

Essay and report writing skills



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Introduction

Most academic courses will require you to write assignments or reports, and this free OpenLearn course, *Essay and report writing skills*, is designed to help you to develop the skills you need to write effectively for academic purposes. It contains clear instruction and a range of activities to help you to understand what is required, and to plan, structure and write your assignments or reports. You will also find out how to use feedback to develop your skills.

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Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- understand what writing an assignment involves
- identify strengths and weaknesses
- understand the functions of essays and reports
- demonstrate writing skills.

1 Good practice in writing

This course is a general guide and will introduce you to the principles of good practice that can be applied to all writing. If you work on developing these, you will have strong basic (or 'core') skills to apply in any writing situation. For assistance with specific aspects of any course you are to study, always refer to any guidance notes or handbooks that have been provided.

This course won't solve all your difficulties immediately; developing your writing skills is an ongoing process, and one that involves frequent reflection on the way you tackle assignments. By the time you have come to the end of the course, however, we hope that you will be able to break down the task of essay or report writing into separate elements, identify which of these elements you want to work on, and develop an action plan to enable you to manage your own improvement.



How to use this course

You can use this course in a variety of ways. You can dip into it, choosing the sections that you feel are most relevant to your needs, or you can work through it from start to finish. However, we suggest that you don't use it in isolation but *in conjunction with your current study, ideally while you are working on an assignment or report*. It is essentially a workbook, and includes a number of activities, which we hope you will do as you study your chosen course. There is also an action plan. You can only really improve through practice. Like swimming, no-one learns assignment writing by reading a book, although it may give useful advice on technique.

2 Identifying key concerns

2.1 Your feelings about writing

Think for a moment about your reasons for studying this course. Is it perhaps because you don't understand what is expected of you in your assignments, or that you aren't clear about how to improve? What are your feelings about your writing skills? What previous experience have you had (if any) of essay or report writing?

Activity 1

You might find it helpful to write down your thoughts at this stage in your Learning Journal and keep them for future reference. You can look back on them at another time and see if they have changed in any way.

Discussion

Don't be despondent if some of your responses are negative. It's the aim of this course to turn those negatives into positives. In a few months' time, you should be able to look back on these initial responses and feel that you have made progress.

Do any of the following relate to your own circumstances?

It's a very long time since I've done anything like this. I've forgotten how to do it.

I'm not familiar with the British educational system. What I was taught seems to be quite different from what is expected here.

I feel I'm putting myself up just to be shot down. I'm really exposing my weaknesses.

I enjoy writing, but there seems to be a mystique to this kind of 'academic' writing that I can't fathom.

I love writing essays but this course requires reports, and I feel frustrated because they constrain my style.

I find that I write in one way for one tutor, and that's acceptable to her, but then the next tutor says I should do it differently. What is right?

2.2 Developing writing styles

If any of the statements on the previous page rings true, let us reassure you: many other students are feeling the same as you. **Writing skills can be learned.** We want to emphasise straightaway that this is a process that can be continually developed.

There is no single 'correct' way of writing: different academic disciplines demand different styles. This can be confusing if you feel that you've mastered what is required for one course, only to find that something different is expected on another. You might feel more comfortable with one particular style of writing or presentation rather than another. You will also have your own individual way of writing, which reflects your personality or your culture: think of this as a strength that can be built on.

3 The purpose of writing

Let's take a step back and think about why you are writing assignments. As with most tasks, if you have an understanding of why you are doing something and how it fits into the bigger picture, it is easier to define what is required of you and therefore to do a good job.

So, what do you see as the reasons for writing assignments? Here are some suggestions:

- to meet the assessment requirements of my course;
- to demonstrate my understanding of particular topics to my tutor;
- to check that my writing is at the right level for my course.

Most students tend to view the writing process in these terms: that it provides evidence of their understanding and skills to whoever is marking their work. It is possible to engage with the course materials for a while without knowing whether or not you have really understood what the writer is conveying. If you have the opportunity to attend tutorials, you may be able to listen to what is going on without feeling you have to say very much. Then comes the crunch. An assignment is due, and you are forced to expose your thinking and understanding to someone else – and be awarded marks for it. For many students, anxiety about assessment can overshadow the enjoyment and personal growth that the writing process can offer.

But what if you change the focus? While formal assessment is obviously important, take a moment to ask yourself 'What can I gain from the writing process?'

Activity 2

Would you agree with the following statements? An assignment:

- (a) provides an opportunity for me to think about different viewpoints or perspectives;
- (b) helps me to come to a better, *personal* understanding of important theories and concepts; to internalise knowledge and ideas, 'making them my own';
- (c) builds on my ability to analyse and apply new ideas;
- (d) allows me to obtain feedback from my tutor and advice on how to improve;
- (e) helps pull the course together and enables me to check out my progress.

Discussion

Assignments are not just about producing something to please your tutor and gaining good marks, nor about moving bits of course material around into a slightly different form. The process of writing is an integral part of your personal learning development, improving your skills and understanding of the subject area.

4 Understanding the task

4.1 Writing requirements

Being a successful writer in one area doesn't always make it easy to know what is required in another. Here are some general questions that you can ask to help define the requirements for particular pieces of writing:

- What will my tutor be expecting? (this is sometimes phrased as 'think about the audience')
- What is the most appropriate format: report or essay? Do I have a choice, or is it stipulated in any guidance notes I've been given?
- What is the question asking?
- Is the aim to inform, to analyse or to recommend – or perhaps something else?
- Is there a recommended length?
- Is there advice about how to distribute the word allocation between sections?
- Is a formal style required ('it could be argued ...') or a more personal tone ('I think...')?

Your answers to these questions will depend on the type of assignment you are being asked to write and the advice or guidance given for that assignment, or for the course more generally. Your tutor will be able to help if you are unsure.

We will concentrate on two forms here, the report and the essay.

4.2 Reports

Let's look at reports first.

