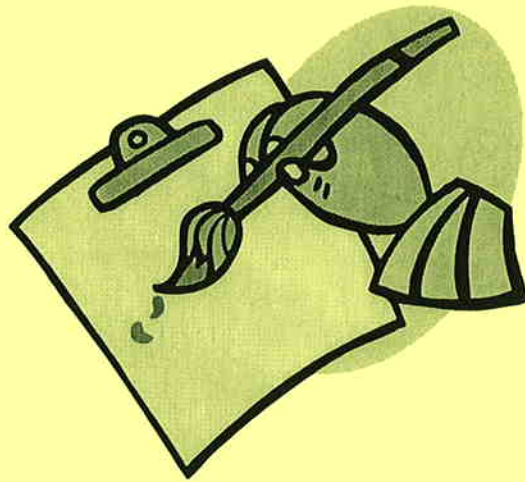


A Good Guide To

Effective Assignment Writing



**Prepared For:
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About the Author ...

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Alison is an experienced learning facilitator and regular guest speaker at seminars and conferences. Her ability to relate to all audiences is what has made her unique. She shares with genuine empathy the many experiences that have influenced her life in a transformational way.

Through her work as Director of Feldman and Associates, Alison has conducted a range of consultancy services across the public and private sectors throughout Australia. She also teaches Public Relations and Communication at the University of Southern Queensland. Her international portfolio includes consultancy work in London, Amsterdam, Mauritius, and the United States.

Alison is also co-founder of The Greenleaf Centre for Servant-Leadership (Australia/New Zealand). Through her work with the Centre, Alison has joined an international network of people committed to influencing the leadership of organisations. Her passion is to help transform organisations through leadership which is based on serving first – of developing communities where people are empowered to grow, serve others and discover their own leadership.

In a career spanning 25 years, Alison commenced as an office junior in private industry. Over a period of years she progressed through the positions of stenographer and executive secretary to library assistant and deputy librarian. Undertaking tertiary study as a mature-age student, Alison achieved her Bachelor's Degree and further qualifications in teaching.

Alison is a member of the Public Relations Institute of Australia, the Australian and New Zealand Communication Association, and the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australia. She also holds full registration with the Queensland Teacher's Registration Board.



How can this Guide Help You?

This guide is designed to give you some practical ideas on how to make the process of assignment writing simpler. I hope that I can help you feel much more ready to begin writing. When you complete reading the material included, and practice the techniques, you will be able to:

1. Describe what an assignment is designed to do.
2. Understand that a planned approach to assignment writing makes the process much easier.
3. Understand and apply the eleven steps involved in preparing an assignment.
4. Be more confident in writing assignments.



What is the Purpose of an Assignment?

An assignment is an opportunity to research a topic or issue and gain a much broader and deeper understanding of it. This understanding is then communicated to a teacher or lecturer in written form. Essentially, your goal in writing an assignment should be to demonstrate to your teacher or lecturer your understanding of a particular topic or issue.

An assignment is an opportunity for a teacher or lecturer to give undivided attention to your work, and to give you specific and individualised feedback. This helps you gain a sense of your progress, and helps you set benchmarks on your performance. It also helps you gain feedback on your skill in communicating information in written form – an important life skill!

An assignment is a formal and structured piece of communication. While some people may see these as an imposition, or as unnecessary, they are in fact keys to helping your assignment work become much more effective. If an assignment is written well, you virtually take the reader by the hand and lead them through the document. Whether your task be to prepare an essay, a report, a review, or some other document, each of these require the inclusion of specific elements which are designed to help your reader ‘access’ your ideas more easily. For example, every good essay contains an introduction, body and a conclusion. A full report will include a title page, table of contents, summary, introduction, body, conclusions and recommendations.

Because an assignment is formal, this trains you to take care in your communication. Formal language helps you set professional standards in your writing, and present work which is more objective. Formal language also increases your opportunities of being understood. This is important because, unlike spoken conversations with others, we do not have the opportunity to explain our meaning in person, or to rephrase ideas so that our meaning becomes clearer.

Preparing an assignment is an opportunity to learn – and to share with another person what you have discovered. This is almost like ‘teaching’ another person – and in this process of teaching you come to a greater understanding of the topic or issue yourself. This can be an extremely fulfilling and exciting opportunity. So, as you learn to master writing assignments, you will discover the process of learning becomes much more enjoyable.



What are the Pitfalls?

There are really only two major pitfalls to assignment writing that you need to be aware of:

1. **You must always answer the question that has been asked**

This sounds simple, doesn't it? You may find, though, that it is easy to find yourself wandering off track, following something that really interests you, and ultimately not answering the question.

2. **Marks are given for quality of work, not quantity of effort**

In assignments, teachers and lecturers award marks for work which answers the question. Unfortunately, some students work really hard on their assignment, but do not make sure that their hard work answers the question. Lots of work which is interesting, but doesn't answer the question, will unfortunately not earn you any marks.



