

Faculty of Built Environment,  
Art and Design

Guidelines  
For  
Written Assignments

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## Guidelines for Written Assignments

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# Guidelines for Written Assignments

## Introduction

The process of writing an assignment has many similarities to the process of a sculptor producing a work of art. A sculptor prepares well, spends some time thinking about the project and its requirements, and then draws up a detailed plan for what will be produced. When it comes to hewing the block of stone, the sculptor first creates a rough form, which is then reworked in its entirety, over and over again, until the required shape, level of detail and necessary finish is achieved.

These guidelines will help students produce a highly competent and successful written assignment. The overall approach comprises five evolutionary steps, and each step has three tasks. The framework has been adapted from the *Five by Three Steps in Writing* model identified in the following two publications:

Radloff, A., Hermann, A. & Fox, R. (1999). *Successful learning skills: your guide to tertiary studies through open, distance and flexible learning*. Wagga Wagga: Bobby Graham Publishers.

Samson, J. & Radloff, A. (1992). *In writing: a guide to writing effectively at the tertiary level*. Perth: Paradigm Press.

These guidelines also incorporate additional information from the following two publications:

Academic Skills Unit (1999). *The ACU Study Guide* (revised ed.). Sydney: Australian Catholic University.

Bartlett, A., Holzkecht, S. & Cumming Thom, A. (1999). *Preparing students for graduate study: to hit the ground running*. Canberra: Asia Pacific Press.

An overview of the model framework is shown on the next page. This is then followed by simple guidelines for each step and each task. Appendices at the end of the guidelines include detailed advice that is important for achieving a successful written assignment outcome. The information in the appendices is set out so it may be used as a checklist.

**The Model Framework**

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<i>Step</i>	<i>Overview</i>
<b>1. Pre-Plan</b>	<b>What Do I Need To Do?</b> a) Analyse the question b) Determine the reader's needs and requirements c) Establish the purpose of the assignment
<b>2. Plan</b>	<b>How Will I Do It?</b> a) Gather information b) Decide what issues to include and exclude c) Select an appropriate assignment format and structure
<b>3. Compose</b>	<b>How Do I Get To First Base?</b> a) Express ideas aloud b) Write to develop argument c) Continually check words for meaning and relevance
<b>4. Review</b>	<b>How Do I Pull It Into Shape?</b> a) Check content is valid b) Check format and structure c) Edit work
<b>5. Evaluate</b>	<b>What Are The Results?</b> a) Did I answer the question? b) Were my strategies effective? c) How well did I carry out the task?

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### 1. Pre-Plan (What Do I Need To Do?)

The assignment question, the reader's requirements and the purposes for which the assignment has been set, all provide information that must be considered to ensure a successful outcome. The information from these three areas becomes a "*compass*" to ensure you remain on course.

#### a) Analyse the question

- Understand what is being asked in the assignment by identifying:
  - **Direction** words (what is to be done with the topic)  
(eg define, compare and contrast, describe, explain, etc - *see Appendix 1*)
  - **Content** words (what is the subject area of the topic)  
(eg discuss the crucial *developments* in *quality management* since 1995)
  - **Limit** words (what are the limits or confinement of the assignment)  
(eg discuss the *crucial* developments in quality management *since 1995*)
- Direction words can have different meanings for different people - check your intended meaning with the lecturer

#### b) Determine the reader's needs and requirements

- Identify the specific needs and requirements of the lecturer, who is likely to be the only reader (some of the requirements will be noted in assignment outlines) (*see Appendix 2*)
- If there will be other readers, what will their requirements be?

#### c) Establish the purpose of the assignment

- It is difficult to motivate oneself without having a strong purpose – so identify it
- The assignment outline may identify a specific academic aim or purpose; otherwise ask the lecturer
- A general academic purpose will be to demonstrate knowledge and understanding, show good communication skills and confirm that required reading has been done
- What are your own requirements, including intended level of marks?

### 2. Plan (How Will I Do It?)

Assess how long the assignment will take overall, and as a rough guide allocate one third to the pre-plan and plan stages, one third to the compose stage and one third to the review and evaluate stages. Also, set time goals for each task (and sub-tasks), and as you work make it a game to try and beat the times set.

