

STUDENT  
SUCCESS

5th Edition

# Essential Study Skills

The Complete Guide to  
Success at University

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# 10

## University Assessment and How to Succeed

You cannot succeed on a course unless you know what you have to *do* and *learn* to pass. You need to understand what *assessment* is and what the actual *assignment* wants you to do... This comprehensive chapter is designed to tackle that.

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### Introduction

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‘I never enjoyed school, not at all. I never understood what we were doing or why. It was all so frustrating and I felt so powerless. Now I’m at university because I want to be, studying what I want to study, and everything is so different. It’s great!’

It is much easier to be a successful student if we know exactly what we have to learn and do to pass a course. No matter how engaged and excited you are about studying, you cannot show you have learned the course material if you do not know what you were supposed to have learned in the first place. In this extensive chapter we look at how to understand and pass your course; we discuss assessment and the value of feedback/forward; we explore a range of typical university assignment formats and what to do about them; we cover our ten steps to assignment success strategy; and we conclude with a section on overcoming writing blocks.

As always, before you read on, think about what you want from this chapter – there could be a whole range of things! At the end – pause and review: What have you got? What have you learned?

## Understanding and passing your course

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‘Not knowing what to expect from university was my problem. I had no idea what to expect, which made me anxious.’



Gaining the ‘overview’ and knowing the ‘what, why and how’ of any particular course you are taking helps you to make sense of it – and helps you take control of the learning. It tells you what you have to do and learn to pass the course. We encourage our students to take control and to ‘own’ the courses we teach – there has to be a shift from our teaching to their learning. It is similar to the way that we ask you to set your own goals when you read a chapter. Yes, there are things that we want you to do and learn – and we set these out in the bullets and introduction that open up each chapter – but it is really important for you to make your own goals conscious as well. Thus with any programme, course or module that you take at university, set your own goals and ‘own’ your own learning. There are several things to do immediately upon joining a new course to help you make it yours.

## Take control



At my university the student union bought books from students and resold them in the Union Shop. Sometimes these books had been bought and resold several times and had been marked up by all the previous students. Looking at their marginalia showed how they had focused on the different questions they were answering – and I would think about that. Sometimes whole chapters were completely unmarked. Not useful? Or an opportunity for me to use something no one else had?



Once you join your course, there are several useful things to do immediately to gain your overview and take that control. In the canteen, library or online find a student who has taken the course and ask them about the course, module and tutors. Find out from them what was important and who were the nice, helpful and knowledgeable tutors – work out which ones to go to for which advice. Once you have done the friendly chatty stuff – get involved with the module handbook:

*Read the module handbook.* Make sure you have a copy of the handbook for each course or module you are taking. Usually this means downloading them from your VLE. Once you have a copy – read it! If you can access this information before you even get to university – do it. Google the names of tutors, find out their expertise, interests and what research they are currently engaged in. Read the articles, books or chapters they have written.

*Aims and outcomes.* Most handbooks spell out overall aims and the learning outcomes. These are the things you have to do and learn to pass that course. Read these, make lists, pin them up in your study space. Highlight key words. Make a list of everything you will have to do or learn to pass each module. Pin this list up in your study space to help keep you focused on the goals of each module.

*Assessment.* Once you have analysed the aims and outcomes, look at how the course is going to be assessed. The course may be 100% coursework, 100% exam based or a mixture of the two. Make sure you know how you are going to be assessed – and how the marks are going to be awarded across the different assignments you are set. (See below for a breakdown of typical university assessments and how to make the most of them.)

*Look at past papers.* If there is an exam on your course, find past exam papers and read them. These tell you what you should be able to answer by the end of the course. They help you to set your learning goals for the course. They will help you practise for your exams.

*Look at the reading list.* Note essential reading – you should read most or all of these. Note the recommended reading – you should read some of these. When reading, keep the assignment question in mind – it will act like a hook and help you catch the information you need. Make notes that help you answer the question.

*Examine the syllabus.* If you have a timetable, syllabus or scheme of work, read it. Notice how the course has been put together. When attending lectures or seminars, have a word or phrase from the question in your mind, this should help you make relevant notes. If left with unanswered questions, make sure you raise these in the seminar. The tutor may just give you a blank stare ('You are so off base here!') – or say: 'Interesting question! Have you thought about it this way...?' Or, 'Oh, if you are interested in that, do read...'. You are testing your ideas in a low stakes way with no risk – and setting yourself up to succeed in the assignment. Even better, the tutor can see just how engaged in the topic you are.

*Know how to reference.* All courses are assessed in some way – and typically all will require evidence of the work you have put in. This will mean putting together your bibliography or references. Make notes of your reading as you read – and be consistent in your referencing.

