# Study skills booklet

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## Writing Assignments - what's required?

Assignments require learners to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding and/or skills related to the topic being studied. They are usually take the form of written instructions around the approach to be taken to address the assessment criteria. It is important that learners understand what they are being asked to do, as the misinterpretation of instruction terms can lead to the wrong approach and ultimately failure to meet the assessment criteria. Sometimes even experienced students get it wrong and can become confused between terms like "analyse" and "assess".

We hope that the following glossary of commonly used instruction terms will help you to understand the approach to take when completing your assignments.

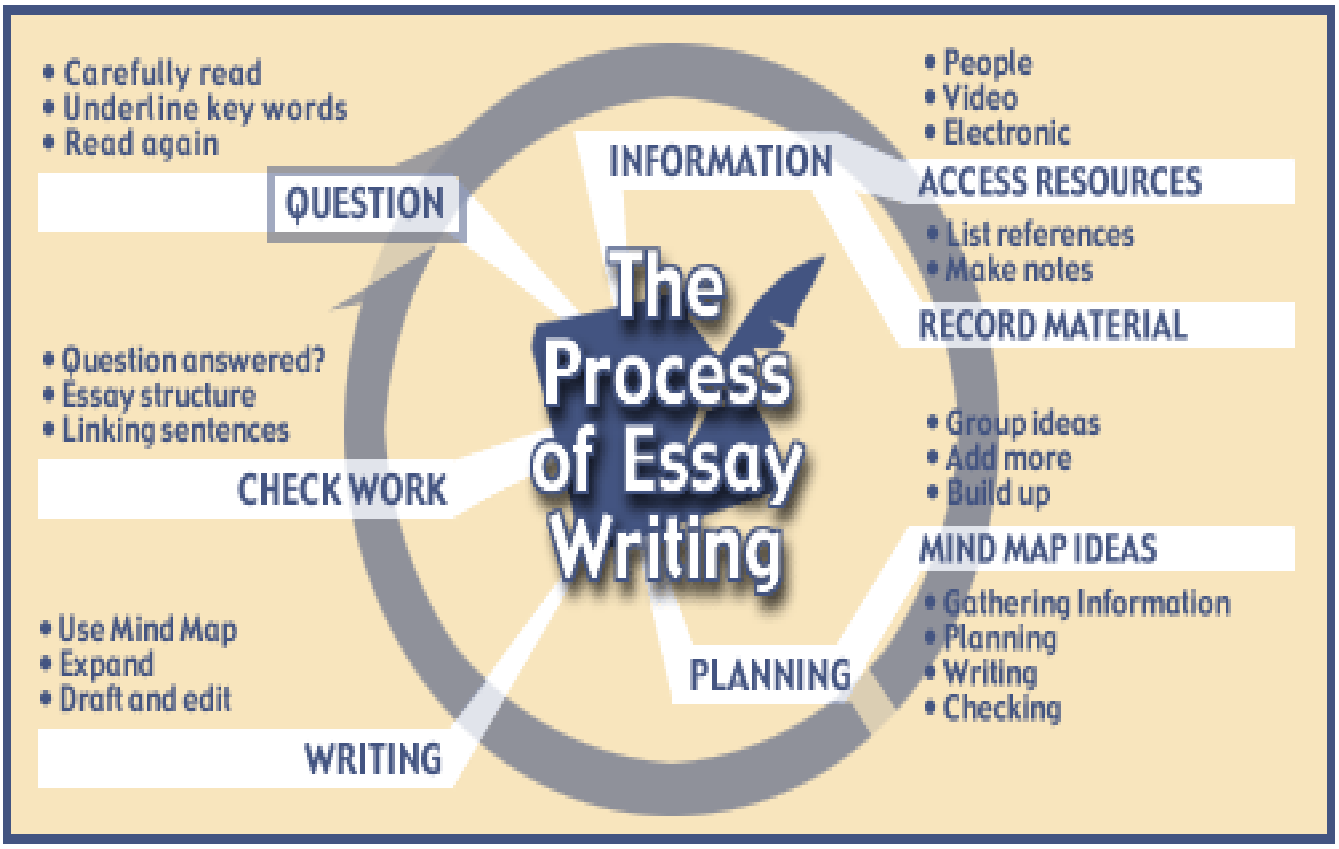
| Instruction term | What's required |
|---|---|
| **Analyse**<br>To examine something in great detail in order to understand it better or discover more about it | Begin by breaking an issue into its constituent parts. Then look closely at each part, considering how they are linked. Use relevant evidence and supporting arguments (for and against) to back up your overall view of the issue or subject. |
| **Assess**<br>To examine something in order to judge or evaluate it | Examine closely, in a balanced way the strengths and weaknesses of a theory/practice or situation. State your conclusion, and justify your judgment clearly. |
| **Compare and contrast**<br>To look for similarities *and* differences between two or more things. | Present the similarities and the dissimilarities between two or more things – these may be theories or practices or approaches. Identify and consider reasons for significant similarities and differences. *Note: Compare and contrast often feature together but may be asked for separately.* |
| **Consider**<br>To think carefully about something in order to form an opinion | Look at the topic from alternative viewpoints and express your own opinions based on relevant evidence and your personal experience. |
| **Critically evaluate**<br>To question information and opinions in the text in order to evaluate or judge its worth overall. | This involves considering research texts, propositions and statements and the extent to which they are valid and/or the extent to which you agree with them. It is important to look at evidence taken from a wide range of sources which both agree with *and* contradict an argument. You should come to a final conclusion which must be based on your judgment about the most important factors, and which you can justify |
| **Define**<br>To give a precise meaning to something | Clearly express and/or describe what is meant by something, and discuss any limitations of the definition |