Activity 3

Note down in your Learning Journal what you consider to be the purpose of a report.

Discussion

Your answer may well depend on the subject you are studying, and again we would recommend that you refer to any guidance notes that you may have been given. Essentially a report can be simplified into three general principles:

- How was it done?
- Why was it done?
- What does it mean?

Once you are clear in your mind about these questions in relation to a particular assignment, you will be in a position to think how best to proceed in answering them.

In general, a good report is one that you don't need to reread, it is clear and the information that it contains is easy to find. The structure is fairly rigid, usually divided into sections, probably with subheadings, each performing a very specific task. For

example a scientific report will be a structured account of an investigation or experiment that you have carried out, whereas a business report may require you to imagine that you are making recommendations to your boss or colleagues for a particular course of action. You need to strive for relevance and conciseness, and your report should proceed in a logical and ordered way.

4.3 Essays

Now let's turn to essays.

Activity 4

Note down in your Learning Journal what you consider to be the purpose of an essay.

Discussion

Michel de Montaigne, a French philosopher, developed the essay form in the 16th century. The term itself derives from the French word *essai* meaning 'testing' or 'trying out'. The purpose was (and still remains):

To try out or test a proposition or ideas in the context of other thinkers and in the light of personal experience and judgement.

In Montaigne's day, the idea of applying your personal assessment to issues, rather than deferring to authority, was quite revolutionary. If you look ahead to the sample essay questions in [Activity 9](#) (don't worry about how you would answer these questions; they are drawn from a wide range of subjects and levels), you can see how this approach applies. In most of them, you are given a statement to test, to try out the arguments and opinions for and against a particular position by demonstrating a use of evidence.

The essay should guide the reader from the issue(s) raised in the title to a conclusion, by developing a clear and logical line of thought so that the reader is not side-tracked by points that are not directly relevant. It is normally in the form of continuous prose, using paragraphs but probably not using headings or numbers. This means that, while the essay may be broken up into paragraphs, generally the writing flows along without interruption.

An essay needs:

- an introduction, telling the reader what the essay is about;
- a main body, containing the 'meat' of the essay, where you outline your particular point of view, while demonstrating awareness of other perspectives or interpretation;
- a conclusion, summarising the content of the essay clearly and concisely.

4.4 Stages in assignment writing

Activity 5

Note down in your Learning Journal what you think the stages are that you have to go through in producing an assignment, from beginning to end.

Discussion

You may well have thought of some, if not all, of the following stages:

- preparation
- planning
- drafting
- polishing
- letting go
- reflecting on the feedback.

Let's break down these stages further.

Preparation

This stage consists of:

- estimating the time available for the task
- identifying what the question is asking of you
- taking note of the guidance you have been given
- researching or carrying out an experiment or collecting data
- making notes
- thinking over your ideas.

Planning

Planning your assignment involves:

- working out an appropriate and logical structure
- identifying what is relevant and what is not
- taking account of the word limit
- refining your ideas
- selecting appropriate evidence or quotations.

Drafting

This stage comprises a single task:

- writing the assignment, perhaps with one or more early drafts.

Polishing

Polishing your assignment means:

- reviewing what you have written and making changes

- checking your spelling and grammar
- making sure your references are correct
- checking the word count.

Letting go

This is more than just sending off your assignment. Letting go includes:

- deciding when the assignment is finished
- submitting the assignment
- conducting a self-review.

Reflecting on tutor feedback

And finally:

- comparing your self-review with your grade and tutor comments.

As you can see, the actual writing of the assignment is only one part of the process.

4.5 A different perspective

If we present the list in a different way [Figure 1](#)), you can also see that this process is not linear. It is not simply a case of beginning with an analysis of the assignment and ending with a consideration of your tutor's comments. It involves frequent revisiting of earlier stages, checking and reflecting: two steps forward, one step back. You may notice how much depends on a constant referring back to the question.

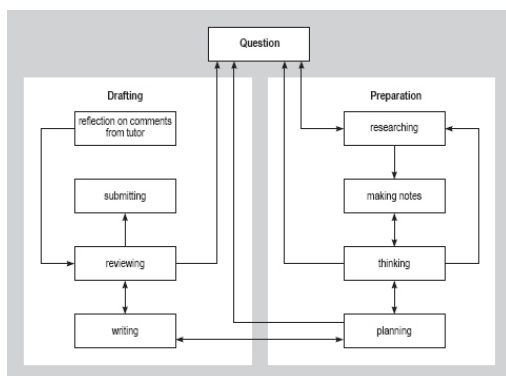


Figure 1 Assignment writing: a different perspective

5 Preparation

5.1 Estimating the time for the task

First you need to know how much time you have available for your assignment. The pacing of your studies comes outside the scope of this course, but it can be very demotivating when you no longer feel in control of your studies because – for whatever reason – you have fallen behind. So it is extremely important to meet the deadlines set by the course team in your course calendar whenever possible.

Activity 6

Look ahead to the submission date of your next assignment. How much time can you allow yourself to go through all the stages? Take account of your known personal commitments and how much time you think that they will involve. Do you know much about the topic or will it require a great deal of extra work? How long does it usually take you to write down your thoughts? Try to set aside blocks of time in your study calendar or diary.

Discussion

You need to be both realistic and flexible. Almost certainly you won't have the amount of time you would ideally like, and it's also possible that something will happen at work or home which will affect your timetable. However, having blocked out the time in your study calendar or diary, see how far you can stick to it. If you find that you need more time for certain stages, then have another go for the next assignment, allowing the extra time in order to make it more workable.

5.1.1 Do you dread deadlines?

Of course, there are lots of different patterns of working: some students can only work to deadlines at the very last minute; while others prefer to work in shorter snatches over longer periods. The main problem with the former is that you may have to skip over some of the points we are now discussing, which could be counter-productive.

Waiting until the last minute may be because you are afraid to begin. If this applies to you – as it will to many others – you might find it helpful to pause here and consider why you feel this way.

