

WESTERN SYDNEY
UNIVERSITY



LIBRARY
STUDY SMART

ASSIGNMENT HELP
GETTING STARTED



PDF resources included in this section

CONTENTS - GETTING STARTED

1. Assignment timeline
 2. Analysing the assignment question
 3. Common task words
-

Getting started

Where should you start with your assignment? Resources for planning your time and analysing the question.

Getting started

You've got an assignment to do. But maybe you're not sure where to begin.

Here you'll find a step-by-step guide to help you with your assignment from start to finish - including the [Library Study Smart Assignment Calculator](#) - and tips for understanding your assignment question. Get started early if you can!

STUDY SMART WEBSITE

Find this section on the Study Smart website here:

https://westernsydney.edu.au/studysmart/home/assignment_help/getting_started

PLANNING YOUR ASSIGNMENT

YOU'VE GOT AN ASSIGNMENT TO DO. BUT MAYBE YOU'RE NOT SURE WHERE TO BEGIN.

Assignments involve a few different steps, so you'll need to plan ahead to give yourself the best chance of completing each step well and on time. The **Library Study Smart Assignment Calculator** is a great place to start the assignment planning process.

Just enter your assignment due date and the Assignment Calculator will break down your assignment into steps and tell you how much time you should allocate to each step. It will also link you to the Study Smart resources that will help you accomplish each step. You can then use the 'Print' function in your browser to print or save a PDF of your customised assignment plan to keep you on track.

Alternatively, you can still download the 'Assignment timeline' resource below and do the calculations yourself.



Assignment timeline

Print out this timeline, calculate how much time you can allocate to each step based on how much time you have until the due date, and write the due date for each step in the 'Due date' column. Use the timeline to organise your assignment preparation, and cross out each step as you complete it. Alternatively, visit the online [Assignment Calculator](#).

Step	Task	Timeframe	Due date	Resources
1	Find all relevant assignment documents	5% of time		Unit Learning Guide Unit vUWS site Assignments section Unit reading list (via Library search box) Interpreting your reading list Library tutorial
2	Analyse assignment question	10% of time		Analysing the question (PDF, 177 kB) Analysing your essay question (video, 2:35) Common task words (PDF, 113 kB) The why, when, and what of reading (PDF, 382 kB) Presentations Group work
3	Find and evaluate information	40% of time		Researching and reading Organising your reading (PDF, 68 kB) How to read effectively (PDF, 519 kB) Types of sources (PDF, 101 kB) Successful Searching Library online tutorial Finding information for assignments (video, 1:59) Critical Thinking (PDF, 110 kB) Evaluating resources using APPEAL (video, 6:26) Evaluating websites using APPEAL (video, 8:09) Note-taking
4	Write your draft	25% of time		Writing (Essays, Reports, Case Studies, Reflective Writing, General writing help, Using sources) Word Processing (PDF, 540 kB) Library Referencing and Citation Guide
5	Revise your draft	15% of time		Using Turnitin Interpreting your Originality Report (video, 2:46) Editing (PDF, 54 kB) Academic Integrity Checklist (PDF, 355 kB)
6	Finish and submit	5% of time		Proofreading (PDF, 40 kB) Using Turnitin Special Consideration information Special Consideration (videos) Extension guidelines (PDF, 24 kB) Extension request form (PDF, 80 kB)

ANALYSING THE QUESTION

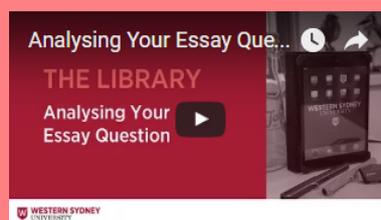
UNIVERSITY ASSIGNMENTS USUALLY ASK YOU TO DEMONSTRATE YOUR KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF PARTICULAR TOPIC AREAS RELATED TO THE UNIT YOU ARE STUDYING. THE ASSIGNMENT QUESTIONS ARE OFTEN QUITE COMPLEX, SO YOU WILL NEED TO PAY CAREFUL ATTENTION TO WHAT THE ASSIGNMENT IS ASKING YOU TO DO. IF YOU DON'T ANSWER THE QUESTION ASKED, YOU WON'T GET A GOOD MARK EVEN IF YOU WRITE IT REALLY WELL.