| | |
|---|---|
| **Demonstrate**<br>To show, explain or describe how something works or how to do something | You may be asked to demonstrate a skill by performing a task under observation.<br>This could also involve providing a written explanation or description of how something works or how something could be done. If asked to demonstrate through writing it is useful to provide concrete and practicable examples |
| **Describe**<br>To give an account of something | You may be asked to briefly describe or to give a detailed description of something or some event. Take note of how much detail is required and provide information about what something is, or what is done and how it is done, as appropriate. |
| **Discuss**<br>A written consideration of a topic | Think of discussion as a written debate. Present arguments for and against a proposition or advantages and disadvantages of a given approach. You will need to show that you can present a reasoned argument backed up by evidence and you must include your conclusion/s. |
| **Evaluate**<br>To assess the value or worth of something | This involves looking at how well or successfully something has been done or carried out. This could refer to theories, policies or practice. Use qualitative and quantitative data and independent assessments as measures of success where appropriate. |
| **Examine**<br>To inspect or study something in detail | Look at the topic closely in order to establish the most important facts and information related to it. Explain why you think these are important and also acknowledge any possible alternative interpretations of the facts. |
| **Explain**<br>To make the meaning of something clear | Give an account of something with sufficient clarity and detail to be understood by someone else. You may be asked to briefly explain or give a detailed explanation, but the overall aim is to help the reader to understand. Focus on the how and why, define key terms, and clarify context. Break down complex procedures so that they can be understood. It is sometimes useful to give an example to provide further clarity. |
| **Explore**<br>To make a careful investigation or study of something | This involves consideration of a range of views, and raising questions about them. It is not always possible to come up with |

| | |
|---|---|
| | definitive answers, but, if possible, draw conclusions based on the weight of supporting evidence. |
| **Identify**<br>To be able to determine what something is | Usually asked for in the context of identifying key features or characteristics of something. Unless specifically asked to do so, do not simply produce a list as you need to state the relevance and/or function of the thing/s you have identified. |
| **Illustrate**<br>To clarify through the use of explicit examples or comparisons | If you are asked to illustrate your answer, you are required to clarify something by providing concrete example/s. These are used to show how something works or happens in reality. |
| **Outline**<br>To convey the main points of a topic | Provide a general account or plan of something, concentrating on the main features or points and inter-related themes, but ignoring fine detail. |
| **Review**<br>To look at something critically | This could involve studying and assessing something e.g. books, articles, and presenting an opinion on them. It could also involve surveying past (and/or on-going) actions, performance or events to measure outcomes and success.<br>Reviews should not be merely descriptive, but should be a critical assessment of the topic |
| **State**<br>To express clearly and briefly | Write in clear terms the key points related to the subject. Be factual rather than descriptive and avoid adjectives. |
| **Summarise**<br>To concisely state or re-state the main points of something | Provide a brief statement of the key facts or points of the subject, avoiding unnecessary information or detail. You might be asked to summarise something that you have covered in detail earlier in an assignment. A summary is often used at the beginning of a substantial report to provide a shortened version of what has been written. |