Activity 7

Spend a few minutes answering the question: Why do I always seem to look for excuses to delay beginning work on my assignment?

Discussion

Is it because you are frightened by the prospect of starting? Perhaps you have looked at the title and felt that you just don't understand what is wanted. You have some ideas but don't know how to put them together. Maybe you just don't want to do it; it seems a daunting task. Or is it because you need to develop your reading or note taking skills?

Try reflecting on your own experience. Then you will be in a better position to help yourself, if procrastination is a problem. You can ask yourself, 'What am I going to do about this?' 'What help do I need?' We hope this course will provide some of that help.

5.1.2 'Good enough' is OK

We can almost hear you saying that you never have enough time for your assignments, whatever your approach, and we empathise with this view. This may be even more of a problem if English is not your first language. It is well known that time constraints are a barrier in distance learning, and you may well have to be satisfied with doing what is good enough, whatever your circumstances. Your aim should not be to submit the 'perfect' assignment (even if there were such a thing). Look again at the discussion of the purpose of an essay in [Activity 4](#). Your aim should be to do the best you can in the circumstances, to learn from the experience and benefit from your tutor's comments so that you can improve for the next time.

5.2 The question

5.2.1 When to look at the question

At what stage do you look at the title of your next assignment?

Activity 8

Note down in your Learning Journal what you think are the advantages and disadvantages of looking at the title before and after starting to work through the relevant section of your course.

Discussion

Your answer may contain some of the following points.

Looking at the title first

Advantages

It can help you to use your time more productively because you are looking out for, and making a note of (either on paper or in your head) the most useful points.

It can help avoid 'writers' block' because you are effectively preparing for the assignment before you have to get down to it in earnest.

It helps you to be questioning as a reader and to read actively.

Looking at the title later

You are likely to gain more from the experience of reading the course materials because your mind is open to more than the assignment question. There is more to studying a course than submitting assignments.

It can help you focus more clearly, noting points and identifying useful quotations, which are relevant to the question.

Disadvantages

It can be daunting because, not having read the material, you may think 'I shall never be able to answer that'.

If you see the course only through the assignment questions, there is a danger that you will miss other important areas.

There is no right or wrong approach and again, much may depend on the amount of time you have available and your own preferred style of learning.

5.2.2 Opening up ideas: analysing the question

What do you need to know about your assignment? Most importantly, what it's about (i.e. the topic). Once you have worked this out, you are in a better position to gauge how much you already know and how much you will need to find out.

Activity 9

Here are some assignment titles from a range of different courses. Although the subject matter may not be familiar, try to put into words how you would explain to someone else what each question is about.

1. Outline the Marxist model of class divisions. How does the growth of the middle class affect the model?
2. Compare and contrast the differences in state development of *any two* nineteenth century European countries or empires.
3. In general, Victorian culture was activated by a dislike of industrialisation and urbanisation: the country was seen as a repository of enduring values. Do you agree?
4. Based on knowledge of your organisation, or one you know well, and using concepts and methods from Unit 13:
 - (a) explain with the help of a diagram how you identify the critical issues within your organisation's environment
 - (b) how do managers in your organisation typically cope with environmental issues? Discuss relevant coping strategies as they are applied, or could be applied, to these issues.
5. Describe and contrast two African poems and either one African story or piece of African music, which you have studied in the course so far. Relate this to the economics and politics of contemporary development.
6. What are the similarities and differences between the mineralogical compositions of the basalt, S3, and the meteorite, EETA 79001?

Discussion

It isn't easy, is it? Take, for example, question 3: is it just 'about' Victorian culture? What would your tutor say if you wrote all you know about Victorian culture? He or she would surely comment that you have not focused on the Victorians' dislike of industrialisation and urbanisation and their preference for country life. So, what would

your tutor say if you had covered these specific aspects of Victorian culture, but in a purely descriptive way? The feedback could well say that, although you showed a good understanding of these issues, you did not say whether or not you have agreed with this suggestion, as the essay title requires. If you had done that, you would get a good grade. However, you would have achieved an even higher grade if you had commented on the significance of the words 'in general' and defined some of the terms, which could need clarification, such as 'culture' and 'enduring values'.

Activity 10

Take another look at the titles in Activity 9. For each of them, indicate which of the following tasks you are being asked to do:

- (a) describe 'x'
- (b) present a case for 'x'
- (c) state whether you agree with 'x'
- (d) explain why 'x' happens
- (e) put 'x' into its context
- (f) compare and contrast 'x' and 'y'
- (g) explore 'x'
- (h) describe how far it is true to say that 'x' ...

Discussion

Do you agree with our choices?

- 1) (a) and (h)
- 2) (d) and (g)
- 3) (b), (c) and (h)
- 4) (d) and (g)
- 5) (a), (e) and (f)
- 6) (f)

Activity 11

Now look at the title of your next assignment. Ask yourself, 'What is this question asking me to demonstrate?' For example:

- (a) specific subject knowledge – from your recent reading/tutorials/TV programmes/audio cassettes, are there particular aspects of the course that are being sought by this question?
- (b) understanding and application of theories and concepts – is there a combination of these to draw on? (Even if you are being asked to comment on one particular set of ideas or concepts, it is usually expected that you have considered alternatives – and these may contribute to your analysis.)

- (c) an ability to identify links to related sections of your course – are you expected to make new links for yourself or to notice and comment on links pointed out in course material?
- (d) personal experience – are you expected to draw on this?
- (e) skill development – what particular skill(s) in writing assignments do you feel you need to work on?

Discussion

Do any of these questions apply to your assignment, or are you being asked to do something quite different? If so, what? If you are still not sure, contact your tutor for reassurance or clarification. Try the approach 'I'm not quite clear whether this assignment is asking me to ... or ...'. Or perhaps you could check your reading of the question with another student, to see if your interpretation of it is similar to his or hers. Remember, this is still your first – almost surface – reading of the question. It is important to keep your options open. Don't rule anything out at this stage.