Eleven Easy Steps

Planning and writing an assignment becomes much easier if you follow a number of logical steps. There are eleven steps to writing an effective assignment. Let's look at what these steps are:

Step 1...	A nalyse the task
Step 2...	S earch for the task and limit words in the question
Step 3...	S earch for the content words in the question
Step 4...	I nvestigate the topic through focussed research
Step 5...	G enerate ideas on the assignment question
Step 6...	N ominate main ideas by adding explanation and evidence
Step 7...	M aximise main ideas by adding explanation and evidence
Step 8...	E nter the writing phase – write the body paragraphs
Step 9...	N ow add the introduction and conclusion
Step 10...	T idy up the assignment through editing and proof-reading
Step 11...	S ubmit your assignment!

Step 1...

A

analyse the task

Before you begin, you need to be very sure what it is you are being asked to do in the assignment task. For example, are you being asked to prepare an essay, or a report? When is the assignment due? What is the word length on the assignment?

Other elements that help you understand the task include: How have you already met with this content area in the subject you are studying? How does this content area fit in with the whole subject you are studying? What approach you think the teacher/lecturer would like you to take? (In other words, consider who you are writing the assignment for, and what their expectations may be.)

Where can you find out how the assignment 'fits in' with the overall direction of the subject?

(Eg. tools such as the course objectives and the course outline help you get a 'big picture' view of the overall design of the subject.)

How can you find out what approach the teacher/lecturer would like?

(Eg. you might be able to make contact with the teacher/lecturer – and this is always an easy option. In addition, you might also find out a little about the background of your teacher/lecturer – this might give you some ideas on their interests. You might also be able to make contact with other students – by letter, fax, phone, email, chat room, or a host of other ways - and share ideas on approaches.)

Step 2...

Search for the task and limit words in the question

Once you are more sure of the 'big picture', you can more comfortably start focussing on the specific task at hand.

Read the assignment question. Look for the task work, *the verb*, that tells you what you have to do. This word will tell you how you should approach your assignment. Look also for limit words – words that tell you to keep your work within certain boundaries (limits).

What are some task words that you have seen in assignment questions?

(Eg. words such as 'define', or 'analyse'.)

What are some limit words you have seen in assignment questions?

(Eg. 'In the past two years', 'in Australia'.)

Task Words -

In their book *Thesis and Assignment Writing*, Anderson and Poole (1994, pp.9-10) give some common task words and their meaning. You might find this list helpful:

Analyse	Consider the various components of the whole and try to describe the inter-relationships between them.
Compare	Examine the characteristics of the objects in question to demonstrate their similarities and their differences.
Contrast	Examine the characteristics of the objects in question to demonstrate differences.
Define	Give a definition or state terms of reference.
Describe	Give an account of.
Discuss	Present the different aspects of a question or problem.
Evaluate	Examine the various sides of a question and try to reach.
Examine critically	Act as judge or critic – appraise.
Illustrate	Give an example, explain, draw a figure
Prove	Demonstrate or show by logical argument.
Summarise	State the main points in briefly.

Limit words –

Limit words are important because they help to make your task smaller and more achievable.

Let's imagine your assignment question is:

'Analyse the effectiveness of pastoral care in Australian Churches of Christ during the 1990's.'

1. Firstly, look for words that indicate a specific time.

In this case, the question asks you to limit your analysis to a specific decade - the 1990's.

2. Then, look for words that indicate a specific place (or a specific context).

In this case, the question includes another limit word 'Australian'. So, this tells you that you can limit your focus to a specific country only

Limit words help you to get the right focus in your work – and will also help you avoid wasting much precious time and energy researching information that is outside of the scope of your question.

Step 3...

S

earch for the content words in the question

The next step is to go back to the question, and identify the specific words that indicate what topic(s) you need to address. Read the question several times so that you understand which dimensions of the topic you need to consider in your assignment.

Be careful here – make sure you identify the words that are actually in the question, not the words that you hope would be in the question!

Look for words or phrases that help you understand the context of your investigation. For example, you may have been given the assignment question:

"The traditional sermon is an ineffective method of delivering a persuasive message designed to increase church giving in today's Australian Churches of Christ. Discuss."

1. Firstly, look for words that indicate what the main topic area is:

In this case, the main topic of this assignment is 'sermon'.

2. Secondly, consider if the question asks you to only consider a specific segment, element or dimension of the topic:

In this case, the question indicates your topic is a specific type of sermon – the 'traditional' sermon. Therefore, you would need to define what this is. For example, you might consider that it is a delivery of information in a formal one-way speech format.

3. Thirdly, consider if the question includes information on the context in which the topic is to be examined:

In this case, the sermon is being assessed in terms of a specific quality - as a method of persuasion – and a specific purpose – to increase church giving. So, this means you would need to be clear about what persuasion is, and what elements are required of effective persuasive communication. You would also need to consider ways in which increased church giving can be achieved – and assess whether the traditional sermon is the most effective of these.

So, you see, the question contains important ‘clues’ that help us decide exactly what it is we need to examine.

Now, if you have been observant, you will also have noted that there are some limit words in this question. Firstly, you need only assess the effectiveness of the persuasive, traditional sermon as it has been used to increase giving in ‘Churches of Christ’ in ‘Australia’. Secondly, the question also includes the word ‘Today’ – so you are to limit your investigation to the current Church environment.