Make sure you have all the documents you need that relate to the assignment:

- Look at the Learning Guide for your unit for
 - the assignment question and instructions
 - the unit Reading List
- Look in the Assignments section of your unit vUWS site for any additional information
- Look at your lecture and tutorial notes to see if the lecturer or tutor has given any extra information in class
- Look for your unit's **Library Reading List**. Search using your unit number

MORE INFORMATION

ANALYSING THE QUESTION (VIDEO, 2:35) FROM WESTERN SYDNEY UNIVERSITY LIBRARY.





Analysing the assignment question

University assignments usually ask you to demonstrate your knowledge and understanding of particular topic areas related to the unit you're studying. The assignment questions are often quite complex, so you'll need to pay careful attention to what the assignment is asking you to do.

It's important to read and analyse the assignment question or task very carefully to ensure that you have understood the task well. If you hand in a really well-written essay but it doesn't answer the question asked, then you won't get a good result and your hard work will be wasted.

Understanding the task

- **Read** the question, and any other supporting material, at least twice.
 - Note the due date and put the date in your diary/calendar if it's not already there.
 - Note length restrictions and other limits (e.g. word or page limit).
 - Note any specifications regarding resources you should use.
- Check the **definition** of words or phrases you do not fully understand, especially technical words.
- Identify the **key words** and phrases (see below).
- **Rewrite** the question in your own words and check with your tutor that it is on track.
- Check the **guidelines** about how the assignment is to be presented and what referencing style is required. You should also read any **marking guides** provided in your Learning Guide. These will tell you what standards you need to reach to achieve each grade.
- Review the **course objectives**, recommended **readings** and class discussion topics to see what content you have covered that relates to the task.
- Discuss the task, and how you understand it, with other students.
- If there is anything you still don't understand, ask your tutor or lecturer.

Analysing the question

The key words in a writing task will help you decide what kind of approach you should take in your response. The keywords will tell you what the topic of the assignment task is, what particular aspect of the topic you should focus on, and whether you should write a description or an analysis.

Types of keywords

There are three types of keywords you should look for in your assignment question:

Task words

- Task words or phrases indicate what kind of response you are expected to write. These words are usually verbs, but may also be question words, for example: How? Why? The task word in the following example is 'discuss':
'Rapid population growth is the major cause of the current climate crisis.' **Discuss.**

Topic words

- Topic words or phrases tell you what topic you are expected to write about. They define the topic, indicating the areas you should concentrate on. Topic words are generally easy to identify, as they are likely to be the topics that you have studied in your Unit. The topic words in the following example are 'current climate crisis':
*'Rapid population growth is the major cause of the **current climate crisis**.'* Discuss.

Focus words

→ Focus words are the specific aspects of the topic you are asked to pay particular attention to as you write about the topic. The focus words/phrases in the following example are ‘rapid population growth’ and ‘major cause’:
‘Rapid population growth is the major cause of the current climate crisis.’ Discuss.

In the example question used above, you are being asked to discuss the given statement. So you need to consider this claim about the current climate crisis in light of other views on the topic, and decide whether the claim is valid.

Here are two more examples:

Schoolies week is an important rite of passage for Australian teenagers. Discuss.

Task word: Discuss
Topic words: Schoolies week
Focus words: Important, rite of passage, Australian teenagers

Since sustainability is a key concept of the twenty-first century, it should be included as part of the curriculum of primary and secondary students throughout Australia. Do you agree?

Task phrase: Do you agree? (i.e. discuss or evaluate the claim)
Topic words: Sustainability
Focus words: Should be included as part of the curriculum, primary and secondary students, Australia

(Adapted from UniStep Guide, 2013, p. 77).

Common writing tasks

You’ll find that your writing at university falls into two main categories: descriptive and analytical. In descriptive writing, you’ll mainly be gathering and repackaging information in a systematic way. In analytical writing, you have to evaluate and analyse information and then synthesise it in an original way.