5.3 Researching

'Research' may sound rather a grand word for what you feel you do at this point of preparation for your assignment. Don't worry: essentially all it involves is finding out more about the topic in hand.



Let's use a dictionary as an example. In looking up a word, you are effectively 'researching' it. We tried looking up the word 'research' in a couple of standard dictionaries, not so much to find out what the word means, but to see if a definition might provide a useful slant for this section of the course. Indeed it did, for three phrases not only confirmed our understanding of the word but also gave us a way forward that might be helpful to you. These three phrases tell us that research is:

- a systematic investigation

- a critical investigation
- a careful search.

'Systematic' and 'careful' suggest a thorough-going search of the material available to you, making sure that you don't leave anything important out. 'Critical' suggests something else: deciding what is relevant to the subject, whether something you have found out should be included or not. If you look again at [Figure 1](#) you will see that there is an arrow linking the researching stage with the question. This is to make sure that your answer will be focused and really address what the question is looking for. (You might also like to look back at [Activity 9](#), which dissects a question). Note, too, the reference to 'search': it is very unlikely that the question is going to be answered just by looking at a single section of your course.

In short, researching something can clarify or explain, but also may spark off further thoughts which can lead you deeper into your topic.

5.4 Identifying sources

So what material do you have available to you?

- Your materials are likely to be your first sources of information.
- Any guidance notes you may have been given will sometimes tell you exactly which sections you need to look at. But don't forget that your course materials encompass more than just these texts.
- Make use of any handouts you've been given.
- Your own notes of what you have been reading or watching; from tutorials, or from observations or experiments you have been carrying out.
- Newspaper articles or reviews, chosen carefully, can be a useful extra up-to-date source for some courses.

Of course, there are many more sources available to you through libraries or the internet. Your course materials may also provide reading lists. If you have time to undertake further research, that's fine and is good academic practice. Certainly you will not lose marks if you restrict yourself to the course materials; it is *how you answer* the question that gives the grade, not how much you know. You can always follow up some of the suggested extra reading once the course has finished.

At this point you are likely to have a great deal of material and many ideas to hand, most probably in note form. Now is the time to start refining and focusing. You may have been doing this already, as you have carried out your research and thought over your findings. Let's move on to the more detailed planning.

6 Planning

6.1 Why plan a piece of writing?

Planning is about creating a framework that will help you to make choices about what needs to be included in your assignment and what doesn't. Some people feel they don't need to plan: starting to write helps them know what it is they are going to say. If you recognise yourself here, we suggest you consider the points we raise in this section.

Activity 12

Why is planning a piece of writing important? Take a few moments to jot down your thoughts in your Learning Journal.

Discussion

Your list probably includes at least some of the following:

- helps me to separate what's essential from what's less so
- enables me to express my ideas more effectively
- ensures that what I want to say doesn't get lost
- assists in building an argument
- makes sure that I don't exceed the word limit
- gets the sequence of ideas right.

Even short pieces require planning so that you are concise and to the point. As the required length and level of complexity of a piece of writing increase, so does the need to organise your ideas.

6.1.1 Report planning

Table 2 highlights the elements of a science or technology report, though the same general principles apply in other disciplines too.

Table 2 The main elements of a science or technology report

Element	Purpose	Description
title	attracts the reader's attention	explanatory of the content, concise and relevant
abstract	gives a brief summary	short paragraph clarifying the scope of the report and the main findings
introduction	gives the purpose of the investigation being reported	explains why the investigation was undertaken and gives essential background information
main text	describes how the study was conducted	the 'meat' of the report containing, for example (depending on the discipline):
	gives results of the study	• method of investigation/ approach taken and why

	interprets results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • record of observations or measurements • references to appropriate theories • discussion • unique or distinctive facts and explanation of how these relate to the broader context or body of evidence
conclusions	describes what the study has shown	includes the meaning of the results of the investigation, what has been demonstrated and any recommendations for action

You need to assemble and order your material, perhaps under a set of headings (which can be added to or sub-divided). Your plan will help you to include material that is relevant and to the point.

6.1.2 Essay planning

Carefully read the following short essay. Try to identify its strengths and weaknesses in terms of planning. Take your time, but don't think you need to be familiar with the content, you are trying to find what provides the writing's framework.

Then try to answer the questions that follow in Activity 13.

There are advantages to studying as a mature student. Do you agree?

Government bodies and the universities are committed to a policy of widening access to higher education. In the attempt to develop a trained, educated workforce, there is greater flexibility in terms of entrance requirements and routes to a degree. If you are 21 or over and do not have conventional qualifications you may be given credit for your life and work experience.

An Open University lecturer wrote that teaching mature students:

... is sometimes an unnerving experience: at a lecture on Dickens's *Hard Times* I suddenly realised that I was explaining the rigour of industrial work ... to ex-steel workers. Everyone of them knew more than I did and indeed they all knew more than Dickens about the lives of workers in heavy industry.

(Philippa Gregory, 1994)

The mature student has often learned a powerful work discipline and can find self-directed learning difficult to adjust to. The mature student may also work full-time and have a home to run. Despite enthusiasm for returning to study, the mature student may be scared by comparing themselves to younger students who seem very quick (having spent their recent years in full-time education).

Your degree certificate is evidence that you have taken the opportunity that you missed when you were younger, it tells people that you have reached a certain level of academic attainment, that you have time management and priority setting skills, and that you have shown sustained interest, commitment and self-discipline.

As I mentioned earlier, increasingly people all over Europe are realizing that education and learning are lifelong processes, much too valuable to belong only to the young. The oldest

Open University graduate is 92. More and more mature students are entering Higher Education. In 1971, the first 24 000 Open University students began their studies. In 1994, there were more than 200 000 students registered. At least 2 million people have studied with the Open University. People are living longer and having fewer children. Changes in the workplace may mean that older workers have to retrain and seek a new career.

