Understanding Assignments

Student Learning Advisory Service
Assignments: What’s the Point?

• Mostly: about extending your own personal understanding and knowledge
• To demonstrate your ability to work within the academic framework (deliver the goods...)
• Technically: to demonstrate that you have achieved the **Module Learning Outcomes**
  – Assessment to show you have earned the Credit
• THEREFORE *check* the Learning Outcomes
  – Generic skills students are required to demonstrate
  – Subject specific skills students need to demonstrate
Types of Assignments

Possible types of assignment include...

- Reports (placement, research, projects, etc.)
- Literature Review (analysis of relevant material)
  - Book review (analysis of ONE book)
  - (Some) description of contents; mostly critique
- Annotated Bibliography
- Case study (focused analysis of ONE case)
- Reflective Exercise (assessment of self)
- Briefing paper (giving ‘executive summary’)
- Traditional essay
  - An essay is an **argument** – persuasive presentation
Marks of a Good Assignment

A good assignment....

1. Focuses on the set question/topic/task
2. Has a clear structure - easy to follow
3. Is well researched - evidence based
4. Adheres to academic conventions
5. Is correctly referenced
6. Is well presented – word limit, page numbering, margins, line spacing, font type, spelling ...
Getting Started

Check your Module Documentation for any:
• Detailed information on the assignment
• Any specific instructions \textit{for this assignment}

ALWAYS ‘do what it says on the can....’

ALSO
• Double-check the deadline

Don’t put it off – start early!
Remember the Rules

• Follow instructions for
  – Word count
  – Font size
  – Margin size
  – Title page
  – School’s ‘style guide’ for referencing

  – Submission process
    • Hard copies, electronic copies, both?
    • Due submission time

  – Rules on concessions and extensions
Understanding Assignments

Regularly go back to (and double-check):

- **General assignment requirements**
  - E.g. Coversheet, plagiarism rules, submission process (Turnitin?), word lengths, **deadlines**

- **Specific assignment requirements**
  - E.g. **type** of document required – essay, project folder, report, case study, etc.
  - Formatting instructions: e.g. fonts, margins, etc.

If in doubt: ask!
Understanding Assignments

• Map each assignment against the module LOs

• Ask: how does this piece of work link into....
  – The lectures
  – The seminars
  – Additional reading
  – Other assignment targets/titles/exams?
  – Other modules?
Getting Started

• 90% of any good essay is what you do *before* you start writing
  – the *last* thing you do is write!

• Essence of task is ALWAYS
  – Careful **planning** and **preparation** – timeline!
  – Thorough background research
  – Readiness to challenge and probe topic
  – Careful drafting
  – Careful proof-reading and checking

• Focus on the question
Assignment Titles

Assignments typically have TWO main elements

1. Assignment **topic**
2. Set of **instructions**

Example:
What are the functions of ritual and specifically rites of passage? What forms and structures might they take?

1. Topic: Ritual with particular focus on *rites of passage*
2. Instructions:
   a) Implied instruction: describe and evaluate
   b) Explicit: Explore *function* of rites of passage

*Check* anything that still feels unclear
Long and Short Questions

• Zola wrote that ‘poetry is everywhere, in everything, even more in the present and the real than in the past and the abstract. Each event at each moment has its poetic superb aspect.’ Explain in detail what Zola meant by this and why he held that view. Why did Artaud disagree? And how did he conceive of the ‘poetry’ of theatre? (Drama)

• Why is international debt a burden? (Economics)
Example:
“Gender roles in social work have not changed significantly in 100 years”. Discuss.

• **Central topic?** Gender roles in social work

• **Key instruction verb(s)?** Discuss

• **Focus clues?** Changes over 100 years

• **Other key words?** Changed significantly
Understand Key Instructions

• Analyse
• Compare and contrast
• Discuss
• Evaluate or Assess
• Trace
• Apply
• Illustrate
• Summarise
• To what extent ... and many, many more!

http://www.uefap.com/writing/writfram.htm
Understand Key Instructions

• Some key words in the title might be telling you to focus on the possible relationship between ideas – e.g. compare and contrast

• Some key words may be telling you to focus on interpretation of the evidence – e.g. assess, evaluate, consider

• Some key words in the title will probably be emphasising importance of critical analysis
What do you need to study for *this* essay?

1. **Definitions:** what is meant by *gender roles*
2. What is meant by social work?
3. **History (100 years = 1900)**
   - changes in gender roles generally over given period
   - changes in society generally over that period
   - impact on contemporary social work practice
4. **Consider:** have gender roles *actually* changed?
   - If so, what is the evidence?
   - *How much* have they (really) changed?
Planning the Research

• Organise a **do-able** timetable for the work
  – How long will the reading *actually* take?
• Read as widely as possible: go for variety
• Prioritise your reading: must, should, nice…..
• Plan your reading: ‘little and often’
• Set sensible objectives: good enough!
• Take notes – to concentrate as well as record
• Make sure your notes are plagiarism-proof
# Assignment Plan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WHAT</th>
<th>WHY</th>
<th>WHERE</th>
<th>WHEN</th>
<th>CHECK</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gather material on gender roles</td>
<td>Central topic</td>
<td>Google Notes Encyclopaedia</td>
<td>By Friday</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read: Specific texts</td>
<td>On reading list + from informal literature review</td>
<td>Library (one week loan)</td>
<td>By next week</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ask colleague at work</td>
<td>Experienced practitioner</td>
<td>Over phone</td>
<td>Weekend</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Assignment ‘Product’

- Formal writing style
- Fair, accurate and precise presentation
- Backed up with sufficient and credible evidence
- Using the right language
  - subject-specific terminology
  - Avoiding pretentious and pompous/flowery language
- Designed to persuade your tutor
- Structured to build up an argument/thesis/claim
- Working systematically towards a fair conclusion
- Carefully crafted
Gathering the Evidence

To do this, you will need…

- Scholarship – your research using recognised experts
- Cases – examples to unpack and consider
- Factual information
- Counter-arguments to test and evaluate
- Evidence that you have ‘covered the ground’ adequately

Ammunition for the assignment