**This list is not exhaustive. If you are unsure of what required of you, speak to your tutor who will provide clarification for you.**

## Assignment – Part A – Graphical overview of the process



## Assignment – Part B – Structure

Ensure that you consider all the learning outcomes stated in the module descriptor, and that you structure your assignment well

## Structure

- Introduction (***Tell them what you're going to tell them)***
  - Open the doors to your discussion
  - Explain the implications of the question
  - Define any key terms
  - Outline how you propose to answer the question ie identify the key headings or topics within your discussion
  - Keep it general

- Main body (***Tell them)***
  - Make your points in order
  - Link them to form an argument
  - Illustrate your ideas through using quotations/back up your points with academic sources
  - Keep referring back to the question at key points

- Conclusion (***Tell them what you've told them)***
  - Sum up what your discussion has proved
  - Don't be afraid to admit that some issues cannot be solved
  - Make your (evidence-based) opinion clear
  - Make any recommendations that may be required and be sure to link these to the conclusions as well as the learning outcomes.

## Writing the assignment

- Unpack the question and identify lines of enquiry
- Collect evidence from texts
- Select and order material
- Consult criticism
- First draft
- Final version

## Bibliography

- Ensure that you collate your references and bibliography from the start (Please refer to the module handbook guidance notes for further assistance.
- Referencing – (in the main text and in the bibliography) – please use the Harvard Referencing System. See handout or Moodle for further guidance.

## Appendices

- You are welcome to include appendices, however only where necessary for items such as tables and diagrams to support/illustrate the main body of the text. You will not be awarded any marks for work included in the appendices, and please do not use the appendices as an alternative location for work that should appear in the main text. It is not recommended that you include published secondary information such as annual reports and company literature, etc. within the appendices.

## Assignment – Part C – Things you need to know

### Presentation

#### Structure

Your assignment must be well structured. Your tutor will advise you on what is expected. You will also find additional guidance in Part D of this booklet.

#### Word count policy

Learners must adhere to the word count specified for the assignment within a margin of -/+10% of the total word count.

#### Font

Please use the Arial font. Text must be no smaller than font 11.

#### Spacing

A minimum of 1.5 spacing must be used.

### Assessment Deadline Dates

The University of Wales Trinity Saint David has strict deadline dates that must be adhered to. **Please check with your tutor what your deadline is.**

The University's procedures for determining compensatory measures for students with a long-term impairment and the University's procedures for handling claims where extenuating circumstances have adversely affected a student's performance is available on the University's website at: http://www.uwtsd.ac.uk/academic-office/

### Submission process

#### Electronic Copies

GWLAD learners can send an electronic copy of their assignment to gwlad@uwtsd.ac.uk or through Turnitin.
WIWBL learners can submit electronically to wiwbl@uwtsd.ac.uk
Your tutor will advise you on the process. Acceptable electronic file types are .doc .docm .docx .rtf .pdf

Work should be submitted by midnight on the agreed submission date. However, it is advisable to submit by 5.00pm on the submission date, as, like all organisations, the University sometimes experiences technical problems which could result in your submission being delayed beyond the deadline date.

### Feedback

For undergraduate programmes/modules, you will be given provisional feedback on your work no later than 20 clear term-time days after submission. Provisional marks will be confirmed and notified to you following consideration by the earliest sitting Exam Board

## Confidentiality

Where candidates are using information that deals with sensitive material or issues, please anonymise using **numbers** so that the information cannot be attributable to the persons or organisations involved.