The mature student may find it difficult to make room in their lives and their homes for study. Many people like to shut themselves off from the rest of the family, without interruptions (but this is almost impossible without the support of your partner and children). It is much easier for young people to be selfish and shut themselves off. They don't have as much to worry about as older students. It is even more difficult if you are a single parent who has to go out to work as well as taking care of children, along with studying.

It is a really big step to add to a busy life at work and at home and start to study, but you do broaden your outlook and the range of ideas and people that you are acquainted with. The self-discipline and motivation that you need to develop will be a great help in the future. Once you have finished studying it may still be difficult to find a different job because of ageism, employers may think that you can't be as quick or as full of ideas as a younger graduate.

Reference

Philippa Gregory (1994), Foreword in Taggart, C. (1994), *The Essential Handbook for Mature Students*, London, Kyle Cathie Ltd.

Activity 13

1. Is there an introduction and a conclusion, which help to guide the reader?
2. Are important concepts or ideas communicated?
3. Does the writing build and have a sense of direction?
4. Can you discern an overall plan?

Discussion

This essay contains some interesting and important points; but does it work?

1 Is there an introduction and a conclusion, which help to guide the reader?

There is no introduction and no conclusion – in fact, at the end the essay is almost left 'hanging' by a throw-away remark about ageism. For the reader, it is rather like undertaking a journey without a map and, instead of being in 'safe hands', finding that the driver is inexperienced.

2 Are important concepts or ideas communicated?

The writer does seem to know what is important to get across. But, there doesn't seem to be much of a framework and so the ideas tend to get lost.

3 Does the writing build and have a sense of direction?

This seems to be one of the major problems. There is good material here but the writer doesn't seem to know which facts are more important than others, there is no real attempt to classify or group points in order to create a sense of flow, of building an argument.

Here are two examples of this lack of order.

- Information about the 'big picture' (presumably obtained through careful research) that is, government policy, numbers entering higher education and

changes in the workplace, is sprinkled throughout the essay, rather than gathered together. The focus changes back and forth between this 'big picture' and the personal quite frequently. The writer certainly has opinions about the issues that a mature student needs to overcome, but these don't appear to be in any particular order.

- The quote about the steelworkers is really appropriate and grabs the attention of the reader, but it isn't linked to the idea of the mature student's life experience mentioned at the end of the first paragraph. This takes away some of its impact and probably means that the writer would not get as many marks for its inclusion as she or he might have done.

The original topic is 'There are advantages to studying as a mature student. Do you agree?' We don't really know whether the writer has a point of view on this or has just put ideas in because the words or phrases look right and may be relevant. The important thinking over of the issues doesn't seem to have happened.

4 Can you discern an overall plan?

Well? What do you think?

- Is the presentation of evidence or supporting material effective?
- Which points are prioritised or do they all have equal billing?
- Are links made between different points?
- Does the essay flow?
- Has the writer made the ideas his/her own?
- Are chains of logic created?

The more time we spent thinking about this – reflecting on it – the more it seemed to us that the key is direction: if you can give your writing direction, then the rest will follow. In other words if you have a case to put, an argument to make, this provides the essay's direction; the elements listed above will then slip into place much more easily.

6.2 Turning the spotlight on your work

Having established some general principles, try now to subject your own work to the same scrutiny.

Activity 14

Take one of your most recent essays or reports and ask yourself, 'What does it look like?' That is, describe its physical appearance on the page.

Discussion

On a superficial level, even the appearance of work can be a give-away and betray a lack of planning. Solid blocks of text can look overwhelming. You should normally aim for an average of three or four paragraphs per side of word-processed A4 paper. Solid blocks of text imply that the writer hasn't taken the time or is unable to organise the material. At the other extreme, written work with the appearance of being very 'broken up' – lots of separate sentences, each treated as a paragraph – conveys the same

impression: that the writer doesn't have a plan or hasn't developed his or her ideas in sufficient detail.

- No paragraphs? Go back and look at your plan.
- Too much in brackets? Something is in the wrong place or is not strictly relevant, go back to planning.
- 'As I mentioned earlier', 'As I said before' If you need to say this often, you are going round in circles; you need a better plan.

Can you think of some other warning signs, things that you write when you have lost your way in an assignment?

Try to dig a little further and apply the questions from Activity 13. They were:

- Is there an introduction and a conclusion, which help to guide the reader?
- Are important concepts or ideas communicated?
- Does the writing build and have a sense of direction?
- Can you discern an overall plan?

6.3 Planning stages

Having discussed the reasons to plan writing and the impact planning may have, now we need to look at planning itself and its two stages.

6.3.1 Stage 1 Brainstorm

To begin your planning, you need to generate ideas or brainstorm. At this stage, you are including *everything* that you think may be relevant. Nothing should be dismissed yet; this part is about gathering your resources and your thoughts.

For instance, using the essay title 'There are advantages to studying as a mature student. Do you agree?', we tried to brainstorm for ideas and produced this list (but, of course, it wasn't this tidy):

- Gregory quote (steelworkers) – life experience
- degree certificate – what does it say about you?
- home commitments and comparison with younger students
- government policy – numbers studying
- changes in the workplace, need to retrain
- need for family support
- self-discipline and motivation
- agree or disagree with statement
- define mature? – no – too obvious.

This isn't everything, but it is a start and is helpful in understanding what the question requires.

Activity 15

Try to do the same for your *next* assignment. Brainstorm all your ideas and sources.

Discussion

The important thing to remember is that anything that comes to mind may be relevant, leave nothing out at this stage.

6.3.2 Stage 2 Create a mind map

Now you need to think about grouping the ideas, creating a flow for your assignment.

We started by grouping together our ideas and material for the essay on the possible advantages of being a mature student. This helped us to create a mind-map by seeing where links could be made and so made it much easier to decide where the weight of evidence was taking our argument (Figure 2).