Typically students have to use a Harvard or APA format (Author (Date) *Title*. Location: Publisher) – these sites are helpful:

- For guidance on in-text citations: [https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research\\_and\\_citation/apa\\_style/apa\\_formatting\\_and\\_style\\_guide/in\\_text\\_citations\\_the\\_basics.html](https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/apa_style/apa_formatting_and_style_guide/in_text_citations_the_basics.html)
- For how to construct your reference list: [https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research\\_and\\_citation/apa\\_style/apa\\_formatting\\_and\\_style\\_guide/reference\\_list\\_basic\\_rules.html](https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/apa_style/apa_formatting_and_style_guide/reference_list_basic_rules.html)

### TIP

- Know how you are going to be assessed for every module. Be prepared to answer the questions set – but you must also meet the learning outcomes, so check them out when you are getting your assignment together.
- Think about the assignment before a lecture – get tuned in.
- Think about the assignment before you read – this hooks information from the text.
- Write out the assignment question. Underline the key words.
- Pin questions on your wall. With syllabus and reading list. Work out how these fit together.
- Free write a response to each question in your first week on the course.
- Read around one word from a question at a time using your active reading strategy. Listen for information on the key words in lectures and classes. Make memorable notes.
- Share the reading with your friends – talk about it, compare notes.
- Draw up weekly and termly timetables – put all your assessment dates on them. Put exam dates in every calendar you own.
- Colour-code your learning outcomes. Colour-code your syllabus and reading list. See which parts of the assignment are being covered in which weeks of the course and in what texts.

## Understanding assessment

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Good assessments are also part of active learning. We know that our learning is assessed – we have to show what we know in the assignment set (assessment *of* learning). But a good assessment should also spur us on to learn (assessment *for* learning) – and engaging in the assessment processes should also bring about active learning (assessment *as* learning). Any particular assessment you engage with is designed to provoke you to learn, and in the process you also produce something – the assignment (essay, report, artefact) – that demonstrates your

learning. We write about assignment forms in more detail below, but here we want to explore how assessment is approached in the university context – what tutors want your different assessments to achieve.

## **Formative and summative assessment**

Typically assessments are described as *formative* or *summative* – and all assessments should generate tutor *feedback/forward* that tells you how well the tutor thinks you have done in the assignment. We unpack these terms here to help you make sense of the different ways that assessment is conceptualised – we also want you to think deeply about the point of feedback/forward. All the research evidence suggests the majority of students do not make the most of the learning opportunities that feedback/forward provides.

## **Formative assessment is developmental**

A formative assessment is developmental and designed to make you learn. The point is to get you to do something, to engage with the course and actively learn. They may be diagnostic, telling the tutor something about your progress – or the progress of the course (whether there is material they need to go over because nobody understood it). The emphasis is on tutor feedback/forward to help you do better in the summative assessment.

Strictly speaking, if an assessment is purely formative, there is no grade – or the grade is small or not carried forward to the final, summative, grade for that course. In this way the whole first year of a degree programme is seen as formative. Yes, you do assignments and they are awarded grades; but these grades do not contribute to your degree classification (the final award that you get at the end of your studies).

With formative assessment more generally, you might be asked to produce a developmental piece of work that you will improve for the final submission. The grade for that final assignment would be higher because of all the processes you have passed through to produce the draft – and because of the way you responded to the tutor feedback/forward. For example, you might be required to write a draft essay or prepare a presentation on a topic early in a course upon which you would receive feedback/forward. Importantly you should note the tutor comments and reflect on them, take action, and then you would produce a deeper and more developed piece of work on the topic for your final assignment later in the module.

Whilst a strict definition of a formative assessment would be that it carried no marks, many lecturers believe students will not undertake developmental work without being offered a grade, so a formative assessment may carry a low stakes grade – say 10% or 20% of the final grade. This does not mean they are not

important. You do not want to pick up a low grade just because you were not paying attention – not least because it would mean you would have to work so much harder to get a good grade in the summative piece.

### TIP

Always note where the highest marks are being awarded across a course. If we find ourselves in 'trouble' we do not want to spend all our time on an assessment that carries 10% or 20% and neglect one that carries 80% or 90% of the final marks.

## Summative assessment is final

Whilst the formative assessment is designed to test student learning at any particular moment in a course, a summative assessment is designed to evaluate that learning overall. Often at the end of a programme of study, it is designed to measure the student's overall achievement in the unit, course or programme.

University summative assessment processes are quality-controlled by external examiners. This is to ensure that testing and marking are transparent, valid and fair. It should reassure you that your programme has been well-designed and the summative assessments you are given 'work' – that is they do provoke powerful active learning that allows all students to demonstrate their learning equally.

Summative assignments are seen as high stakes because they do count – whilst other activities are considered low stakes when they do not count towards your grades. You might have noticed in the chapter on group work that we talked about engaging students in lots of low stakes group activities before we asked them to engage in high stakes assessed group work. Low stakes work is designed to take the pressure off, so that you can express yourself more creatively perhaps, and take some risks with your work and your thinking.

## Feedback/forward

So, assessments are designed to provoke your learning and the assignment itself is to provide evidence of your achievement. Most importantly, the *process* of preparing an assignment is heuristic – it brings about powerful active learning. As you wrestle with a question and struggle to read and write about it, you learn your subject. Whether the assessment itself is formative or summative, most tutors will give you feedback/forward on what you have produced. This is a critical

commentary designed to show you what you have done well (look for the ticks) – and what not so well (work out what to do to improve).

