

How to Organise and Plan an Assignment

Organising and planning an assignment can make the actual writing of it a much less daunting prospect. There is no single strategy for doing this, as what works for one student may not necessarily work for another. There are, however, some tried and tested methods that help make the task less stressful.

GOOD organisational and time management skills will make for a much less stressful time. If you are feeling a bit overwhelmed by it all, remember, it does get easier with practice! Honestly!

1 Before Writing

Before you begin writing, it is important that you fully assess and understand the task at hand. Think about:

- What exactly is required? Examine the title and identify the focus of the essay in terms of subject matter.
- Examine the title and underline or highlight key words which tell you HOW to tackle the assignment.
- Read through lecture notes on the topic to refresh your memory.
- Look at a dictionary or reference books for help in understanding unfamiliar terms.
- If you are unsure about anything, talk to your subject tutor.
- Try 'Brainstorming', using mind maps or point notes (i.e. 1, 2, 3, 4) to record what you already know about the subject.

2 Collecting information

Read through a variety of sources such as text books, journals, newspaper articles, and also examine internet sites. While the latter is a valuable research tool, it is important that you use reputable sites. Please note that internet data is not subject to the same kind of scrutiny as are books or journals.

- Be pro-active when you read. Be selective about the material you read and use.
- Consult reading lists provided by lecturers.
- Undertake library searches on the subject matter.
- Use authors' reference lists to search for additional references.
- Make full use of the index and contents sections of books and of abstracts in journals.
- Skim read to get the overall gist.
- Scan the material for any specific terms, phrases that you have noted during lectures.

- It is impossible to read or use everything so it is useful to keep referring back to the assignment's question/title in order to keep your research focused. Ask yourself....Do I really need this information? Then ask....How will I use this information? Does it support/contrast with material that I've read by other authors?

3 Recording Information

It is important to keep a full and accurate account of sources (author, date, title, publisher details, web addresses and page numbers) for your bibliography/reference list at the end of the assignment. This avoids wasting time chasing after missing bits of data at the writing up stage of your assignment.

- Make a list of the sources which you have consulted.
- Make notes of general ideas.
- Copy down any phrases or ideas you may wish to quote.
- As when collecting information, when recording information, ask yourself...Do I need this information? How will I use this information? Again, it is useful to keep referring back to the question in order to keep focused.
- It may be a good idea to keep these sources separate, perhaps by putting them in different folders or by highlighting them in different colours.
- Take some time to reflect on and evaluate what you have discovered so far and decide whether, for instance: your viewpoint has changed, whether you have clarified your argument, if you have enough evidence and/or examples. Have you also considered alternative viewpoints? This last point is important if you are to present a balanced account and demonstrate a broad knowledge of the subject.
- Now, sketch a loose structure to work within based on the information you have gathered.

4 Planning Your Piece of Work

Assignment plans can help to keep you focused. Here are some suggestions for planning:

- Decide the approach you intend to take with regard to the topic.
- Decide on the main points.
- Put them in the most logical order – the points should follow a sequence that enables the reader to see how one point connects to the next.
- Set alongside the main points all the supporting evidence, examples, data, quotations or illustrations that will be used to substantiate them. The assignment needs good supporting evidence in order to be convincing.

How detailed you decide to make your plan is really up to you. Some people sketch out a loose 'open' structure, while others go into far more detail. Below is an example of a general plan.

Example

Title

Introduction

Main Body: Present evidence for, evidence against, and an evaluation of that evidence. Alternative theories: evidence for, evidence against, evaluation of evidence and possibly why alternative theories are not, or are, convincing. Again, it might be a good idea to keep evidence in separate folders or use a colour scheme so you can easily find specific pieces of information.

Conclusion

A checklist for an assignment plan

Ask yourself:

- Is there a theme running through the assignment?
- Is there a logical progression?
- Are the links obvious?
- Is there sufficient relevant information to answer the question?
- Is there any irrelevant information?
- Is the balance/emphasis appropriate?
- Is there any repetition?
- Does it answer the question?

References and further reading:

Cottrell, S. (2003) *The study skills handbook*, 2nd edn. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan.

Payne, E. and Whittaker, L. (2000) *Developing essential study skills*. London: Prentice Hall.