

STUDY GUIDE: Assignment Writing

'Let's get on with it'



What is **ASSIGNMENT WRITING**?

A piece of structured writing in response to a question given as a task—usually an academic essay or a research paper.

You can focus your writing on the question by taking the **four simple steps** below which make up stage 1 of the essay writing process:

The four steps are:

STEP 1
Underline the key content words or phrases in the topic.

Content words are words and phrases that tell you the main ideas and information you must include.

The assignment writing process consists of several stages:

- 01 studying the topic
- ↓
- 02 making a tentative plan
- ↓
- 03 gathering information and ideas
- ↓
- 04 identifying your arguments
- ↓
- 05 revising the plan
- ↓
- 06 writing the first draft
- ↓
- 07 evaluating the draft
- ↓
- 08 reworking the draft
- ↓
- 09 proof reading

01 Studying the Topic

Many students who are capable of writing excellent assignments or examination essays often do not read and think about the topic carefully enough, before they start gathering information. As a result, they do not focus directly on the set question, and include much irrelevant material.

The following are essay topics or examination questions previously set for students in a variety of courses. The key content words are in **bold type**.

Example 1

Define the term **economic development** and identify the **main economic development problems** and **priorities of small island countries**

Example 2

Compare the **government and politics** of two **Pacific Island countries** with reference to **colonial legacies, traditional patterns of authority, national cohesion and political stability**

Example 3

Outline the **main features** of the **VSEPR method** for predicting the shape of a chemical species.

Example 4

For **Pacific Island countries** there are **economic benefits** to be derived from **tourism**. Because of the **social costs** incurred, however, **governments should not promote or expand the tourism industry** as an alternative to other forms of development. Discuss.



Activity 1

Can you underline the content words?

- 01 Why do Australia and New Zealand give aid to the islands of the South Pacific and what are the advantages and disadvantages of this aid for island countries?
- 02 What are some of the factors that subordinate women in society? How can women achieve equality with men?
- 03 Compare and contrast two mechanisms of water movement through the plant.

(Refer to the back for answers.)

STEP 2

Make sure you understand the meaning of the words and phrases you have underlined. Use a dictionary or other reference books if necessary.

STEP 3

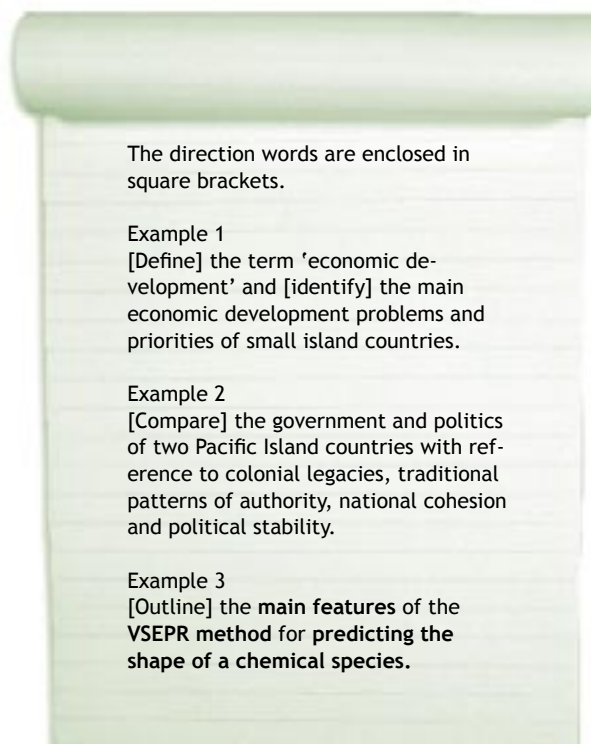
Mark the direction words.



For more information see the **Direction Words Study Guide**

Direction words give you guidance about **HOW** you should write the assignment.

For example they tell you to compare, contrast, discuss, define etc.



The direction words are enclosed in square brackets.

Example 1

[Define] the term 'economic development' and [identify] the main economic development problems and priorities of small island countries.

Example 2

[Compare] the government and politics of two Pacific Island countries with reference to colonial legacies, traditional patterns of authority, national cohesion and political stability.

Example 3

[Outline] the **main features** of the **VSEPR method** for **predicting the shape** of a chemical species.



Activity 2

Put brackets around the direction words in the following topics:

- 01 Why do Australia and New Zealand give aid to the Islands of the South Pacific and what are the advantages and disadvantages of this aid for island countries?
- 02 What are some of the factors that subordinate women in society? How can women achieve equality with men?
- 03 For Pacific island countries, there are economic benefits to be derived from tourism. Because of the social costs incurred, however, governments should not prompt or expand the tourism industry as an alternative to other forms of development. Discuss.