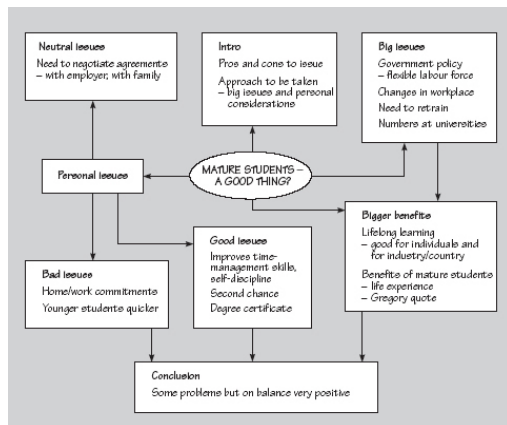


Figure 2 Mind-map for essay on advantages of being a mature student

Can you see the advantages of using this type of approach to planning? Grouping the parts of your assignment together and making links helps to ensure that you avoid a disjointed response to the question. It can also show how balanced your answer is going to be: are there too many points on one side or does it appear to be balanced?

Activity 16

- Part 1 Now return to your most recent assignment and try to construct a similar map in order to reveal its underlying structure.
- Part 2 Having done this, make a note of what worked well and what you might do differently next time.
- Part 3 Try to apply this by making a plan for your next assignment.

Discussion

Try to use this activity as an opportunity to improve how you approach future assignments. Did you consider all parts of the question? Did you write yourself into a dead-end? Was the balance right? Was there a clear sense of direction? Take account of these points and see how you can make things better next time.

7 Drafting

7.1 Translating your plan

You have now reached the stage when it is time to translate your plan, whatever its form, into the assignment itself. It is likely that this will be a first attempt at the exercise – a first draft. You may be one of the lucky few who only needs to write one draft. Or, if you have taken some time over your planning, one draft before the final version may be enough. But if you are finding it difficult to reconcile opposing points of view or to fit in a great deal of information, you may need two or three drafts. If this is the case, take a step back and check that you are sticking to your plan and are not trying to include too much ‘just in case’. Finally, if you feel you need to write lots of drafts before you are satisfied with the final product, ask yourself why it is necessary. What might you do to reduce the number of drafts and thus save time?

Activity 17

What is the difference between the appearance of your plan and the assignment itself? Note down the steps that you must take to convert one to the other.

Discussion

Your plan only needs to make sense to you. It may be diagrammatic in form, using circles and arrows and abbreviations. It is the bare bones of your assignment. It is also disposable and changeable.

The assignment itself must be understandable to anyone who is marking it, as certain expectations will need to be met. You will find help in any guidance notes you’ve been given for your course. Reading these is just as important as interpreting the assignment title as they will explain the conventions that you are expected to abide by in shaping your piece of writing. For instance: if it asks for 1500 words in continuous prose, it would not be a good idea to write 2000 words and use sub-headings.

A useful way of converting your plan into a first draft of your assignment is to number each of the areas you want to include (you may have already linked them with arrows). This confirms the order in which you want to present ideas and ensures a logical flow. Then, cross off each area once you have written about it, so there is no danger of repeating yourself. This can be encouraging by showing you how much progress you are making. If you would like some practice in this, try using [Figure 2](#) as a model to work on.

7.2 Drafting reports

As you may remember from [Activity 3](#), the three general principles of a report (whether it is of a social sciences investigation or a scientific experiment) are:

- Why was it done?
- How was it done?

- What does it mean?

You will need to make some decisions, not only about what to leave out (because it isn't particularly relevant) but also about how to present what you are including to best effect:

- Do you wish to present your findings in chronological order?
- Would subject area, types or categories be preferable?
- What will make your findings clearer?

Diagrams, tables and graphs may help to present your results with greater clarity. Headings or sub-headings, numbered paragraphs and bullet points can also help to emphasise the main issues.

Here is a plan on how to lay out the report of a social sciences investigation, though there are common elements with reports produced for other purposes.

1. Introduction
 - 1.1 Background or context
 - 1.2 Aims and objectives
2. Methods
 - 2.1 The questionnaire framework
 - 2.2 The sample
 - 2.3 Numerical significance of sample
3. Findings
 - 3.1 Response rates
 - 3.2 Principal findings
 - 3.3 Analysis (here you may wish to break the findings and analysis down into further subsections (3.2.1, 3.2.2 as appropriate))
4. Conclusions
5. Recommendations/implications
6. Further research
7. References
8. Appendices
 - 8.1 Sample questionnaire
 - 8.2 Summary of findings (tables etc.)

The language used in a report is usually straightforward and to the point. The report's structure and organisation make it easy to identify the various parts, and to find specific items of information quite quickly.

7.3 Drafting essays

As you may remember from [Activity 4](#), the main elements of an essay are:

- the introduction
- the main body
- the conclusion.

7.4 Writing the first draft

Now that you are beginning to draft, keep the assignment's title in front of you. Refer back to it regularly in ordering your material. Are you doing what you are asked to do, or are you writing about what you want to write about?

7.4.1 The introduction of a report

The introduction of a report has a very specific role, and the range of approaches you may take is fairly limited. The function of such an introduction is to:

- outline the aim of the investigation or experiment: list the objectives
- provide background information in order to clarify why the investigation or experiment was undertaken.

7.4.2 The introduction of an essay

What is the introduction of an essay and what is its purpose?

Activity 18

Write down your own understanding of the term 'introduction' in relation to essays.

Discussion

How does your understanding compare with ours? Potentially the introduction to an essay can:

- lead the reader into the main body of the assignment
- grab the reader's attention and interest
- explain how you are going to answer the question
- set the scene or provide a context
- give a brief answer to the question before the fuller explanations in the assignment itself
- set out the aims of the assignment
- indicate the position you will be taking in answering the question.