The danger in this step is that you will gather so much information that it becomes overwhelming. Remember that the use of content is more important than the amount of content. Also, frequently refer back to your “*compass*” to ensure the information gathered is directly relevant and the amount is appropriate to the size of the assignment.

Use taxonomy, flowcharts, mind maps or other forms of diagram to build up an understanding of the information being gathered.

#### a) Gather information

- Consider what you already know about the topic, and identify gaps in your knowledge
- Check lecture notes and set readings for definitions, background information and possible references
- Identify a reasonable number of literature sources relative to the value and nature of the assignment, and ensure they are as relevant and as up to date as possible
- Read strategically, with a clear purpose in mind (*see Appendix 3*)
- Make notes rather than take notes (*see Appendix 4*), and accurately record full reference information (including page numbers)

#### b) Decide what issues to include and exclude

- Arrange notes into manageable categories (headings), and logical flow (the assignment outline may identify the categories you should use)
- Ruthlessly select most appropriate content to best answer the assignment – don’t try to use all information gathered

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### c) Select an appropriate assignment format and structure

- The assignment outline will often state or infer the format to be used (eg essay, report, etc)
- Whatever the format, it should include at least an introduction, a main body and a conclusion (ie not a summary) (*see Appendix 5*)
- As a rough guide, 10% introduction, 75% main body and 15% conclusion is a reasonable balance
- Writing often commences in the order of body, conclusion and then introduction

### 3. Compose (How Do I Get To First Base)

Composing results in the creation of the first draft of the assignment. The first draft is written for the writer (it helps clarify their thinking and allows them to consider the appropriateness of the intended content).

Allow roughly one third of your time for composing.

#### a) Express ideas aloud

- Mostly, we communicate our ideas better in speech than in writing (generally, academic writing can be difficult - we often find that what we write is not really what we want to convey or what we mean)
- Articulate your thoughts by saying ideas out loud and then write what you have said
- If you are really stuck, try explaining your ideas to someone else

#### b) Write to develop argument

- Concentrate on getting thoughts down (be aware of the principles of good writing, grammar, spelling and punctuation, but don't be too distracted by them at this stage) (*see Appendix 6*)

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- Don't try to write ideas fully or perfectly - let the ideas flow (if they stop flowing in one section, move on to another)
- If you have difficulty expressing ideas, try writing each point in a short sentence (the linkages and ideas can be improved as part of the Review step)

### c) Continuously check words for meaning and relevance

- Be continually aware of what you are writing to ensure it is directly relevant to answering the assignment and the needs of the reader (otherwise you may easily find you have a good answer, but not for the assignment you are doing!)
- From time to time re-read the assignment title and your analysis of the question

## 4. Review (How Do I Pull It Into Shape?)

Review is about re-drafting what has been composed so that it now clearly communicates ideas to the reader (clarity comes from re-writing several times). Also, share the task with your sub-conscious - leave time to set aside the assignment so your sub-conscious can work on it too!

Constantly refer to the principles of good writing, grammar, spelling and punctuation during all review tasks (*see Appendix 6*). And, remember to allow roughly one third of your time for review and evaluate.

### a) Check content is valid

- Check the validity of the content by asking the following questions:
  - Does the content make sense, is it balanced, and does it fully answer the assignment questions?
  - What is the main point I am trying to make, am I going into too much detail, and could it be said more directly?

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- Is any of the material redundant because it is off target or repeats what has been said earlier, and is the correct material grouped together, or are there bits that should be elsewhere?
- Is it written in my own words, with as few direct quotations as possible?

### b) Check format and structure

- Check the format and structure by asking the following questions:
  - Have I properly followed the conventions for the format used, and properly covered the introduction, main body and conclusion? (*see Appendix 5*)
  - Are the main points arranged in the order that supports my stance or argument, and is the sequence logical and clear, with points summarised regularly?
  - Is the work reader friendly, with well-structured sentences and paragraphs?
  - Is the cover page, contents page and list of references correct?

