

STUDENT NOTES FOR SUCCESS

No 14

Planning and pre-writing: adding value to assignments

Planning is a key part of what we do in many aspects of our lives. In study, planning plays a central role in all learning and assessment activities. The key to success in academic writing is to begin with well researched, organised materials.

Planning and pre-writing

Most of what you do at university will begin with an assessment brief or instructions of some kind. Usually the first and most valuable of these is the unit outline document. The unit outline will provide you with an overview of topics to be covered, and all assessment items. Most often, assessment items have a set of instructions, topic questions, formatting instructions, and a marking guide. This is where your planning, pre-reading, and pre-writing begin.



Hot tip

Examine your unit outline carefully for important assessment instructions



How to start

Read the assessment item brief carefully, making notes and highlighting things of importance as you go. For example, identify the following:

Instructions

- When is the assignment due for submission?
- How long should it be?
- How many academic references are required?
- What sort of assessment task is stipulated (essay, report, presentation)?

- What formatting is required for written documents (such as fonts, margins, footers, title page, contents page)?

Task content

- What does the question ask you to do?
- What do you need to know to answer the question?
- What kind of argument will you develop (for example historical, descriptive, comparative, evaluative, application of theory, and presentation of your interpretation)?

Making a plan

Once you feel confident in knowing what you have to do, you can then get on with planning how to do it. The first step is to map out a simple time line plan in which you take the submission date as the end point, and then work backwards allocating times and dates for the completion of each part of the assignment. This will provide you with interim deadlines for finding, reading, and interpreting materials for writing your document.

Pre-reading and Pre-writing

Quality academic writing is largely founded on empirical, research-based, peer-reviewed publications. Such materials can be readily accessed through the many academic databases in the Curtin University Library system. Begin your assignment pre-reading by selectively choosing journal articles with key words or topics in their titles or abstracts that align to your assignment questions. As you read, make brief notes to record principal ideas, facts and your interpretation of what it all means.



In your reading of relevant journal articles/documents, the titles will provide you with key words that set the context. You should then scan the abstract, contents page if there is one, other main headings and sub-headings. While reading the main body, the recommendations and conclusion, make note of any information that might assist in your understanding of the topic you are researching and with writing your own assignment.



Tips for planning and pre-writing:

- Read widely on the topic. Make notes and include referencing details.
- Structure a key sentence – a statement that can be argued as the focus of your assignment document. This becomes the proposition or thesis statement.
- Write (or draw) a plan outlining several key issues that will support the thesis statement. These issues are to be logically argued and supported with researched evidence.
- Organise your thoughts. Ask: does this argument flow logically and rationally from one key idea to the next?
- Think about the transition words that are required to connect one idea to the next e.g. ‘however’ and ‘as a result’.
- Begin by mapping out the document structure using headings and sub-headings in ‘Word’ to denote each key section or sub-section.
- Write a first draft by addressing as many of the headings and sub-headings that you have already included in your structure, as possible.
- Writing the draft will usually reveal for you parts that need further research information or thought. Take time to address these before going back to the draft to expand and refine your work.
- Ensure that you paraphrase, quote and reference all source materials correctly as these are important requirements for academic writing.
- When revising your document, ensure that each paragraph addresses a single idea that is clearly defined and logically explained.

Writing your final document

Ensure that you have:

- a logical connection between one idea and the next
- a smooth transition between paragraphs
- broken down the document topic into manageable sections to prioritise ideas
- an argument that leads logically from one important point to another, within the context of the topic, in order to reach a suitable conclusion
- defined issues and analysed evidence using examples which support your position.

In concluding your document, revisit the assignment instructions (particularly the marking key) to ensure that you have addressed all requirements and can ‘tick off’ all stipulated criteria. Address any shortfalls identified.

The key to the success of any academic document or assessment item is the appropriate use of evidence to support all arguments or contentions. The principal source of such evidence should be peer-reviewed academic publications, based on empirical research data.

Find out more at the CBS Academic Communication Development website:

<https://businesslaw.curtin.edu.au/study/student-experience/academic-communication-development/>

You might also be interested in *Handy Handout 8. Qualities of good academic writing.*

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