It may not do all of these things. The introduction you write for an assignment may be short and seek only to 'engage' or draw the reader in. A fuller introduction, which may be preferable if you are still developing confidence in your writing, could include any or all of the following points:

- an identification of the essay's topic and how you plan to define it; here you are establishing what you intend to write about and making clear, perhaps by implication, what you don't intend to write about – thus indicating the scope of your essay
- a brief definition of important terms or concepts, for purposes of clarity
- highlights of the important debates that lie behind the question; an essay title often acts as a doorway to an area of controversy or debate
- a signpost to the content and shape of your argument or response to the question.

Look back at [Section 1](#). It is longer than the introduction that will be required for one of your assignments: our constraint was the number of pages, not the number of words. But does it fulfil any of the above criteria? We have certainly outlined our aims and objectives; we have indicated the limits to the course – our writing assignment; but we haven't provided much background information or context.

7.4.3 When to write the introduction?

At what stage should the introduction to an assignment be written?

Activity 19

A group of students attending a writing workshop were asked to identify the first task in preparing an assignment. Some answered 'Writing the introduction'.

1. Do you agree that writing the introduction should be your first priority when working on your first draft? If you disagree, why?
2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of beginning your first draft with the introduction?

Discussion

People vary in whether they prefer to write the introduction at an early stage or when they have almost completed your assignment.

Here is a list of the pros and cons of beginning the first draft with the introduction.

Advantages	Disadvantages
It gets over the barrier of being faced with a blank piece of paper.	The main body of the assignment is far more important and needs to be given your full attention.
It clarifies the approach you are adopting in answering the question.	The introduction may constrain what you subsequently want to write; once you begin the more detailed drafting, you might find that it takes off in a different direction.
Having set out your approach, it is easier to check that you are adhering to it.	
It can help stimulate your thoughts or imagination.	

7.4.4 The main body of the text

Presenting an argument

Students generally understand that they are required to 'present an argument in an assignment' but can feel unsure about what this means and how to go about it. Is this how you feel? Though an assignment is an exploration of a topic, it requires a sense of direction, of building a case or argument in a logical manner.



Activity 20

Imagine you need to ask your tutor for an extension to the cut-off date for an assignment. You need to persuade him or her that you have a good case. (In practice, of course, you would not be under so much pressure to explain. We have chosen this as an example because the situation may be familiar to you.)

What might a good case be?

- (a) I have been called away on business at short notice.
- (b) I have had a lot of visitors recently.
- (c) I have just not had the time.
- (d) My daughter was taken into hospital last Monday after a car accident, and I have had to spend a lot of time there with her.
- (e) I have not been able to concentrate on my studies recently.
- (f) We are short-staffed at work, and this is our busy time.

Discussion

If you were the tutor, would you consider all of these to be good reasons for the request? Would you agree that some reasons are stronger than others? Maybe those students whose circumstances have changed unexpectedly have a better case than others who could have foreseen problems and should have been able to plan around their difficulties.

Maybe you would look less favourably on (b) because you would feel that the student need not have got him or herself into that situation and in any case has got his or her priorities wrong. But look at (c) and (e) again. On the face of it, these reasons may not be as strong as, say, (d) but if you were to enquire further with your student, you might discover there were other things underlying the lack of time and concentration. Perhaps the student with reason (c) is caring for an elderly relative for whom respite care had fallen through. Maybe the student with reason (e) is depressed and on medication. These two students would both have a good case but have not presented it very well. Even the student with reason (b) may have an acceptable explanation for

the sudden influx of visitors. What lies behind the suddenness? What extra demands did this place on the student? The more questions that are asked, the stronger the case could become.

There is another aspect here. How do you know that what these students are telling you is true? What pieces of evidence help to verify their reasons? What status would you accord a medical certificate or a statement from the student's employer?

In summary

When drafting your next assignment, ask yourself:

- is my argument logical and worth making – is there a case?
- have I made the argument as clearly as I can?
- have I been side-tracked by issues that are irrelevant?
- have I explained what lies behind my argument in sufficient detail – not too much, not too little?
- do my points follow on from each other and strengthen my argument?
- have I provided evidence for what I say?

Making your argument usually occurs in the *main body* of the assignment, whether it is an essay or a report. This is where you outline your point of view while demonstrating awareness of other perspectives or interpretations. To be convincing, you need to show your reasoning as to why you favour a particular perspective, and to provide supporting evidence.

Paragraphs

You will recall from the planning activities, how important it is to group your ideas together. Once you have reached the drafting stage, these groups of ideas should be subdivided into paragraphs.

Paragraphs:

- act as major organisers
- individually offer something distinctive, in terms of analysis, argument, ideas or examples
- may contain a new topic
- often start with a statement and then expand on or explain it
- include any related evidence, information or quotations.

Use of quotations

Throughout this course, we have recommended that wherever possible you try to put things into your own words. But you may not be familiar with this practice if you come from a different educational or cultural background.

One of the purposes of writing assignments is to reach your own understanding of the issues and to show your tutor that you have done so. This is most effectively done by using your own words. However, there are occasions when it may be best to quote directly from your course materials: for instance, as a piece of evidence, or where you feel the author has expressed him or herself particularly memorably or effectively. Including appropriate quotations, extracts or evidence is often a good way to add weight and authority to your arguments.

Using quotations is not the same as *plagiarism*. Plagiarism is borrowing too heavily from someone else's work and *failing to acknowledge the debt*, giving the impression that you are passing their work off as your own. Quotations should not be too long; a couple of lines is normally sufficient. Remember to acknowledge quotations by providing references. We are reluctant to be too specific here because practices do vary from academic discipline to discipline and from course to course. Once again, refer to any guidance notes you've been given. These may provide an indication of what style of presentation is preferred or required. One guide is to see how quotations are handled in your course materials.