The learning cycle is completed when we receive and act upon this feedback/forward. Yes of course you are interested in your grade – but don't forget to use that feedback/forward. Look for the advice about what you should have read, or what you needed to reference better. It can be hard to take criticism well. It can feel like a personal attack or rejection and it can be a powerful emotional experience – and not always a positive one. We have to learn how to use the tutor's comments to help us learn. Obviously it is useful if we can review our own work and judge it for ourselves, but we should also pay real attention to our tutor's notes and work out how to apply what they have said to the next assignment or module. This is how we grow through the whole 'writing to learn' process.

## ACTIVITY

### Dealing positively with feedback/forward

Read through and think about how one student responded to some short sharp feedback/forward on an essay on Freud that she had worked on and cared about for a very long time.

(Examples taken with permission from 'An Essay Evolves': <http://evolvingessay.pbworks.com/w/page/19387227/FrontPage>)

**The assessor's feedback on the assignment:** '...could be improved by having a clearer focus and a stronger take-home message, which could perhaps be achieved by interpreting the title in a narrower way.'

**The student's response:** I feel that in this case (and in some others!) I slipped away from my main task which is usually identified by a thorough question analysis. Looking back, instead of presenting the strengths and weaknesses of Freud's theory of personality as measured against the yardstick of evidential science I decided at too early a point to become an advocate for it. I tried also to question the appropriateness of the paradigm often used to assess Freud when it might have profited me (in terms of more marks) to stick with it. It may have helped me achieve the stronger take-home message counselled by the assessor. And interestingly, in this case I carried out my question analysis belatedly.'

**Discussion:** That's a brilliant way to respond to what must have felt like really negative feedback/forward. She had worked long and hard on that task – and then it must have felt like it was being attacked. It is something we all have to learn: how to listen to feedback/forward whilst not taking offence – not taking it personally – but thinking of what to do differently next time.

For more of this student's essay, search online for 'An Essay Evolves', and read the essay as it developed and the student's blog about her thoughts and feelings when writing the essay.



**TIP**

- See assessment as an opportunity to shine.
- Use the feedback: find three things that you did well in an assignment – and three things that you could do better next time.

## **Understanding assignment formats**

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Assessment is designed to test your learning – the assignment is the thing you are asked to produce to show you know. You could be asked to demonstrate your learning by curating an exhibition, writing a short story, producing a website, designing a newsletter or a whole range of other things that require you to consider what you have learned – and to communicate that effectively in some way to some sort of audience. Typically at university, assessment does not reach the creative heights of asking you to put on a play or choreograph a dance to demonstrate your learning – although it could. We are normally asked to write essays or reports, we are set exams or asked to produce multimodal artefacts. In this section we are exploring university assignments.

There are chapters coming on the essay, report and presentation and on revision and exam techniques – but first we are going to quickly cover a range of popular university assignments. The trick for you when you face an assignment is to ask: What am I being asked to show that I have learned? Why have they set this particular form of assignment in which to show my learning? As you read the examples below, work out how knowing the information might help you to be a more successful student.

### **The essay**

An essay is a discussion around a topic – you are supposed to argue for and against an idea or proposition and come to a reasoned conclusion using mainly theoretical evidence (what you have read). A good essay assignment is initiated by some sort of question (they are called questions even if not written as questions) that provokes you to think. Usually you have to think about the question itself first. They are not usually straightforward. Working on an essay is designed to be a heuristic process, that is, it brings about active learning. The essay itself demonstrates your engagement with, and your analytical and critical thinking around, the topic. One of the most formal academic forms, essays are typically

written in the passive voice (third person, past tense), with extensive accurate references to support your arguments and evidence taken from the key players in your discipline.

### **The reflective essay**

Sometimes, rather than being set a challenging essay question to wrestle with, we are specifically asked to reflect on our learning in a 'reflective essay'. The 'rules' of this sort of essay are more fluid, thus although it might seem easier to do – surely it is just demonstrating what you've learned? – they can be more difficult to get right. We recommend you ask the tutor exactly what sort of issues they want you to cover in your reflection – and what sort of structure they want. If in doubt, have a look at the chapter on reflection – and especially the section that discusses reflecting on practice learning.

### **The patchwork assessment**

Sometimes rather than a deep focus on one topic, a tutor might want you to engage in a range of heuristic (active learning) activities to help you reflect on and demonstrate your learning more widely across a whole course. This can be called a patchwork assignment – and you can be set a range of different tasks to complete from small essays, to short blog posts, poetry or prose, perhaps even presentation slides. Each patch or piece of work, though short, is complete in itself. The idea is that each piece is important individually but becomes even more significant when 'stitched' together into your 'patchwork quilt' assignment by the overarching commentary you produce.

### **The report**

A report is a practical document where you write up the findings of your investigation into real-world problems – think scientific experiment or business report. Reports are written for specific readers in the passive voice and are signposted with headings and subheadings: Context; Literature Review; Method; Findings; Discussion; Conclusion; Recommendations; References.