Descriptive writing	Analytical writing
Gathering information	Evaluating information
Repackaging information	Analysing information
Classifying information	Synthesising information

The table below shows examples of common tasks in each category of writing. You can also download a Common Task Words List that gives examples of essay questions for the most common task words, and keep it near your study space as a handy guide.

Descriptive writing		Analytical writing	
Define	Give the exact meaning of a term	Analyse	Identify the components of a concept, theory or plan and describe the relationship between them
Describe	Identify and outline the attributes or characteristics of a subject	Compare	Identify the similarities and differences between concepts, theories, plans or objects
Explain	Describe features so they can be easily understood	Contrast	Identify the differences between concepts, theories, plans or objects
Illustrate	Explain and give examples	Criticise	Identify the weak points of a concept or theory
Outline	List or describe the most important features	Discuss	Identify different approaches to a question or problem and decide which is most valid or useful
State	Describe precisely the content of a law, theory or concept	Describe	Identify different approaches to a question or problem
Summarise	Briefly present all the main points	Evaluate	Decide whether a concept, theory, plan or action is valid or useful
		Examine	Identify the strengths and weaknesses of a concept or theory

(Adapted from Brick, 2011, pp. 26-30).

You may have noticed that the word 'describe' appears in both lists. This verb can be used for both types of writing. To work out which kind of response you are required to write, you will need to look carefully at the topic of the question.

In general, if the topic is something that is generally well understood and agreed upon, e.g. 'describe the process of photosynthesis in plants' or 'describe the life cycle of a mosquito', then you are most likely being asked to write a purely descriptive piece.

If the topic is something that could be approached in a number of ways, e.g. 'describe different theories of human language acquisition', then you are most likely being asked for an analytical piece of writing that involves a combination of 'compare', 'contrast', 'evaluate', and 'examine'.

(Adapted from Brick, 2011, p. 30).

Question words

Sometimes the task is set by a question word instead of a verb. Some of the most common question words are:

- What is/was...? What impact/effect...? In what ways...? How does/did...? How far...? These are usually 'describe' or 'explain' type essays
- Why...? How far...? To what extent...? How effectively...? Was...? Do you agree? Is this fair comment? How important...? What do you think? These are usually analytical 'argue' or 'discuss' type essays

(Adapted from UniStep Guide, 2013, p. 59).

Of course, these question words only make sense when read in conjunction with the focus and topic words. But even then, it can sometimes be difficult to identify what you actually have to do, and you may need to clarify the task with your tutor or lecturer before going any further.



Watch [Analysing your assignment question](#) (video), 2:35 via the Library for more help.

Try it yourself



Look at your assignment question and analyse it using the following table. If the question uses more than one task word or question word, number them.

Task word / phrase OR Question word	Topic word(s)	Focus word(s)	Other information or instructions
(1)			
(2)			
(3)			

If your question uses a question word, which task word do you think it is closest to? Why do you think that?

Question word	Corresponding task word	Why I think this
(1)		
(2)		
(3)		

Write each topic word in a column below, and think of synonyms or similar phrases to match each one. You can then use these groups of words in a Library search (do the Library's [Successful Searching](#) online tutorial to learn how).

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Topic word	car		
Similar words or phrases	Automobile, vehicle, etc.		

References

Brick, J. (2011). *Academic culture: A student's guide to studying at university* (pp. 26-30). South Yarra, VIC: Macmillan.

UniStep guide: Making the transition to university (10th ed.). (2013). Sydney, Australia: Hub for Academic Literacy and Learning (HALL), Learning and Teaching Unit, University of Western Sydney.



Common task words

Your assignment question may be a 'what', 'how' or 'why' question. But it may not have a question word at all. You may also find that your assignment uses more than one task word.

Here is a handy guide to common task words used in university assignments, and what they are asking you to do.

Account for

Explain why something has occurred. You are being asked to find out about the different factors that may have contributed to a particular state of affairs. You then have to decide which factors are most likely to have brought that situation about.

- Example from Economics: *Account for the economic success of the 'tiger' economy of Singapore during the 1960s.* (University of Adelaide, 2014)

Analyse

Consider a concept, statement, or situation, identify the different components it is made up of, and describe how the components relate to each other. Your answer should be methodical and logically organised.

