Interpreting the task and planning an essay

The aim of this workshop is to develop your skills in interpreting and planning an assignment. We will use a sample assignment task to practise with. You will find it on page 3. (If you have an assignment task with you, use it to practise with instead.) Interpreting the task helps you get started on your assignment, and ensures that what you write will be relevant. This planning stage of an assignment is crucial and should always be done before you actually start to write.

We suggest that you do these 2 steps 4-5 weeks before an assignment is due. That gives you plenty of time to do the rest of the work involved in academic writing.

Interpret the assignment task

First, you need to understand the question. If you write an assignment that is not about the task you’ve been given, you will fail, so it’s important to take some time to understand what you have been asked to do. This ensures your assignment is relevant.

Go through the 6 step process below. It’s a useful process for interpreting any task. We will refer to the task on page 3 throughout.

1. **Genre** (the format of the task: essay; report; literature review, care plan etc)
2. **Orientation** (the contextualisation of the assignment, usually given as a preamble)
3. **Topic** (the overall, general, broad topic of the assignment)
4. **Focus** (the particular aspects of the topic you are asked to concentrate on)
5. **Directions** (argue, describe, explain, list, recommend, critique, choose, select, provide, compare and contrast, observe and record etc)
6. **Scope** (what you are asked to base the assignment on and limit the assignment to; a case study, a period of time, a number of authors, a particular reading or unit of a text book)

*If you are given an assignment that does not include these features, ask your tutor for guidance or clarification. As a last resort, create the features for yourself.*

1. What genre is the assignment task? **Highlight** it.
2. Does it have an orientation? **Highlight** it.
3. What is the general topic? **Highlight** it.
4. What is the *focus of that topic? **Highlight** it.

*Focus can include questions.*

Do you see any question marks in the assignment task? Sometimes, the lecturer asks questions, and you have to be sure to answer them in your essay.

5. What are the directions?
6. What is the scope? **Highlight** it.

What else limits us?
(a) The Word Count. What is it? ..........................

(b) Presentation: This is where your lecturer tells you how your essay must look on the page, e.g.: “type, don’t hand-write; use Times New Roman 12; use 1.5 line spacing”. Underline all of the presentation instructions your lecturer has given you.

(c) Assessment Criteria: Your lecturer lists these criteria to help you get high marks. Read it now on page 3, and every issue as you read it.

Paraphrase the assignment question. Write it in your own words. Make it yours. This is the crucial part of interpreting your assignment topic. This takes a little while.

(a) Rewrite the whole assignment question on the lines below, in your own words. (This is only for you to see – it will not go into your essay.) Start with the Genre, Directions, Focus and Scope. It’s important you change them so they are words that you normally use. Make each one into everyday language. You are making a promise to yourself, so use the first person, e.g. “For this essay I will refer to at least four authors from the reading list and I will compare their ideas about the effects of the internet on society and decide whether to argue for or against…”

Check the assignment task again, and make sure you’ve included everything you’ve been asked to do, and nothing more. Do this for your own assignment task. (Again, please note, this ‘I’ language is just for you to see here. Most lecturers do not allow this type of personal language in your assignment.)

(b) Also, include the information in the ‘Presentation’ section of your assignment question using first person, e.g. “I will use Times New Roman size 12, and one point five spacing. I will number the pages…” You are writing all of this to remind yourself of what you are going to do.

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Look at the Assessment Criteria on page 4. (You should have something similar with your assignment, if not, request the criteria from your lecturer.) Tick every point you have addressed in your interpretation above. Add anything you’ve left out.

Can you see how important it is to get this right first before you start reading and writing?

Word limits.
(a) If the limit is 1500 words, keep your word count within 10% under or over. i.e. write between 1350 and 1650 words.
(b) If your lecturer says ‘between 1300 and 1500 words’. Do not write fewer than 1300 or more than 1500.
(c) If the instruction is ‘no more than 1,500 words’, write between 1,350 and 1,500 words, not more.
(d) The word count does not include the reference page at the end.

Referencing
Both Harvard and APA referencing systems are covered in different workshops. For now, write here what style of referencing your lecturer has requested. If you have not been told, then please ask your lecturer.

Assignment 4: Argument Essay 2

Due date: Friday, Week 10
Length: 1500 words
Value: 35%

Task

The internet has become an essential component of people’s lives in the 21st century. However, there are concerns that the disadvantages of the internet may outweigh the advantages.

Referring to current literature and drawing upon the perspectives of a minimum of four authors from this unit’s recommended reading list, argue either in favour or against the impact of the internet.

Assessment criteria

Text organisation 40%

1. Introduction
   - Provides an orientation to the topic (defining topic and key terms)
   - States purpose of the essay
   - States thesis or proposition (main point/argument)
   - States outline of the essay’s stages
   - States scope of the essay

2. Main Body
   - Arguments logically sequenced to support thesis
   - Each argument linked to thesis in topic sentence
   - Arguments logically organised into paragraphs
   - Paragraphs linked
   - Generally one argument per paragraph

3. Conclusion
   - Summarises outline
   - Confirms/states thesis
   - Qualifies thesis if required

Content 40%

- Covers all important issues in relation to the topic and stated scope
- Evidence contradicting thesis included and dealt with
- Uses readings (references) to substantiate positions taken in relation to topic
- Clearly distinguishes between references and own statements
- Quotations used appropriately (length and position)
- The writer’s argument is made explicit throughout the essay through the use of semantic markers and restating of the thesis
- The argument is presented in a logical order
Presentation 20%

- Title page including: Title, Name, Lecturer, Course, Date due, Date submitted
- Times New Roman
- 12pt size
- Left aligned
- 1.5 line spacing
- Spelling and punctuation accurate
- Sentence structure not too long and meaning clear
- Harvard referencing system consistent
- Reference list contains all sources used in essay
- Essay is prescribed length
- Essay is on time
- Formal academic language used
- Language specific to the topic/discipline used where appropriate
Planning your assignment.

Step 1. You understand the task. (Do not start reading yet.)

Step 2. Develop an outline/plan for your essay

Do not start researching at the library until you have planned what you need to include in your essay, otherwise you may read unnecessary texts and end up with a mass of useless notes. Do it the other way round: plan your essay first, then do the reading. This way, you will only read relevant texts, and not waste your time.

This is thinking time. You need to get a sense of how your essay will develop. To do this, you’ll need the assignment question that you’ve just written in your own words. Spend some time now thinking about the detail that you will have in each part.

Use a taxonomy to do an outline: Brainstorm this part of the process with one or two students. On the left hand side, write the Focus of the Topic. In the middle write the issues about society that you believe have been affected by the internet. (You might choose to focus on 2 or 4 rather than the 3 below.) Then, on the right hand side, brainstorm each of the three issues in more detail.

Social Structures

- effects on family life
- effects on religion
- effects on courtship

Effects of Internet on society

Cultural Identity

- effects on nationalism
- effects on multiculturalism

- effects on voting public
- effects on activism

Politics

There are other correct ways we could do a plan for this assignment task. This is just one way.

Each of the four sub-topics above will have 1, 2 or 3 paragraphs of detail. They are in the right hand column above. Each one will require its own paragraph in the Body of your essay.

Does your outline reflect your assignment question? Does it address each issue? Check that you have included everything you said you would when you wrote the assignment question in your own words.

Next, write each sub-topic on a separate piece of note paper and keep these 3 pieces of paper together in a folder. You have to research each of these sub-topics, so you’ll be making notes on each. Add your taxonomy to the folder also.