## Plagiarism

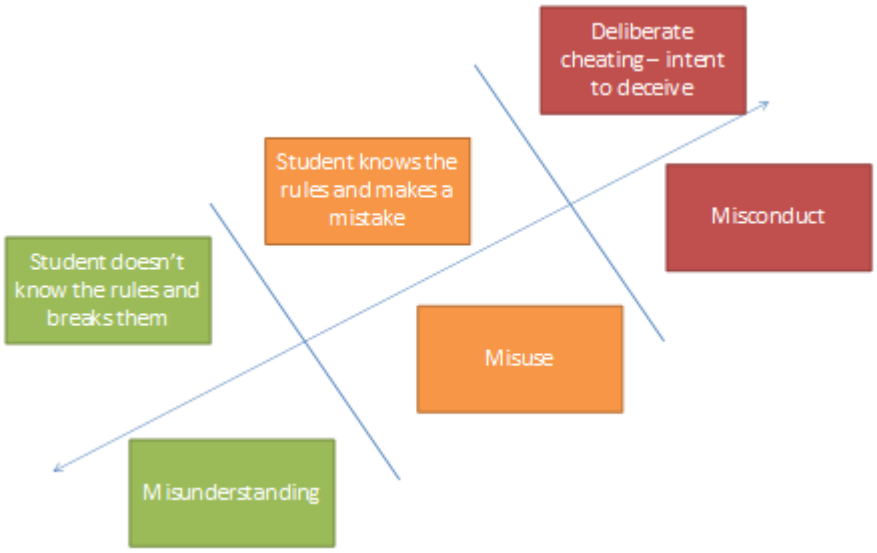
Plagiarism is treated very seriously.

**Definition: -**

"uses words, ideas or work products, attributable to an identifiable person or source, without attributing the work to the source from which it was obtained, in a situation in which there was a legitimate expectation of original authorship, in order to obtain benefit, credit or gain". Fishman, 2010

Fishman, T. (2010) cited in Fearn, H. 'Is it plagiarism? Well it is rather difficult to say.' [Online], Available: http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/412292.article [29 April 2013]

**A spectrum of plagiarism**




Here are some examples of plagiarism:

- Copying without showing it is a copy
- Paying someone to do it for you
- Not showing your sources [words and work] transparently enough
- Working closely with others and not acknowledging the shared work

## Referencing

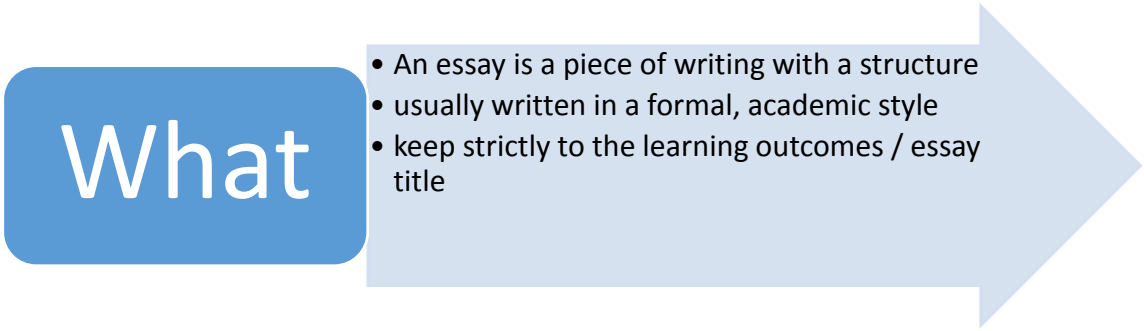
Learners must identify and acknowledge **ALL** sources, methodologies, theories, quotes or applications used.