(Refer to the back for answers.)

STEP 4

Think about how the direction words require you to write.

For example, when you see the word *why*, as a direction word you know that you will need to focus on giving reasons. When you are asked to give *advantages* and *disadvantages* you concentrate on giving positive and negative points.

02 Making a Tentative Plan

The tentative plan is an “empty” plan. It helps create a framework for the essay and focuses your reading. In **Plan 1** below, for example, the student has the task of identifying three interpretations of economic development for section one. Using this method, you can avoid wasting time studying material irrelevant to the question.

SAMPLE TENTATIVE PLAN 1:

TOPIC: Define the term ‘economic development’ and identify the main economic development problems and priorities of small island countries.

INTRODUCTION

- introduce topic: e.g. idea of economic development
- mention your thesis statement
- indicate main areas and organisation: priorities and problems to be discussed, and countries to be used as examples

BODY

- I - discuss definitions of economic development
 - 1 eg writer X
 - 2 eg writer Y
 - 3 eg writer Z
- give support to one definition, or to your own interpretation
- II - problems of economic development in small island countries
 - 1 eg
 - eg
 - 2 eg
 - eg
 - 3 eg
 - eg
- III - priorities of economic development in small island countries
 - 1 eg
 - 2 eg
 - 3 eg

CONCLUSION

- summarise the main points in different words
- re-emphasize the thesis statement and show that the question has been answered
- place essay in wider context

With this plan, you can then go in search of definite information. First you look for good definitions of economic development. In the essay you may use and discuss several of them from different sources, or you may highlight a single one. In that case it is advisable to select the one that seems most useful for the topic.

The next task is to identify information on problems of economic development, but only in small island countries, not elsewhere. Remember to note down specific examples to back up main points.

For the third part you need ideas on what priorities these countries should adopt to achieve economic development. You will need to justify your selection of points to convince the lecturer you have made a reasonable choice, and that you understand some aspects of development theory.

Questions requiring a comparison and contrast as in **Plan 2** on page 4 are very common as assignment topics. When you are faced with one, you need to think what structure or organisation would most clearly set out the similarities and differences you wish to point out. Some students might decide to approach the above topic differently, with ‘similarities’ and ‘differences’ between the two mechanisms as their main sections, and the various aspects as the subsections.

SAMPLE TENTATIVE PLAN 2:

TOPIC: Compare and contrast two mechanisms of water movement through the plant.

INTRODUCTION

- introduce topic: e.g. importance of water movement in plants
- mention your thesis statement, e.g. relative importance
- indicate main areas and organisation, e.g. features to be compared

BODY

- I - Feature A
 - 1 similarities of mechanisms (if any)
 - (a)
 - (b)
 - 2 differences between mechanisms (if any)
 - (a)
 - (b)
 - II - Feature B
 - 1 similarities
 - (a)
- etc....

CONCLUSION

- summarise the main points in different words
- re-emphasize the thesis statement and show that the question has been answered
- place essay in wider context. e.g. importance of water in plants e.t.c.

03 Gathering Information & ideas

Main sources of information

- lectures
- your own experiences
- written sources: books, magazines, journals, reports, newspapers, official documents, etc.
- electronic sources: CD-Roms, Internet, email

For every source used, write down the author, date and title.

- If it is a book, add the publisher and city of publication.
- If it is a journal, add volume number and page number.



For more information see the **Using References** Study Guide.

The task of compiling your list of references will be easy if you have all these details. If not, you can be in a terrible panic at the last minute!

A useful technique to help you stay on track:

Begin by writing the headings of sections and subsections of your tentative plan at the top of different sheets of paper. Then make notes under the appropriate headings as you locate relevant material.

You can add to these early notes as you go into the topic in more depth. This system of organising your notes in advance will help you focus on material relevant to the essay question. Some people like to make notes in an exercise book, which keeps everything together. Loose sheets of paper do have their advantages; you can easily slip in extra sheets at any point, and you can also alter the order of the sheets if you want to change your tentative plan.

04 Identifying your Argument

Good essay writing is based on two important elements. As we have seen, the first is having a clear plan. The second is developing your own point of view on the

topic. This is called an 'argument'. It is important that your plan supports your argument, as do the sources you select from your reading. Your reading and thinking will help you to decide on the most effective way to develop the argument of your essay.