### c) Edit work

- Thoroughly check all grammar, spelling, punctuation, and completeness and use of citations (*see Appendix 6*)

## 5. Evaluate (What Are The Results?)

Self-evaluation provides essential feedback that helps us stop making the same mistakes over and over again. So, by evaluating our writing we take charge of it, and this allows us to monitor our progress, develop our writing skills, set goals for improvement and truly acknowledge that we have done a good job.

### a) Did I answer the question?

- Find out by asking the following questions:
  - Did I cover all required aspects of the assignment?
  - Did I include any irrelevant arguments or material that was off target?

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### **b) Were my strategies effective?**

- Find out by asking the following questions:
  - Did I take charge of the task and was I in control (or did it overwhelm me)?
  - Did I start on time and manage my time effectively (or did I procrastinate)?
  - How well did I pre-plan, plan, compose and review, and did I balance my time between them well?
  - Could I have gone about the task in a more efficient, or more satisfying way?
  - What would I do differently next time?

### **c) How well did I carry out the task?**

- Find out by asking the following questions:
  - How satisfied am I with what I have completed?
  - What skills do I think I have improved in doing this assignment?
  - What skills do I want to improve when I do my next assignment?

## Appendix 1 – Content Words

<b>Analyse</b>	Investigate and explain the nature and relative importance of the components, definitions or concepts of a question and explain the way they are interrelated and why certain outcomes occurred.
<b>Argue</b>	Support or reject a position by presenting reasons and evidence while indicating awareness of opposing points of view
<b>Comment</b>	Express an opinion on the issues that form the basis of the question. Such opinion should draw upon evidence both supporting and opposing the proposition with your preference stated.
<b>Compare</b>	Identify and represent two or more views about the same topic and compose an essay that relates the similarities and differences.
<b>Contrast</b>	Identify aspects or characteristics of two or more concepts. Discuss how they differ, and present your evaluation.
<b>Critically Analyse</b>	Investigate and explain the nature and relative importance of the components, definitions or concepts of a question and explain the way they are interrelated. Also discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the definitions and concepts.
<b>Criticise</b>	Evaluate the merit and point out the strengths and weaknesses of opinions and theories. Evaluate the degree of truth observed.
<b>Define</b>	Make clear the meaning and establish the boundaries of the topic.
<b>Describe</b>	Give an account of the different aspects of a topic.
<b>Discuss</b>	Consider a topic from various points of view. This is likely to entail both description and interpretation. Your opinion should be supported by arguments and evidence.
<b>Evaluate</b>	Pass judgement on the worth of something. Such judgements should be extensively supported by pertinent evidence.
<b>Examine Critically</b>	Act as a judge or critic. Appraise.
<b>Explain</b>	To make plain or clear, to advise the meaning, to interpret.
<b>Justify</b>	Provide adequate grounds or examples to support conclusions.
<b>Outline</b>	Briefly identify and outline systematically the most important aspects or elements of a topic.
<b>Review</b>	Make a summary; examine a subject critically.
<b>Summarise</b>	Examine the main points briefly.

(from: Academic Skills Unit (1999). *The ACU Study Guide* (revised ed.). Sydney: Australian Catholic University.)

## Appendix 2 – Typical Lecturer Requirements

The table below lists typical lecturer requirements, or identifies information that will assist you to work out what their requirements are. Always check the assignment outlines to see if any of the lecturer requirements are identified.

If lecturers do not identify their requirements for *coverage* and *format*, ask them to confirm what they are. If lecturers do not identify their requirements for *presentation*, tell them your proposals so they may advise if changes should be made.

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<b><i>Coverage</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Value of the assignment (for level of effort expected)</li><li>• Assessment criteria and marks distribution (for coverage expected and relative importance of areas)</li><li>• Length or word limit requirements</li><li>• Due dates or deadlines</li></ul>
<b><i>Format</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Style of writing appropriate to the assignment (eg essay, report, etc.)</li></ul>
<b><i>Presentation</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• White A4 paper, using one side only</li><li>• 25mm margins all round</li><li>• Times New Roman font size 11 at 1½ line spacing</li><li>• Concise "<i>simple English</i>" style</li><li>• Clear, legible and with good grammar and spelling</li><li>• Harvard style of referencing</li><li>• Contents page</li><li>• Cover page, including:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• School or Area name</li><li>• Unit name</li><li>• Assignment number and/ or title</li><li>• Lecturer name</li><li>• Student name (number)</li><li>• Date of submission</li></ul></li><li>• Staple submission in top left corner (no folder or protector)</li></ul>