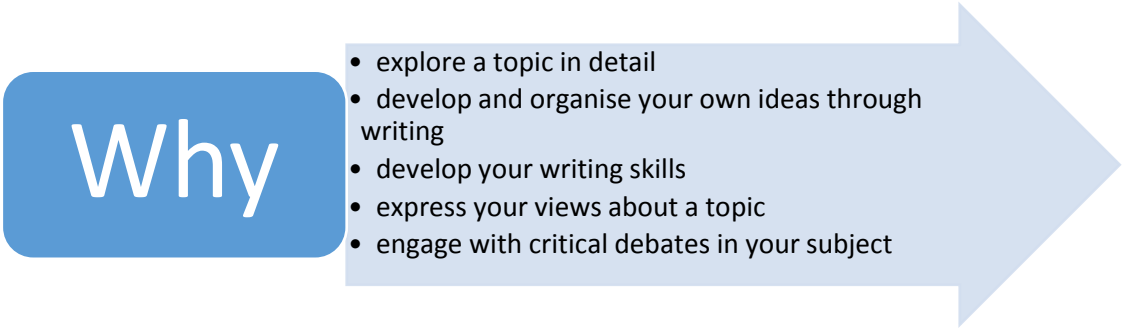
The Harvard referencing style must be used within the main body text as well as within the bibliography. Please see **Guide to Referencing** for further assistance on how to reference the following: -

- Books
- Electronic books
- Journal articles
- Electronic journals
- Websites
- Publications by governments and other organisations
- Newspapers
- Television / radio programmes
- Film / Video / DVD
- Conference papers and presentations
- Email

## Assignment – Part D – Getting a good mark

(Taken from: Cottrell, S. 2013. The Study Skills Handbook. 4th Ed. Palgrave, Hampshire.)




**How to get a good mark?**

**Good marks are awarded for work which: -**

- Meets the set criteria (learning outcomes in the module descriptor) and follows appropriate conventions
- Shows understanding of the key issues and reflects on them
- Is well structured and organised
- Demonstrates good background reading
- Develops a strong argument and presents a clear position on the issue
- Uses evidence and examples to support arguments, points and conclusions
- Indicates the relationship between issues and concepts within the subject area
- Reveals some thought and reflection
- Is succinct, well-expressed, properly referenced and error-free

**Even better marks for these in addition to the above:**

- Engages actively with subject-related debates in a thought-provoking way
- Demonstrates a deeper and more subtle understanding of the significance of the issues and evidence, drawing out complexities or nuances
- Synthesises material well.

## Critical writing V's descriptive writing

| **Descriptive writing** | **Critical writing** |
|---|---|
| States what happened | Identifies the significance |
| States what something is like | Evaluates strengths and weaknesses |
| Gives the story to far | Weighs one piece of information against another |
| Outlines the order in which things happened | Makes reasoned judgements |
| Instructs how to do something | Argues a case according to the evidence |
| Lists the main elements of a theory | Shows why something will work (best) |
| Notes a method used | Identifies whether something is appropriate or suitable |
| States when something occurred | Identifies why the timing is of importance |
| States the different components | Weighs up the importance of component parts |
| States options | Gives reasons for selecting each option |
| Lists details | Evaluates the relative significance of details |
| Lists in an order | Structures the information in order of importance |
| States links between items | Shows the relevance of links between pieces of information |
| Gives information or reports findings | Evaluates information and draws conclusions |

## Questions to consider in an essay

In general, when working in a critical way you will be asking questions such as those below.

1. Why?
2. How far?
3. How much?
4. How often?
5. To what extent?
6. How do we know this is true?
7. How reliable is this source?
8. What could be going on below the surface?
9. What do we ***not*** know about this?
10. Which is preferable
11. For what reasons

## Good and bad critical reflection

(Taken from: Cottrell, S. 2011. Critical Thinking Skills. 2nd Ed. Palgrave, Hampshire.)

