yourself – cheaper than printing them and more environmentally friendly. Remember USBs often malfunction, so back up your material on a hard drive.

**Google Scholar** can be very useful as it accepts a number of search words at once. However it is often hard to find the fulltext article. Google Scholar may find links into the Library catalogue and databases or you can search for a journal title through **E- Journal A-Z**.

For background information on a topic, go to Age Melbourne in E-Journal A-Z where the full text of all articles published in the Age are available. You may specify a time frame and search a topic. Newspapers can be quoted in some types of essay but are not as highly regarded as journal articles from your academic discipline.

## 3. Create a summary or skeleton outline

### Summarize the material in point form as you read.

Use a Word file on a computer or a sheet of paper if you're reading away from a computer (be sure to add it later). It is important to record the source of your material.

Eg. Marx's views on capitalism, Brown, p. 123  
Serfs in Russia – slave-like status, Smith, p. 2  
Marx – view of Czar, Jones, p. 345

Keep reading and listing material so you can find it later. You may need to take photocopies of key passages in books on counter reserve, and don't forget to get details from the front of the book for referencing, eg. author, date of publication, publisher etc. Record website details as well.

### Expand your notes into a bigger skeleton outline.

Eg. Current industrial events in Australia, p. 21  
March – Unionism membership in decline in Australia due to individual work place agreements – see also Government workplace reforms.

### Keep reading and listing. Add complete sentences.

Eg. Historical influences on Marx's theory, Green p. 23 Marx was aware of the causes and effects of the French Revolution.

## 4. Revise your skeleton outline

Consolidate your material by grouping similar issues together. If working on a computer, use cut and paste

functions (Ctrl X to cut; Ctrl V to paste).

Eg. Serfs in Russia – slave-like status, Smith, p. 2  
Marx was aware of the effects of French Revolution  
Marx' view on capitalism, Brown p. 123  
Marx – view of Czar, Jones, p. 345  
Australian issues

## 5. Write the essay

### Start with the main body. Write the introduction and conclusions last.

Cut out material that doesn't answer the question! By adding and deleting material from a skeleton outline, it could develop into your essay. But don't stop at this point – keep analysing your material. Rephrase concepts in your own words where necessary. Step back and look for connections between all the material you have gathered.

### Have you thought about referencing?

Be careful to reference exact quotes and be sure to record the source of all your material. Build a list of references at the end of your work, or use an automatic referencing program such as RefWorks.

As your skeleton outline expands into your first draft, put word counts on sections so you don't go over the word limit.

Eg. **Define** Alienation: see Collins Dictionary, p. 345  
(50 – 70 words)

### Introduce Marx's Europe and give historical account of industrialisation

Marx: comparison of Russia to England  
Serfs in Russia: slave-like status, Smith p. 2  
Brown, p. 4  
Industry in Russia: White, p. 234  
(300 words approx)

**Explain** how and why Marx's theory was developed  
(300 words) .....etc. etc.

## 6. Revise often: time well-spent

Stay focused and think critically. Keep asking yourself "Have I answered the question?"

## 7. Reference as you go

The UB Guide to the Presentation of Academic Work gives tips on how to cite your sources (see Citation section) to avoid accusations of plagiarism in your work. Use of material from other authors is an important part of academic writing and it must be acknowledged and documented correctly. Refer to Worksheet 13 'Avoiding Plagiarism'.

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## Essay Structure

### Introduction

- One paragraph or several, depending on essay length (approximately 15% of total essay length)
- State the topic and provide background information and any definitions

Your introduction should outline the issues you intend to develop in the essay. Use the wording of the essay question you were given to state the scope of your essay, and place any definitions (with their references) after this initial statement.

#### For example:

The aging population in early 21<sup>st</sup> Century Australia represents a potential time bomb for the health care system (Blaiklock, 2007). Ivetic and Carrucan (2007) describe how post World War Two 'baby boomers' (representing a huge demographic bubble in the Australian birth rate) are now approaching the age when they need a great deal of health care.

This essay will analyse....      This paper will describe...      The concept of demographics can be defined as ... (ref)

### Body

- Divide into paragraphs with one point per paragraph (approximately 75% of total essay length)
- The number of paragraphs depends on the length of the essay
- Include examples and references to support each statement

Topic sentences begin each paragraph. Ideally, a topic sentence should use key words from the essay question. It should briefly outline the relevance of that paragraph to the overall goal of answering the essay question. That is, it should support the main argument or statement of the essay.

#### For example:

One cultural issue that will have a major impact on future demand for health care is the tolerant attitude within Australian society towards the use of alcohol. Walker (2007), Beam (2007) and Daniels (2007) suggest that....

Another major issue is the lack of equity in access to health care... (ref)

### Conclusion

- Usually one paragraph in length (approximately 10% of the total essay length)
- Sum up the main points and reconfirm the main argument or statement

Rather than repeating what you have stated in the body of your essay, your conclusion needs to set the topic in the wider context again by mentioning broader implications or by making recommendations for further investigation. You can make your own judgement or point of view, but be sure to support it with evidence. You should not introduce any new material in your conclusion. Restate the conclusions in terms of the question that was asked – keep it all relevant to the question!

#### For example:

Therefore, many urgent health issues need to be acknowledged by government and medical professionals and catered for in forward planning for adequate and equitable health care. Major issues are as follows: the demographics of the Australian population and in particular the vast number of baby boomers, the lack of equity and access to health care caused by differences between rich and poor, private health insurance issues... etc.

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## Your final copy:

- Have you answered the question? (A brilliant but irrelevant essay will not pass.)
- Do you refer to the question in your essay? (This keeps you on track and reminds the marker of the relevance of your answer.)
- Is your essay well structured; are all ideas and information ordered coherently?
- Does your work flow logically from beginning to end?
- Have you used evidence to support the ideas and arguments presented in your work?
- Have you referenced your work appropriately?
- Have you proofread your work to eliminate any spelling or grammatical errors?  
(Try using the WYNN software available on UB computers to hear your essay read aloud. Find the WYNN program at: Start/All Programs/WYNN/WYNN Reader. Open your file; upload your essay file; select Settings for speed and accent; select Read. If you edit, save it as a Word Win. Close WYNN and open as a word document. A headset will allow better listening.)
- Are there any special presentation requirements such as a cover page? (Know your course requirements – ask your lecturer or tutor. If you need a cover page, include the title and submission details, eg. Course, Lecturer, Your Name, Date Due etc.)

Being an independent learner is all about being able to answer yes to the above questions. Make it your checklist.

## The Presentation of Academic Work

As you have put considerable effort into researching and writing your paper and you want to make a good impression, do not let poor presentation detract from the content. When preparing your final draft, give some thought to the layout of your paper. Get familiar with the UB publication, '**General Guide for the Presentation of Academic Work**' which is available online at [www.ballarat.edu.au/generalguide](http://www.ballarat.edu.au/generalguide) and is also for sale at each campus of the University.

The Guide contains critical information about reaching acceptable standards of academic work at UB. The recent edition contains full citation guidelines for online referencing as well as traditional forms. You can find links to it on **myUBGateway** homepage and on student computers.