- Example from History: *Analyse the major social and technological changes that took place in European warfare between 1789 and 1871.* (University of Adelaide, 2014)

Assess

Consider how true, reliable or beneficial an idea(s) or subject(s) is. You might present points for or against the idea(s), or state whether the idea(s) or subject(s) being discussed is valuable or relevant. You might also need to address counter-arguments. Your judgment should be influenced by other authors' views as well as your own opinion (similar to *Evaluate*).

- Example from Law: *Assess the arguments for and against Australia signing the Kyoto Protocol.* (University of Adelaide, 2014)

Classify

Divide a topic into sub-topics, categories or classes in a systematic way.

- Example from Education: *Classify the resources and interventions being used in mathematics education at a school of your choice.*

Comment on

State your opinion on a topic or idea. You may explain the topic or idea more fully. Your opinion must be expressed objectively and supported by evidence from reliable sources.

- Example from Law: *Comment on the criminal justice system in Indonesia.*

Compare OR compare and contrast

Set the two items side by side and show their similarities and differences.

- Example from Sociology: *Compare and contrast Marxist and pluralist conceptions of politics, power and the state.* (Brick, 2011, p. 29)
- Example from Computing: **Compare** 'Traditional File Processing' with the 'Database Management Approach'. (University of Adelaide, 2014)

Contrast

Point out only the differences (not the similarities) between two or more topics.

- Example from Linguistics: **Contrast** the phonology of Australian English and British English.

Critically

Often used in conjunction with other directive words, such as critically discuss, critically examine or critically analyse. It does not mean criticise. It is asking you to give a balanced answer that points out mistakes or weaknesses and any favourable aspects of the subject of the question. The decision or overall judgment you make must be supported with evidence from reliable sources.

- Example from Management: **Critically** analyse two major areas of risk in general contracting and construction management. (Southampton Solent University, 2016)

Define

Explain the precise meaning of a concept. A definition answer will include a discussion of the concept and may also state the limits of the concept's meaning.

- Example from Accounting: **Define** inventory as it relates to a merchandiser. (Brick, 2011, p. 28)

Describe

Identify and outline the attributes or characteristics of a subject.

- Example from Nursing: **Describe** the five phases of the nursing process and provide an example of a nursing activity that represents each phase. (McDonald, 2014, p. 183)

Differentiate

See *Contrast*.

Discuss

Explain the item or concept, and then give details about it with supporting information, examples, points for and against, and explanations for the facts put forward from various points of view. This can be one of the most difficult types of essay question. You may be given a claim or statement to discuss, and/or a specific topic you need to relate your discussion to.

- Example from Information Technology: 'Human efficiency is more important than machine efficiency.' **Discuss** this statement in relation to commercial software production. (Brick, 2011, p. 29)

Distinguish

Highlight the differences between two items. The items that you have to distinguish are sometimes things that are easily confused, so you are being asked to identify precise differences that may not be obvious to everyone.

- Example from Sociology: *Distinguish* between qualitative and quantitative research methods.

Enumerate

This requires you to list or specify and describe items or ideas one by one. You may be required to format your response as a list or outline.

- Example from Politics: *Enumerate the main differences between pluralist and elitist analyses of power distribution in liberal democracies.* (adapted from University of Sydney, 2001)

Evaluate

See Assess.

Examine

Investigate a topic thoroughly. This may include identifying the strengths and weaknesses of a proposition.

- Example from Sociology: *Examine sociological explanations for the 'divorce phenomenon'.* (Monash University, 2007)

Explain

Offer a detailed and exact rationale behind an idea or principle, or a set of reasons for a situation or attitude. This is what you need to do in response to a 'why' or 'how' question. The explanation should increase the reader's understanding of a topic or idea.

- Example from History: *Explain how the collapse of the Tokugawa regime in feudal Japan was inevitable.* (University of Adelaide, 2014)

Explore

See *Examine*.