### **The dissertation**

A dissertation is an extended piece of writing associated with Honours level projects or postgraduate study – Masters or PhD. The dissertation records the findings and conclusions of independent research into specific phenomena. The

typical dissertation structure is like that of a formal report, but it has an extended literature review and method sections – and is written discursively like the essay.

### **The presentation**

A presentation is a talk of a set length, on a set topic – to a known audience. It is similar in structure to the essay – but is supported by audiovisual aids (sounds or visuals that enhance your message) and normally finishes with a question and answer session. The purpose of the presentation is usually to demonstrate the student's subject knowledge and their oral communication skills.

### **The portfolio**

The portfolio can combine written, multimodal or oral elements – it can be an actual or an online portfolio. The student is given different pieces (or patches) of work to do across the course – and typically has to select which pieces to finally submit in the portfolio at the end. Sometimes the patches are formative or developmental and you will receive feedback showing you how to improve your work so the final pieces in the portfolio have been refined by you over time.

### **The project – or problem based learning**

Sometimes, rather than an essay or report or even a developmental portfolio, you will be set a project or problem to engage with and resolve – over a whole module or a large part of one. The idea behind these assignments is that they are very active and engaging. They set you an authentic task that you see the purpose of – and you will enjoy solving the problem. If you enjoy problem solving, look for modules that assess this way.

### **The exam**

The exam is designed to test learning. Students use information learned on a course with respect to new questions and in a time limited way. Exams can be open or closed book, time or word length limited, or other variations. Always know what sort of exam you are preparing for (and which room it is being held in).

### **The digital artefact**

As universities embrace the digital age, some tutors are setting digital rather than written or oral assignments. Here students are asked to produce a

multimodal artefact that reflects on the course in some way. This could involve making a podcast, an animation, a video essay or a teaching resource that could be used with other students. If you are set a task such as this, discover whether there are certain tools you have to use and investigate just how creative you are allowed to be.

## **The literature review**

The literature review can be part of a dissertation – though some courses set a literature review as an assignment in its own right. The literature review demonstrates your exploration and understanding of the most up-to-date literature and research in the area you are studying. The process of reading for and writing up a literature review is designed to enable you to gain deep knowledge of the key issues and debates on a topic. Typically when writing a literature review you do not summarise what you have read item by item, but you pull the reading together topic by topic. Your literature review becomes your analysis of the most up-to-date and relevant knowledge-claims in your area and becomes a measuring stick against which you can compare your research findings. Detailed literature reviews are required for dissertations – shorter ones might be required in reports.

## **The reading record**

A reading record is not an essay or a literature review. It is designed to be an annotated account of the reading a student has undertaken on a particular course. The annotations are not supposed to be descriptive – ‘This book was about...’ – but analytical: ‘This text is key for this topic outlining the major theoretical perspectives of...’ or ‘This text could be used to support the arguments of...’ or ‘However, Y and Z would take issue with the following aspects of the major arguments...’. A tutor might set a reading record to test that students are reading in an active and analytical way, thus your annotations should demonstrate your understanding of the text and its relationship to the key debates in your subject.

## **The annotated bibliography**

An annotated bibliography is a condensed version of the reading record. A conventional bibliography records Author (Date) *Title*. Place of publication: Publisher, in alphabetical order, by author’s surname. In an annotated bibliography, you also note down information on a text’s strengths or weaknesses, on how useful it was and why in relation to the aims and learning outcomes of the module and the key theoretical debates of the discipline.

**TIP**

- Whatever the assignment, open a folder and write an assignment question on it at the start of the module – add notes to it as you go. When this assignment comes round, you have already started.
- Write the whole question out exactly as it is.
- Put the question in your own words and say it back to another student or a tutor.
- Free write before you read for the assignment.
- You are not looking for the one right answer that already exists – there are usually several ways of tackling a question.
- Be creative: brainstorm and question matrix all the key words.
- Make sure you do something about every word – don't leave any out.
- Add key words from the aims and learning outcomes of the module – research these as well.
- Write your 'favourite' paragraph first to get you started.
- Free write a conclusion to get an idea of where you want your answer to go – change the conclusion later.
- Write ideas on separate pieces of paper. Move these around to discover the best structure for the answer.
- Remember a reader who keeps saying, 'What if...?' and, 'So what?'

## Ten steps to assignment success

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We have looked at the *why* and the *what* of assessment, so let's now move on to *how* to prepare and write your assignments. We have broken this down into ten key steps to assignment success.

### Prepare

Start working on an assignment as soon as possible: week one or two of your course would be good. Open a folder or an A4 envelope for every module you do – and every question you have to answer. Open the folder early and put information in there. Start collecting information from week one. Brainstorm the question to develop lots of avenues for research. Read around each part of the question.

### Targeted research and active reading

Once you understand the question and know what you are doing, read actively and interactively, using your active reading technique and asking questions as

you go. Remember to get physical with the texts – mark them up, annotate, make comments and cross-reference. You will get much more from your reading when you do this. Don't look for the whole answer to the question in any one piece of reading – typically the authors have not written their chapters or articles to answer your assignment question! This is why we have to 'read around the subject' – we are looking for ideas for different parts of an assignment in each bit of reading. Record each source on the outside of the envelope: Author (Date) *Title*. Place of publication: Publisher... and you will build up your bibliography as you go.