| Aspect | Good critical reflection | Poor critical reflection |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Experience | Draws on personal, group or workplace experience as a means of testing out theory or learning new lessons, looking at experiences with a critical eye. | Assumes 'experience' is an end in itself; that one's own experience is typical of others' without good evidence that this is so; that experience equates to 'insight', without bringing a critical eye to it. |
| 2. Personal responsibility | The best critical reflection demonstrates integrity both in focussing on one's personal role, such as the assumptions brought to a situation or actions taken or omitted, and in taking responsibility for the consequences of these. | Poor critical reflection finds ways of deflecting blame onto other people or the context itself for the way events unfolded. Alternatively, personal responsibility is addressed in a superficial way, so that the relation of action and consequence is not considered in depth. It is also poor practice to assume personal responsibility and guilt for matters that are not simply down to oneself. |
| 3. Focus | Selects a focus such as a particular time-period, set of events, specific kids of incident or examples of interactions. | Rambles around or covers too many dimensions so it isn't clear what is the focus of the reflection. |
| 4. Scale | The focus is broad enough to offer challenge and meaningful insights but can be reasonably explored in the timescale and word limit. | Is either too narrow to provide the insights needed or too broad to look at things in any depth. |
| 5. Direction | However it may start, good critical reflection beings to take direction as the person starts to identify, and then focus on, selected themes for closer attention. | Rambles or hops about rather than finding a direction. |
| 6. Depth | Delves below the surface: it picks up on initial thoughts and insights, analysing these further with the aim of gaining deeper insights or broader applications. | Is superficial. It doesn't demonstrate any interest in burrowing beneath the surface to understand more. |
| 7. Challenge | Usually tackles a difficult area or enters difficult terrain, such as matters that are personally difficult, or issues that are complex and don't lent themselves to easy answers | Tends to stay within safe territory or deals with difficult issues in a superficial way or doesn't seem to take the person forward in their understanding. |
| 8. Theory | Draws on relevant theoretical standpoints, research, or established professional practice in ways that demonstrate how these have helped understanding. Where relevant, it relates the particular incident to broader social and political issues. | Draws only on the person's own ideas experiences and anecdotes, or makes superficial passing references to theory and research. |
| 9. Critically | Brings a searching, critical eye to the focus of the reflection, to emerging insights, and to any theories or sources of information. This critically is used to take the person forward in their | Is preoccupied mainly with describing situations, content or events. May include critical analysis but this doesn't seem to be used in a way that really develops an understanding of the core emerging issues. |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | understanding of the core emerging issues, such as by challenging their own ideas and actions, or showing how their experiences supports or challenges existing knowledge. | |
| 10. Insight | The reflection takes the person forward in their understanding, such that they can make more sense of their situation, work or study, manage better within it, do things differently, apply understandings to new contexts etc. | The reflection gives little indication that the person has moved forward in their understanding of the context or issue, or self-knowledge. |
| 11. End-points | The process of reflection may take the person in many different directions. However, by the end, they have stood back, drawn out the key messages of what they have learnt, and summarised these as conclusions or recommendations. | The reflection reads more as description of a process or rambling free association. The lessons learned are not drawn out clearly as conclusions or recommendations. |
| 12. Audience | If this is to be used in academic, work or public contexts, the writing up of reflection demonstrates a sound understanding of ethical considerations and stylistic or academic contentions that may apply. Issues of confidentiality have been addressed appropriately. | The reflection is handed in or made public without all due care being taken to ensure that confidentiality and other data protection issues area addressed; no thought is given to how to make the reflection manageable for others to read. |

## Critical thinking

Use the following checklist to analyse a piece of writing: -

| **Critical questions** | **Analysis of the writing** |
|---|---|
| What is the main line of reasoning (argument)? | |
| Is the line of reasoning clear both in the introduction and in the conclusion? | |
| What is the key evidence used to support the line of argument? Is the evidence presented in a way that develops the argument and leads clearly to the conclusion? | |
| When was the evidence produced? Is it up to date? Is it still relevant? | |
| Is there sufficient evidence to prove the case? Is the evidence relevant? What might be missing? | |
| What (if any) would have been a better order in which to present the evidence so as to strengthen the line of reasoning? | |
| Are there any examples of flawed reasoning? Attempts to persuade the reader through an appeal to the emotions? Is evidence interpreted and used correctly? | |
| Has the writer given sufficient consideration to alternative points of view? Give examples | |