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## Appendix 3 – Reading Strategically

<i>Identify what information is needed</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Review information from analysis of question task (Step 1) and decide terms to be defined, key words to be investigated, and questions to be answered</li> </ul>
<i>Progress reading through four distinct modes</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Review material suitability and content by evolving reading through four distinct modes (constantly be aware of which mode you are in): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><i>surveying</i> publication to gain impression of suitability</li> <li><i>skimming</i> content quickly to confirm suitability and locate general sections that are relevant</li> <li><i>scanning</i> content of identified sections to quickly locate specific information or key points</li> <li><i>intensive and slow reading</i> to understand identified information</li> </ul> </li> <li>Ignore any material that is not relevant to the assignment</li> </ul>
<i>Surveying texts</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Look for recent publications, reputable authors and/ or publishers, and flick through contents pages, index pages, and main body headings, tables and illustrations</li> </ul>
<i>Skimming texts</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Look for relevant topics, expressions and ideas</li> <li>Use cues to direct reading, eg contents pages, indexes, chapter headings and sub-headings, and tables and illustrations</li> <li>Pay particular attention to opening and final paragraphs and chapter summaries</li> </ul>
<i>Scanning texts</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Scan identified sections to locate specific information</li> <li>Don't read every word (it may help your scanning if you slowly move an index finger over the page in a lazy "Z" shape)</li> <li>Look for relevant key words and concepts; look for main point author is making by identifying the topic sentence in paragraphs</li> <li>Note, mark or highlight points found (<i>See Appendix 4</i>)</li> </ul>
<i>Intensive and slow reading for close understanding</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Interrogate the text as you read and don't uncritically accept points made by the author, eg ask: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What do I already know about this?</li> <li>What more do I need to know?</li> <li>Does my new knowledge agree with my former knowledge?</li> <li>What is the writer's main message/ argument?</li> <li>How convincing is the author's argument and on what evidence is it based?</li> <li>How can I best use this material in my assignment?</li> <li>What sections do I need to make notes on?</li> <li>Is it still relevant to my needs or should I move on?</li> </ul> </li> <li>Re-read as often as needed to gain full understanding, and review how information fits with points made by other authors</li> </ul>

## Appendix 4 – Note Making

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- Prior to note making*
- While scanning, identify main ideas and relevant key points for intensive reading, eg:
    - Write key words on post-it notes and stick on relevant page
    - Underline in pencil, so it can be rubbed out later
    - Use coloured highlight pens
  - With library books, only use post-it notes (a torn piece of post-it note can be placed down the side of a page to show the location of the important information in the text)
  - It is easier to work with photocopies as they can be marked in any way, including with your own written notes and comments (but don't break copyright restrictions or copy unnecessary material – only copy relevant pages)
  - Avoid highlighting whole paragraphs – only highlight the words or parts that are directly relevant
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- Note making*
- Try not to copy the words of the author – paraphrase in your own words (if you do copy text straight from the reading, put it in inverted commas so you will know to paraphrase it later)
  - Where an assignment requires critical comment or evaluation, also record your own thoughts about the text information you have noted
  - Make sure information noted is directly relevant to the answering the assignment
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- Writing notes*
- Write notes straight into computer, or onto paper or cards (it is a tremendous help to be able to touch type – use the training software on StartUp CD)
  - You can record information in any order (eg by author or topic) as it can be cut and pasted (computer or paper) or sorted (cards) into a more logical flow later
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## Appendix 5 – Introduction, Main Body and Conclusion

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### *Introduction*

- Gives the reader an idea of what to expect in the other sections (particularly in the main body), and usually:
  - States the argument, thesis or viewpoint
  - Specifies extent of coverage/ limitations
  - Outlines the main points covered, in logical sequence
  - Defines any ambiguous terms or concepts