### **Write – read – write**

Do not wait until you have finished reading to start the writing. Free write to get started. As you are reading and making notes, also draft possible paragraphs for your assignment – leave gaps in the writing. For example, you start to write a paragraph, but you have not found a reference yet so you could put in: NEED TO FIND A REF or just REF or ... . This tells the brain you have not finished that paragraph yet and it will keep thinking. Know that you are not looking for one right answer – you are writing to learn: your thinking about the question should change as you write, read, write.

### **Settle on a first draft**

After some time spent struggling to write, read and write – settle on a first draft. You might want to write a conclusion that tells you where the piece is going – you might desperately want to write an introduction. That is okay – but be prepared to change these when the writing has finally settled. It is not until the final draft that you know exactly what is in the essay – this is why it can be much easier to leave the introductions and conclusions till the end.

#### **TIP**

Introductions are important. They are the first thing the reader sees. A good introduction sets the reader up to understand and enjoy your essay. They can be brief and punchy – setting the scene, giving context. They can be creative – using catchy or provocative statements. A lot depends here on the subject you are taking and the tutor who is marking your work. Is there room for creativity and taking risks? In some subjects there is no room for irony or catchy phrases.

## **Leave it!**

Once you have achieved a first draft you feel great, your answer is great, your friends are great and life is great. Of course they are and so are you! But still, put the work to one side and leave it for a while.

This will give you some distance and it allows your brain to close the gaps you left in the writing. The brain likes closure and will not be happy with all the gaps in your assignment. If you allow yourself to take a break in your writing process you are allowing the brain to close the gaps – you are working with your brain.

## **Review, revise and edit: Struggle to write**

This is the stage where you go back over your work and struggle to make it the very best it can be. Here you have to re-read what you have written – and change it. Sometimes we have to change everything – and nothing of our first draft gets left. This does not matter. We are writing to learn, so our thoughts *should* change as we write. Remember we would never get to a good version if we did not go through our rough versions first.

Be prepared to draft and redraft your work. Don't even try for perfection on a first draft – it is bad technique and it can actually stop you writing anything. On your first review, you might read from the beginning of your essay and improve, polish, as you go. After that, try to concentrate on one paragraph at a time – in any order.

## **Proofread**

At some point you have to stop and say: 'This is the best I can do'. Sometimes we are never really 'happy' with our work, but there still comes a time to stop and move on to the next task. At this point you have to proofread the final version.

Proofreading is not editing – you are not looking to make huge changes to what you have written, you are going through looking for mistakes, grammatical errors, tense problems, spelling mistakes or typographical errors.

## **Hand it in – celebrate**

You should now be ready to hand in your work on or before the deadline. And remember that deadline. On most university programmes a late submission is awarded an automatic fail or a capped low mark. This is serious. Save your work to the cloud and a memory stick, email it to yourself. Make absolutely certain it cannot be lost! Then celebrate.

### **Getting it back: Think first**

When we get our work back, we look at the grade, feel really happy or really unhappy, throw the work to one side and forget all about it. This is not a good idea. What is a good idea is to review what you have written, and see what you have done well. So, before you do get your feedback, review your assignment for yourself – and work out how well you think you have done against the assessment criteria – you might like to assess what grade you think you will get. As an active learner, you should take control of your own work and judge it for yourself and not just rely on the tutor’s opinions.

#### **TIP**

Start to do this self-evaluation before you hand the work in!

### **Getting it back: What the tutor said**

At the same time, you should also utilise the feedback/forward you get from the tutor. Be prepared to use that guidance to write a better essay next time. We used to recommend students do a SWOT analysis of their work, looking for strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. However, too often they only looked at their weaknesses – and forgot about their strengths. Now we recommend you engage in a process of appreciative inquiry: What did I do really well? How can I do even more of that in my next assignment? What would a dream assignment look like? How can I make that happen? Make this conscious – make notes – do something with this thinking!

#### **TIP**

- Allow plenty of time for drafting and redrafting an assignment – and plenty more for revising and editing.
- Revising and editing is where you go back and put in the ‘best’ word, the verbs... all those things that you left out to make sure that you kept writing.
- Revise to shorten long sentences so you make clear, effective points.
- Check the ‘links’ between paragraphs – make sure they still connect with each other.

*(Continued)*



- Index surf to brush up your paragraphs. That is, once you have used your in-depth reading, go over the paragraphs and see if they could be improved with a further reference – then index surf things you have already read to see if there are other articles to dip into – and refer to them as well.
- Read your assignment aloud – listen out for breaks in the rhythm and flow. Smooth out the writing.
- If it is a presentation, rehearse in front of a critical friend.
- Swap assignments with a friend – proofread each other’s work.
- Cover the assignment with paper and proofread one sentence at a time.
- Proofread from back to front.
- Proofread from the bottom of the page to the top.
- Proofread for one of ‘your’ mistakes at a time.
- Proofreading gets better with practise.