Whereas references serve as an acknowledgement of someone else's words, a bibliography allows the reader (in this case your tutor) to identify in detail the source of your quotations and even ideas. Every assignment should contain a list of sources at the end (even if it is only your current course unit or TV programme). There are many ways of presenting a bibliography. Look at the way it is done for your course. Here is an example of one way of acknowledging a quotation (a) and its bibliographical reference (b):

(a) (Cringley 1996, p. 97)

(b) Cringley, R. (1996) *Accidental Empires*, London, Penguin Books.

7.4.5 The conclusion

Having come so far with your drafting, how will you bring it to a close?

The conclusion should summarise the content of the main body of your assignment clearly and concisely. A final reference to the assignment title is often useful, emphasising to your tutor that you have indeed answered the question. Your concluding paragraph should not include anything new, though it may suggest what needs to be considered in the future. It should emphasise the key elements of your argument.

When you have worked through this course, you might like to consider its conclusion in the light of these statements. Are we successful in following our own advice?

8 Polishing

8.1 Why polish?

Once you have reached this stage, you have nearly finished.

What does polishing mean, and what does it involve? Imagine polishing a car or a piece of furniture. Why might you do so? Usually, to make it look better, to present it in the best possible light, either for your own pleasure, or to impress others – perhaps because you want to sell it. If it is an object that you value, it is worth making it look its very best: it deserves it. How effective your polishing is usually depends on the time and energy you devote to the task.

Activity 21

How would you interpret the analogy to polishing cars and furniture in the opening paragraph of this section?

Discussion

We hope you spotted that it referred to assignments. Your tutor's initial reaction on opening your assignment will probably be very much related to the amount of polishing that you have been able to do.

8.1.1 Achieving a good polish

Here is a list of indicators you can use to judge your polishing techniques. Most guidance notes given to students include these points, but they are not always followed.

Positive indicators	Negative indicators
It is word-processed or clearly and neatly hand-written.	The assignment is written on paper that has been torn out of an exercise book.
It is double-spaced.	It is illegible.
There are wide margins on either side of the script to allow for tutor comments.	The writing (or word processing) fills the whole page, with no margins and no spaces between lines or paragraphs.
The title appears at the top of the first page.	There is no title.
There are few, if any, spelling mistakes.	There are no separate sections or paragraphs.
Paragraphs are neither too long nor too short.	There are too many short sections or paragraphs.
There is space between paragraphs.	There are no references and/or bibliography.
Quotations are acknowledged accurately and in sufficient detail.	

There is a bibliography at the end of the assignment, to indicate which sources you have used.

The pages are numbered.

You have put your name and personal identifier on each page.

9 Letting go

This is the point where you have to make the decision that the assignment is complete and ready to be sent off. It is not always an easy decision to make. Perhaps you feel that there is always room for further improvement or there is something more that you could have done.

At a certain stage, the potential gain from further refinement is not sufficient to warrant delaying submission or to risk impeding progress with your course. Remember, you should be aiming for what is 'good enough', bearing in mind all your other commitments and circumstances.

If you do harbour any residual anxiety, is there anything you can do about it? Yes.

- You can make notes for your own use on:
 - (a) what I did well in this assignment
 - (b) what I would have liked to improve.
- You can ask your tutor if he or she is willing to look at the particular aspect of the assignment that has given you concern, and provide feedback on that point.
- You can make a note to yourself for next time: *what I'd like to do better in the next assignment.*

This will help you to develop an action plan for future improvement; then put it to one side until next time.

Finally, don't forget to keep a copy of your assignment, just in case it gets lost in the post.

10 Reflecting on tutor feedback

When you have taken the assignment as far as you can, you will benefit more from the feedback from your tutor than you will from further polishing.

- If you have worked hard to become involved with your subject you will really appreciate having a captive audience. Someone with as much interest in the subject (and presumably greater knowledge) as you, will take time to read what you have written and to understand what you are trying to say.
- There is recompense to be gained in the form of feedback. As well as marking the work, your tutor will provide comments and advice on the content of your assignment, and your skills in communicating your ideas.



Some tutors find that, despite their feedback, when the next assignment arrives to be marked, it can be hard to believe that the student has even read the comments, let alone tried to apply the advice.

- Are you so keen to make progress that you read the mark, but not the comments provided in the feedback you've been given?
- Do you allow yourself the time to refer back to what you did in light of your tutor's feedback and see whether or not you can apply that advice to the next assignment?
- Is your tutor as critical of your work as you are? Perhaps you are too self-critical and your tutor's comments could help to provide a better sense of perspective.

If you are not reading and acting on your tutor's feedback, you are denying yourself the opportunity to improve and to save time. You are wasting a very valuable learning resource. You may be working hard but you won't be 'working smart'.

Conclusion

Just as we have advised earlier, we are not going to introduce any new ideas in this concluding section. We are using it to reinforce what we think our main points are.

Writing essays or reports can be time-consuming; individual assignments tend to focus in depth on specific topics rather than fostering a wider sense of the whole course. However, three or four or more assignments will bring benefits as linkages start to become apparent and the *total programme* of written work helps you to develop your knowledge and skills across a range of areas. If you allow yourself to be open to making mistakes, to learn from feedback and to view assignment writing as a continuing, developmental process, then the same knowledge and skills should help you beyond any single assignment or any one course.

We hope we have demonstrated that there are many aspects in the process of writing an assignment and it is not just a matter of starting with *x* and finishing with *y*; you will sometimes need to take one step back in order to take one forward: moving on a stage but continually checking back over previous stages, amending as appropriate. There is a limit to what you can – and are expected – to do. Perfection is not everything. If you have to send off an assignment that is not as good as you would have liked, look for the positives. *Why is it not as good? What might you have done differently? Can you transfer the answers to these questions to the next assignment?* Most of all, however, think what you learned from doing it, both from the experience of writing it and from its content.

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Acknowledgements

Appendix 1 Action Plan

In writing my assignments, I think I do the following things well:

I am fairly satisfied with:

I need to work on:

The first thing I am going to when I finish this toolkit is:

Good luck!

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