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### *Main Body*

- Develops the argument in a logical and cohesive way which:
  - Elaborates each main point and provides accompanying evidence
  - Organises points into categories (sections/ parts) that are in a pattern appropriate to the task (eg in time sequence, from most important to least important, compare – contrast, cause and effect, etc.)
  - Begins sections, sub-sections and individual paragraphs with general information before moving on to specific information
  - Maintains a balance in coverage relative to the overall assignment requirements

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### *Conclusion*

- The conclusion does not repeat the main points from the main body, but:
    - Synthesises and summarises the points from the main body
    - Provides a coherent argument or informative statement justifying the main thesis
    - Excludes new information (ie that was not previously discussed or included in the main body)
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## Appendix 6 – Writing

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***Construction issues generally***

- Fully explain and make sense of what you say:
  - Make as few direct quotations as possible (ensure quotations have not been used as substitutes for your own words)
  - Anticipate (and answer) questions that readers may have about something you write
  - Make sure what you think you are saying is what you are actually saying (often not the case)
  - Explain what you expect readers to understand from tables and figures (never have readers trying to guess why a table or figure has been included)
- Use:
  - Short sentences, direct and to the point
  - Plain and simple English, written as concisely as possible
  - The active rather than the passive voice
  - Third person (he/ she, they/ them) (avoid first person unless writing a personal account)
- Ensure:
  - Subject – verb agreements (singular verb = singular subject) are correct
  - Use of tenses is correct
  - Spelling is correct (use spellchecker, but also read the work to make sure the words are correct in context, eg to, too, two)
  - Punctuation is correct and consistent (eg all quotes in double inverted commas and same punctuation at the end of all bullet points)
  - All figures and tables are given a number and a heading and are referred to in the text

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***Paragraph construction issues***

- Ensure each paragraph contains only one main idea or concept
  - Use linking words to provide connections within and between sentences and paragraphs, ie:
    - Signposts (eg firstly, finally, in addition, therefore, however, conversely, in conclusion, etc)
    - Referents (eg which, these, where, it, them, both, etc)
    - Conjunctions (eg and, but, also, likewise, yet, though, etc)
  - Use topic sentences to make it easier for readers to understand the direction of your thinking (generally the topic sentence is best placed as the first sentence in a paragraph)
  - Make general statements before specific statement (ie begin each section and each paragraph with a general statement, then move on to explain that statement)
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<b><i>Paragraph construction issues (Cont'd)</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Aim for paragraphs of around 100 to 200 words long, and try to make all paragraphs about the same length</li><li>• Big paragraphs may require a concluding statement that draws the various points discussed in the paragraph together</li></ul>
<b><i>Style issues</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Use:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Italics for non-English words</li><li>• Written words for numbers 1 – 10</li></ul></li><li>• Do not use:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Gender specific language</li><li>• Contractions (ie don't = do not)</li><li>• Abbreviations</li><li>• Acronyms (unless full title is given first)</li><li>• Generalisations/ sweeping statements</li><li>• Slang/ colloquialisms/ jargon</li></ul></li></ul>
<b><i>Referencing issues</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Ensure:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• All in-text citations are consistent and complete</li><li>• All authors cited are included in the list of references (list in alphabetical order and do not number the entries in the list)</li><li>• Direct quotes follow the exact words, punctuation and grammar of the source text (and double check accuracy)</li><li>• Page numbers are included for direct quotes and specific references (eg for figures and tables taken from literature)</li><li>• Double quotation marks are used around short quotes (ie less than three lines or 40 words in length)</li><li>• Long quotes are indented, use single line spacing and have no quotation marks</li></ul></li></ul>
<b><i>Layout issues</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Ensure:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Margin sizes are adequate</li><li>• Spaces are included and are consistent between paragraphs and sections, and following all levels of headings, tables and figures</li><li>• Headings are used appropriately (not too many, but not too few)</li><li>• Format of headings, sub-headings and bullet points are consistent</li><li>• Font types and sizes are consistent</li><li>• Appropriate cover page is included</li><li>• Appropriate contents page is included</li><li>• Page numbers, your name and the unit name are included in header and footer</li></ul></li></ul>

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