## ACTIVITY

### Talk yourself through an assignment question

Imagine the question: ‘Evaluate the usefulness of pattern notes to a student’ – how would you talk your way through that? (Don’t forget to tape yourself doing this!)

What about:

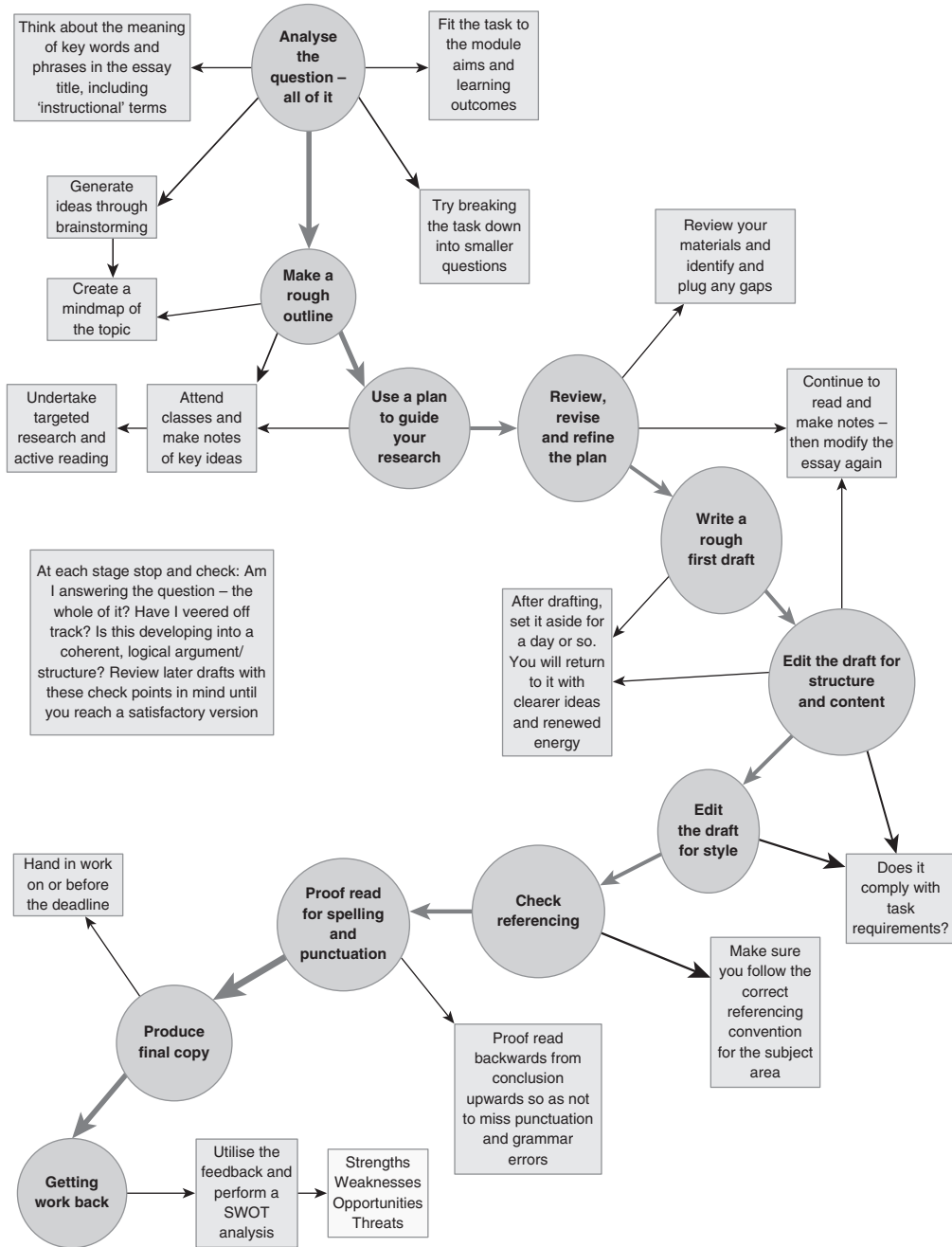
‘So – I am supposed to evaluate the usefulness of pattern notes to a student! Okay – so first I might have to find out what it means to be a student – what do they do – what do they need? Are all students the same? Would the same things be useful to all students?’

Perhaps I’ll need to define ‘useful’ or offer several definitions: useful could be – saves time, makes you happier, helps you understand the material, helps you learn the material, helps you get better grades – all these things could be useful. I might sketch them all in – then choose one and say which one I’m writing about and why – and find some evidence!!

Pattern notes: I’ll have to say what they are. I wonder if I’ll have to compare them with other notemaking systems? It’s not in the question – but that often helps to make good points. How many words have I got? Hmmmm 1500 words. Not enough – perhaps just sketch-in that there are active and less active notemaking strategies (saying why active is good) – pattern notes are good non-linear notes – and Cornell are good linear notes? Then I’ll have to argue why pattern notes offer something useful to students.’