Hypothesise

Suggest the reasons for some phenomenon or situation and the processes by which it occurred. A hypothesis is a theory regarding particular occurrences. You confirm hypotheses through testing. So the hypothesis you come up with has to be testable.

- Example from Linguistics: *Hypothesise about why there is less variation between Australian English dialects than between British English dialects.*

Illustrate/demonstrate

Give concrete examples to explain a topic or phenomenon, or demonstrate the validity of a claim. You will often be given further instructions with this kind of task word.

- Example from Science/Social Science: *Hypothesise about the origins of dog (*Canis familiaris*) domestication.*

Interpret

Very similar to *Explain*. Describe what your subject means. Examine the key components of a topic or idea and give an evaluation of it. You may be required to interpret the subject in terms of a particular framework or theory specific to your discipline.

- Example from Education: *'Jemma (aged 14 years) fights a lot with her parents but not with her friends. She used to be a keen student but now seems to have lost interest in both her school studies (she wants to leave school next year) and outside school activities. But she does take a passionate interest in the environment and in boys.'* **Interpret** these behaviours in the light of Erikson's stage theory on adolescence. (adapted from University of Sydney, 2001)

Investigate

Research, study and carefully survey all areas of the subject.

→ Example from Psychology: **Investigate** the effects of television viewing on children's perception of violence.

Outline

Summarise information about a subject. You should only include the main points, not the details. Questions of this type often require short answers.

→ Example from Computing: **Outline** the stages of the software life cycle. (Brick, 2011, p. 28)

Relate (relationship)

Make links or connections between two or more ideas, and show how these ideas are associated, as well as the nature of the relationship.

→ Example from History: **Relate** the development of archaeology in the 19th century to the social conditions during that period. (adapted from University of Sydney, 2001)

Review

Analyse, criticise and comment on the main ideas of a topic. Your assignment needs to be structured in a logical order.

→ Example from Science/Philosophy: **Review** the theory of relativity in the history of scientific thought.

State

Express the relevant points briefly and clearly without lengthy discussion or minor details. This is a purely descriptive task, so you are not expected to evaluate or give your opinion on the points you make.

→ Example from Sociology: **State** the five characteristics of qualitative research.

Summarise

See *Outline*.

Trace

Describe in logical order the stages in the development of a theory, a person's life, a process, etc. 'Trace' is frequently used in historical questions (but not only in History courses).

→ Example from History: **Trace** the archaeological origins of the Neolithic revolution in Egypt and the Sudan.

(Adapted from *UniStep Guide*, 2013, pp. 78-70).

References

- Brick, J. (2011). *Academic culture: A student's guide to studying at university* (2nd ed.). South Yarra, VIC: Macmillan.
- Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. (2016). Sula, Toni Morrison: Study help essay questions. Retrieved from <http://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/s/sula/study-help/essay-questions>.
- McDonald, M. E. (2014). *The nurse educator's guide to assessing learning outcomes* (3rd ed.). Burlington, MA: Jones & Bartlett Learning.
- Monash University. (2007). Language and learning online: Sample essay. Retrieved from <http://www.monash.edu.au/lis/lonline/writing/general/essay/sample-essay/index.xml>
- Southampton Solent University. (2016). Solent Online Learning: Writing essays. Retrieved from <http://learn.solent.ac.uk/mod/book/view.php?id=2735&chapterid=1154>
- UniStep guide: Making the transition to university* (10th ed.). (2013). Sydney, Australia: Hub for Academic Literacy and Learning (HALL), Learning and Teaching Unit, University of Western Sydney.
- University of Adelaide. (2014). *Assignment directives: Writing Centre learning guide*. Retrieved from https://www.adelaide.edu.au/writingcentre/learning_guides/learningGuide_assignmentDirectives.pdf
- University of Sydney. (2001). *Learning Centre first year experience series: Analysing an essay question*. Retrieved from http://sydney.edu.au/stuserv/documents/learning_centre/AnalyseEssayQuestion.doc

Contact Information

ic@westernsydney.edu.au

Western Sydney University
Locked Bag 1797
Penrith NSW 2751 Australia



[WESTERNSYDNEY.EDU.AU/STUDYSMART](https://westernsydney.edu.au/studysmart)