Step 4...

I nvestigate the topic through focussed research

Now that you have a very firm idea of what specific aspects of the topic you need to investigate, you need to do some in-depth research.

Go to the literature on your topic – for example, books, articles, and newspaper stories. Identify relevant portions from Scripture. At this stage, though, don’t read each book or article deeply. What you need to do is to skim read for main ideas and themes. To do this, read the first and last sentences of each paragraph – this should give you a good starting point.

Step 5...

Generate ideas on the assignment question

The next stage is to generate ideas on your topic. Your skim reading of the literature should have helped you to develop an understanding of what some of the main ideas in your assignment may be.

One of the best methods to help you generate ideas is to brainstorm. Simply take a blank sheet of paper and write down any ideas that come to your mind – no matter how good or bad you may think they are. The aim here is to generate as many ideas as you can. You may even be able to discuss your topic with others, and use them to help you generate ideas.

An easy technique that you might find helpful is the 'PMI' approach to brainstorming:

Pluses
Minuses
Interesting things

Given your particular topic, what are the pluses (advantages)? What are the minuses (disadvantages)? What interesting ideas did you meet with as you were considering these aspects?

For example, consider this topic:

'Critically analyse the effectiveness of the church newsletter as an evangelical tool in Australian Churches of Christ communities.'

What are the strengths of the Newsletter? (Pluses) Are there any weaknesses or disadvantages? (Minuses) What are the interesting aspects you found while researching the Newsletter? (For example, does a newsletter also achieve other outcomes? Have there been other interesting uses for a newsletter?)

Step 6...

N

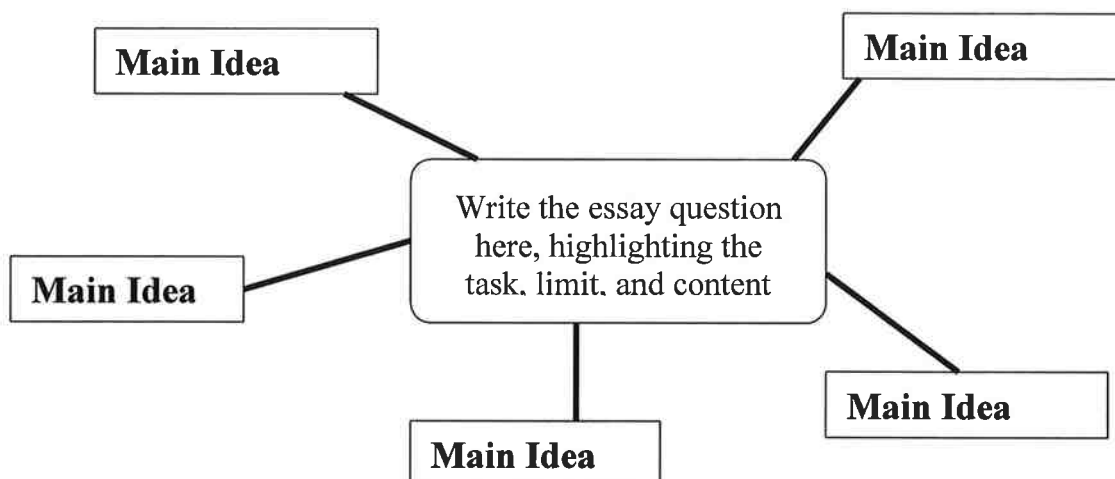
ominate main ideas on the question & logically sequence them

Now decide which ideas are most appropriate to your assignment question.

Organising your ideas at this stage can be quite difficult. You may find that your work is messy and difficult to put into some logical order.

Here is a method you might find helpful. This is an adaptation of Mallett's (1978) note taking system called the ORL (Organising Reading for Learning). It is a particularly good method because it replicates how the human brain tends to process information – visually and spatially.

On a blank sheet of paper, write the assignment question in the middle. Then, add your main ideas around the question. This is how your page would look:



Try to write these main ideas in your own words. Also, try to write these ideas in a sentence.

Why do you think writing ideas in your own words helps you develop your assignment more effectively?

(Eg. It is a way of 'testing' whether you have really understood the material.)

Why do you think writing your ideas in a sentence helps you develop your assignment more effectively?

(Eg. A sentence makes you explain your idea fully.)

Lastly, consider what would be a logical way to work through your main ideas – to sequence them. Remember, in an assignment you are building a case. Number each of your main ideas in the order you think is best.

Step 7...

Maximise main ideas by adding explanation and evidence

In an assignment, you are trying to develop a logical case. To do this you must explain your meaning, and ultimately persuade your reader. Just as a lawyer in a court of law presents a range of evidence to persuade the jury, you must also present a range of evidence to persuade your teacher or lecturer.

What are the different types of evidence, or sources of information, that you might use in your assignment?

(Evidence can come in many forms – examples, case studies, scripture verses, direct quotes from authors, statistics, information obtained through surveys and interviews, and so on.)

Remember, your case will be stronger if you can demonstrate that there is some agreement between experts in the field that the ideas that you have put forward are logical, appropriate and correct