**Discussion:** Can you see how this ‘talking through’ of all the different parts of the question is helping this student to take control of the whole question? This process is making sure that nothing will be left out. It is a really active way of engaging with the question... and, as you know, the more active we are in our learning, the more we will learn.

## UNIVERSITY ASSESSMENT AND HOW TO SUCCEED



**Figure 10.1** The assignment journey

## Overcoming writing blocks

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‘I just loved having other people in the room working at the same time as me. I did not know that about myself at first, I discovered it at university in a writing blocks session. I work in the library more now, this encourages me.’

Writing for assessment can occasionally zip along, ideas flowing with a sense of creativity and wellbeing. More normally, writing is fraught with tension, stress and fear of failure. The stress of writing means we tend to approach academic writing in strange and unhelpful ways. We hardly write at all – and then always ‘at the last minute’, with little preparation and no practise. In this way our all important academic writing is done under the most stressful of conditions and, strangely enough, it continues to be stressful.

Writing involves drafting and redrafting your work and it is a struggle. We struggle to understand the question. We struggle to use a whole range of differing arguments and opinions in our own writing. We struggle to shape our ideas to answer a specific question. We struggle to make our draft work better and better. It is in the ‘struggle to write’ that learning happens. And we do mean struggle. As the typical author says, ‘Writing is easy – you just sit and stare at a blank piece of paper until your eyeballs bleed!’ Writing is hard for everyone. Not just you. Once you accept that, you realise writing is difficult because it is difficult. There does not have to be anything wrong with you if you are finding it difficult also.

In this section we explore practical activities designed to help us write, to overcome our writing blocks and to develop confidence in writing. We start by exploring some positive writing strategies.

### TIP

- Read journal articles – try to find the *rhythm* of your subject – how the writing looks, feels and sounds.
- Build your self-confidence and self-belief, practise your positive thinking, say: I am enjoying this assignment.
- Get creative – before you write, make a collage of your thinking about the question.
- In the first week of the course, read the questions and free write a bad answer. Now you know what you know – and what you don’t.

## Some positive writing strategies

‘A few students I knew created “headings” from different parts of the assignment question. They would make notes, add a reference or a quote under each heading... Eventually everything under one heading became a paragraph. When that was done they wrote a conclusion. After lots of correction the headings would be deleted and they’d print it off, read it again and make changes. Finally, they would write the introduction to finish off their work. It was a slow process but seemed to work for them.’

There are many different ways to start writing assignments – there are whole books on the subject. Here are a few strategies that have been proven to work with other people – try them out and see which ones work for you.

*Be big, bold and creative:* Writing the question in the centre of a large sheet of A1 paper is good. Circle the keywords in the question. Draw out lines from the keywords – one line or branch representing a possible paragraph. Free write more keywords under each branch. Draw pictures, stick on images cut from magazines. Make the paper a bold and imaginative engagement with the question. Use this thinking to seed your work on the assignment.

*Paragraph patterns:* Put each keyword from a question in the centre of its own A1 sheet. Branch out and put more keywords, pictures and doodles around that. Add points, names, theories and ideas from your lecture notes. Follow all this up with focused reading. Then do some writing. Then read some more.

*Use the question:* It can be useful to use words and language from the question and the learning outcomes in your writing – especially in the final sentence or sentences of your paragraphs. Here you show the tutor you are on task and understand the question set – and you are demonstrating this all the way through your writing and not just in the introduction and conclusion.

*Practise brainstorming:* Sit down with a list of questions. Give yourselves ten minutes to brainstorm and plan each answer. Choose the question whose brainstorm you like the most – but use ideas from the other brainstorms in your answer.

*Use the paragraph questions:* When writing, write to answer the questions a reader would be asking: What is this paragraph about? What exactly is that? Tell me more? What is the evidence – and what does it mean? So what?

*Speed write paragraphs:* Once you have an assignment plan, sit down and use the paragraph questions to prompt your paragraph writing. Write quickly – put in lots of blah blah or ‘I need to find a source here’... Use the first rough drafts to help you choose more material to read. Plug those gaps.

*Do not aim for perfection:* Write something, anything... then change it.

*Practise writing:* Do not just write for assessment – get into the habit of writing something every week, every day. Blog about your learning – keep a learning journal – produce a reading record.

*Group writing:* Form a group with some friends that you trust. Ideally, meet once a week as a writing group and get writing. Each person is free to write about something different – but writing together helps you all stay motivated and engaged. At the beginning of a writing session everyone says what they are working on – at the end everyone says what they accomplished.

*Blog to learn:* Write happy, interesting and informative blogs about your learning – stressing again here, blog with kindness and respect. You will find you are developing a point of view and an authorial voice – you have something to say that you want people to read. You are also learning your subject as you write it. Students of ours who have blogged their learning find their assignment writing and their grades improve – dramatically.

‘I didn’t understand why we were blogging at first – and I found it really difficult... Then I “got it”. I write about what I’ve done in class, I write about the reading. Suddenly my writing is getting better – and I actually enjoy it.’

## ACTIVITY

### Free writing for assignments

‘I’ve tried loads of things to get me writing. Wheel diagrams when I was a first year. I’ve made lists. I’ve done free association. I’ve talked out loud. I’ve made pattern notes. There is also specialist software (Inspiration) to use – and the old fashioned scribbling down of ideas.’

