

THIS ACADEMIC TIP SHEET:

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

THE TWO HABITS YOU'LL NEED

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

1. Read the assignment carefully as soon as you receive it and start working on it reasonably early – they usually take longer to complete than you think!
2. If you're unclear about anything in the assignment, ask the lecturer or tutor questions. It's best to get help before you attempt the assignment.

WHAT ARE THE COMPONENTS OF AN ASSIGNMENT?

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

1. An overview or general statement on the topic: provides background information on the topic and usually contextualises the task.
2. A task statement: contains a central verb or verbs that describe the task, e.g. discuss, describe, evaluate, critique.
3. Content guidelines: suggestions made by the lecturer to ensure you address all aspects of the content and that you organise your work systematically.
4. Style/presentation guidelines: presentation and technical aspects, such as referencing, layout, formatting, word count, etc.
5. Assessment criteria: identifying the mark allocations and grading system.

A TECHNIQUE FOR ASSIGNMENT TASKS

To thoroughly understand the assignment task and the instructions, you'll need to read the assignment several times. To help you understand what's required, you should break the question/task statement into three components:

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

Note: While assignment instructions are meant to be precise and explicit, they can sometimes seem ambiguous and vague. If so, discuss the assignment with some of your classmates to clarify anything you find confusing, or talk to your tutor or lecturer.

STRATEGIES TO DEMONSTRATE YOUR KNOWLEDGE

Generally, your learning is being assessed on the basis of the work you produce in assignments.

To effectively demonstrate your knowledge in an assignment, you should synthesise what you've learned from studying the literature and relate it to the assignment task.

The claims you make and explanations you give in addressing the task need to be properly substantiated. This is usually referred to as providing 'evidence to back up your arguments.'

Using the literature in this way to support the points you make in your assignments, is an integral component of academic work. It allows you to demonstrate to the marker your knowledge of a body of literature on the topic.

EVIDENCE

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

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

The strategy is to clarify what types of evidence will be required within an assignment as this will determine the nature and extent of the research required to produce a good assignment.

Note: You're not only learning to present an academic argument, but also how to argue using specific types of materials and ideas.

WRITING STYLE

It's expected that you'll write your assignments in the academic writing style. Key features of this style include:

- The writing is focused, i.e. it addresses a topic/question/problem.
- It's organised and systematically structured, i.e. coherent.
- It's based upon research, i.e. informed.
- The writing integrates and synthesises information from the literature, i.e. makes links to and situates the writer's position within a body of knowledge.
- The information is drawn from scholarly and current literature on the topic, i.e. draws from the work of experts/leaders in the field.
- The text is written in a formal style and tone.
- The content is unbiased (objective) and reasoned (analytical).

- The writer uses the conventions of referencing accurately and consistently, i.e. proper attribution to avoid plagiarism.
- The technical presentation is excellent, i.e. grammar, spelling and punctuation are free of errors.

Note: In addition to these features, be aware of the typical writing patterns used in discipline areas, e.g. chemistry, human biology, engineering, psychology, etc.

Also, be aware that there are stylistic differences that apply to genres of writing, e.g. report, exposé, review. Before you begin, you should take note of the type of assignment, as this will influence how you present the content.

PRESENTATION

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

ASSIGNMENT CHECKLIST

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

WANT HELP WITH YOUR STUDY?

Please contact our Academic Skills Centre to find out how we can assist you.

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