Writing is a thinking and learning process. We write and rewrite in a struggle to express exactly what we want to say. As we work, ideas and the relationships between them can become clearer to us. Sometimes this leads to further revision of the first tentative plan with the aim of making the argument clearer and more convincing.

05 Revising the Outline

As the word 'tentative' implies, the tentative plan may be changed. This can happen during the information gathering stage. As you read, you may wish to add further headings and subheadings, or you may decide to remove some, or change their order.

06 Writing the First Draft

If you have worked through all the previous stages carefully, you are well prepared for writing the first draft. Having revised your tentative plan, arrange your notes in the same order. This helps you write the first draft in a smooth flowing manner.

While writing your first draft,

- concentrate on summarising the ideas and information as clearly as possible in your own words.
- do not use or imitate the language of the original text.
- weave in your own ideas and always keep your overall argument in mind.
- bring in descriptions, definitions, explanations and examples to build up your argument.
- acknowledge sources.

If you are the kind of person who finds it hard to get going with your writing, even when you have a plan and notes in front of you, try starting with the section of the essay that you think you will find easiest to write. You don't have to start writing with the introduction and end with the conclusion. As long as you are aware of how each part fits into your overall argument, you can write the sections in any order you please.

When you have finished the first draft **put it out of sight** at least **overnight** or for a day or two. Then, you will be ready for stage seven.

07 Evaluating the Draft

When you return to your first draft, you can look at it 'with new eyes'. In fact, you should try to put yourself in the position of a reader of the essay rather than the writer. As you read, ask yourself the following questions:

- 01 Has the writer satisfied all the requirements of the assignment question? Are there any weak sections that need strengthening?
- 02 Is there an obvious plan that the writer has followed?
- 03 Are all the general statements well supported by examples or explanations?
- 04 Are there any sentences and paragraphs which do not express the ideas clearly enough? Could they be rewritten for better understanding?
- 05 Does the argument flow smoothly
 - from section to section?
 - from paragraph to paragraph?
 - from sentence to sentence?
- 06 Has the writer always made it clear what sources have been used?



For more information see the **Connectives, Reporting Verbs and Using References** Study Guides

As you take on the role of reader, you evaluate your essay as critically as possible. Mark the parts you need to improve, and those you want to move to a different place. Ask your friends to comment on your draft and to identify sections which are not clear. When the evaluating process is complete, you are ready to go on to stage eight.

08 Reworking the Draft

Once you have taken note of the criticisms and suggestions made by yourself, and possibly your friend, you should now work on your essay again. This is easier if you have got a soft copy of the first draft. Do not hesitate to keep chopping things out, adding or rewriting things even at this stage. The most successful and experienced writers usually make many drafts before they are satisfied.

Most lecturers prefer that you leave wide margins of at least 1.5 line spacing so that they have space to write comments. They also expect a Title Page which includes the assignment question and title, your name and student ID number, the name of the course and of your lecturer or tutor and the date. Refer to your course outline for the preferred presentation format.

09 Proofreading

However careful you are when writing the final draft, you can still make small errors which you need to correct in the final reading of your essay before handing it in. At the proofreading stage, you need to look out for the following types of errors:

- 01 Spelling errors
- 02 Singular subjects used with plural verbs
- 03 Plural subjects used with singular verbs
- 04 Singular pronouns used to refer to plural nouns
- 05 Plural pronouns used to refer to singular nouns
- 06 Errors in verb forms especially with regard to mixing tenses
- 07 Sentence fragments which are not sentences because they have no main verbs



For more information see the **Proof Reading** Study Guide

Summary

As a final exercise, try to remember the nine stages of the assignment writing process and list them on the lines below. Then check your list with the one on the first page of this study sheet.

- 01
- 02
- 03
- 04
- 05
- 06
- 07
- 08
- 09



Sample Answers for Activity 1

- 03 Compare and contrast two mechanisms of water movement through the plant.
- 02 What are some of the factors that subordinate women in society? How can women achieve equality with men?
- 01 Why do Australia and New Zealand give aid to the islands of the South Pacific and what are the advantages and disadvantages of this aid for island countries?



Sample Answers for Activity 2

- 03 For Pacific island countries, there are economic benefits to be derived from tourism. Because of the social costs incurred, however, governments should not prompt or expand the tourism industry as an alternative to other forms of development. [Discuss].
- 02 [What] are some of the factors that subordinate women in society? [How] can women achieve equality with men?
- 01 [Why] do Australia and New Zealand give aid to the islands of the South Pacific and [what] are the advantages and disadvantages of this aid for island countries?