Free writing is a bit like brainstorming. However, rather than looking at and responding to a question word by word in notes, in free writing you read the question and then write briefly in a ‘stream of consciousness’. Free writing can really surprise you, often revealing that you know more about a topic than you previously thought. Practising free writing can help you develop a writing habit – and when you write more – your writing improves. Try these free writing activities:

*Free write on your assignment questions:* As soon as you get them, just sit down and write something when you see the question. Do not try to get it right, just write. Use free writing to help you understand your course – and your reading.

*Free write after every lecture:* Sum up the main points. Write about how the ideas in the lecture will help with your assignment. Put the main arguments in your own words.

*Use writing prompts:* Collect postcards – or make your own index card collages – use these to prompt your free writing on assignments.

*Blog about Peter Elbow:* Search YouTube for Peter Elbow videos on writing, free writing, spelling, punctuation and grammar. Check out his ideas, then recommend free writing to other students.

*Give yourself permission to be a bit messy:* Often we look at an essay question and think we should know the answer. This gets us into so much trouble. The question is an ideas generator – not an answer. When starting work on your next assignment, give yourself permission to get things wrong – to be a bit messy in your writing – and free yourself up to learn.

*Two pieces of paper:* Free write around an assignment question with two pieces of paper (try doing this for just ten minutes the first go). On one piece write the answer to the question – on the other write the reasons why you are not writing. At the end – have a look at all the writing and work out: 1) What emotions were getting in the way of your writing; 2) What habits were getting in your way (checking the spelling, the grammar, the tense?); 3) What useful ideas were in your free writing. Now do something about all of them!

**Tip:** Sometimes having the two pieces of paper does the trick – it gives you space to vent, and then you can work on the assignment with a clear mind.

**Discussion:** Needing to be in control and perfect all the time actually stops us from learning – it definitely stops us from writing. Free writing can be messy – but it can generate loads of good ideas for you to follow up and develop. Give it a go.

What other students have said:

- When we first started free writing I didn't get it at all. What's the point? Then I realised that I could just let myself go. Things started to happen. I do it with all my assignments now.
- When we did that free writing every week, I got the best mark I've ever got for an essay.
- All the free writing helped me to take control of the module. I think it helped me be more creative.
- When I did the weekly writing, I finally understood why I was reading!

## Summary

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We have considered the what, why and how of assessment – arguing that the assessment *process* is part of active learning where the *products* provide tangible evidence of your work. We discussed formative and summative assessment and the purpose of feedback/forward and we stressed the heuristic aspects of assessment. All the reading, thinking, discussing and struggling you do to produce an assignment is powerful active learning.

We discussed the most popular forms of assessment at university from the essay to the reading record, the report to the digital artefact – asking you to think through what opportunities there are for you to shine in each different format.

We moved on to our ten steps to successful assignments strategy, that moved from very active preparation to detailed and thoughtful engagement with the feedback that you receive – for all feedback should also feedforward to your next assignment.

We concluded with overcoming writing blocks and free writing because we want you to get into a writing habit. Our fear of writing is often our worst enemy – but getting into a writing habit helps us overcome this fear... we write... and our writing improves.

We hope that you now feel less apprehensive and more confident about writing generally. Yes, writing is a struggle – but that is because it is meant to be an active learning process, so it takes effort. At the same time, this process gets easier if we can overcome our fears and get into a writing habit. Your academic writing will get easier the more you do it – so do it.

## FURTHER READING

There is freely available online (at: <https://prism.ucalgary.ca/handle/1880/113457>) our staff-facing textbook – Abegglen, S., Burns, T. & Sinfield, S. (2021) *Supporting Student Writing and Other Modes of Learning and Assessment: A Staff Guide*. Calgary: University of Calgary – which contains many activities for staff to undertake with their students, and that you might like to try yourself when approaching your assignments.

## ACTIVITY

### Rich writing

Rich or slow writing is a different approach to the quick stream of consciousness approach of free writing. Here, instead of swiftly dashing off a response, you sit with something for an hour – you make yourself slow down and be with just one thing, and then you write something short and pithy. Have a go at this rich writing – and of course, think about how you might use the strategy in your studies.

- Choose an object or a picture or a photograph in your home or in an art gallery. Sit with it for one hour – just focusing on it and being with it.
- Do not let anything outside of this activity interrupt your hour. You can make notes, doodles or draw pictures in your hour – but no conversations, no phones, no googling, no checking your accounts...
- After one hour, write just 300 words on your chosen artwork or object – using your notes. Be strict and only write 300 words.
- Think about that experience.
- Reflect on how to use this experience to improve your academic writing.
- Once you have reflected on this writing experience, blog about it – sharing a picture of your artefact and sharing your writing and your thoughts about how any student could utilise the strategy in their own learning.

(For more on rich or thick writing and other creative strategies, check out: Bransford, J. (2012) *Draw It with Your Eyes Closed: The Art of the Art Assignment*. New York: Paper Monument.)