SMARTER STUDY SKILLS

HOW TO WRITE FOR UNIVERSITY: ACADEMIC WRITING FOR SUCCESS

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ALWAYS LEARNING

PEARSON

HOW TO WRITE FOR UNIVERSITY

Keeping on track

Having worked out your timetable, you need to make sure that you follow it. You need to be firm with yourself so that you do not over-run the time allocation in certain areas. For example, close to the end of the process, students of every level are often found to be looking for 'just one more book' in the hope that it will provide that extra piece of information that will push up the grade on the work. It is better to draw a mental line and work with the material you have and apply this to your own thinking and analysis of the issues. If you 'overspend' time on collecting the material, then that will reduce the time that you can spend on other aspects of producing the final copy to a good standard.

WORKING FROM THE MATERIAL

After **Step 4**, the main activity of gathering information normally gives way entirely to processing information, although you may find that you revisit the resources at later points to confirm facts or find new information. When processing information, you need to apply your understanding of your reading to the task you have been set. To do this, you need to understand what you are being asked to do by analysing the wording and meaning of the task instructions – **Step 5** in the 12-step process.

To understand the task, you need to break the instruction down into its component parts by asking yourself the following questions:

- **What's the *instruction?*** Many assignments are not questions but framed as commands introduced by an instruction word. It is important to interpret these instruction words properly (Table 8.2).
- **What's the *topic?*** This will clarify the context of the discussion you will need to construct.
- **What's the *aspect of the topic?*** This will help you define a more specific focus within the wider context and so define the relevant areas of research and reading.
- **What *restrictions* are imposed on the topic?** This will limit the scope of your research, reading and discussion.

Example assignment analysis

Task: 'Assess the importance of post-operative care in the rehabilitation of orthopaedic patients.'

Instruction: assess (= decide on the value or importance)

Topic: care (as in health care)

Aspect: importance (not the cost or any other aspect)

Restriction 1: post-operative (only post- not pre-operative care)

Restriction 2: rehabilitation (only the recovery phase and not the earlier phases)

Restriction 3: orthopaedic patients (only those and no other category)

Table 8.2 shows a range of typical instruction words, with definitions for each one. You should make sure you know what's expected of you when any of these instructions are used, not only in terms of these definitions but also in relation to the thinking processes expected (Ch 11). However, always take the whole task or question into account when deciding this.

Generally, instruction words in Table 8.2 fall into four categories, although this grouping may vary according to the context. The information box defines these instruction word categories in broad terms, and suggests differences in the approach you can take to tackling assignments that will dictate how you need to organise the information in your written submission.

Instruction word categories

One way of categorising instruction words is by looking at what they ask you to do:

Do – create something, draw up a plan, calculate

Describe – explain or show how something appears, happens or works

Analyse – look at all sides of an issue (there are often more than two)

Argue – look at all sides of an issue and provide supporting evidence for your view.

Table 8.2 Instruction words for assignments and exams. These words are the product of research into the frequency of use of the most common instruction words in university examinations. The definitions below are suggestions: you must take the whole question into account when answering.

Instruction word	Definition – what you are expected to do
Account [give an]	Describe
Account for	Give reasons for
Analyse	Give an organised answer looking at all aspects
Apply	Put a theory into operation
Assess	Decide on value/importance
Brief account [give a]	Describe in a concise way
Comment on	Give your opinion
Compare [with]	Discuss similarities; draw conclusions on common areas
Compile	Make up (a list/plan/outline)
Consider	Describe/give your views on the subject
Contrast	Discuss differences/draw own view
Criticise	Point out weak/strong points, i.e. give a balanced answer
Define	Give the meaning of a term, concisely
Demonstrate	Show by example/evidence
Describe	Provide a narrative on process/appearance/operation/sequence …
Devise	Make up
Discuss	Give own thoughts and support your opinion or conclusion
Evaluate	Decide on merit of situation/argument
Exemplify	Show by giving examples
Expand	Give more information
Explain	Give reason for/say why
Explain how	Describe how something works
Identify	Pinpoint/list
Illustrate	Give examples
Indicate	Point out, but not in great detail
Justify	Support the argument for …
List	Make an organised list, e.g. events, components, aspects
Outline	Describe basic factors/limited information
Plan	Think how to organise something
Report	Give an account of the process or event
Review	Write a report/give facts and views on facts
Show	Demonstrate with supporting evidence
Specify	Give details of something
State	Give a clear account of …
Summarise	Briefly give an account
Trace	Provide a brief chronology of events/process
Work out	Find a solution, e.g. as in a maths problem

How should I respond to 'question words'?

Not all tasks are based on instructions; some do ask questions. For instance, they may include words such as 'How…?', 'Why…?' and expressions such as 'To what extent…?'. In these cases, you will need to think about what these mean within the do-describe-analyse-argue instruction hierarchy. One way to do this is to reword the question to assist your analysis of the task.

For example, consider the question: 'To what extent has the disposal of sewage effluence in rivers contributed to depletion of fish stocks over the last decade?'

This might be re-worded as: 'Outline the relationship between the disposal of sewage effluence in rivers and the depletion of fish stocks over the last decade'.

This would suggest a phased approach to organising the content of the answer to the original question (Ch 15).

You may already deconstruct questions, topics, assignments and other tasks subconsciously in this way, but there is value in marking these elements out on paper. First, it helps you to recognise the scope and limitations of the work you have been asked to complete. Second, it reduces the risk of producing a piece of work that waffles or strays from the point. Once you have gone through this quick process, you will be able to identify which resources or pieces of material are most suited to the task and so to your reading. Further discussion on the groups of instruction words follows in Chapter 15.

As you work through your reading and related note-making you will embark on **Step 6** of the 12-step process where you reflect more deeply on the topic. This will come about as you begin to be more discriminating about sources and the content they contain. As you move from basic texts to more specialised books or journal articles that give more detailed analysis, your understanding of the topic will expand. This may mean, for example, that you begin to build up, for example, a more informed picture of events, implications of a procedure or the possible solutions to a problem. What are you looking for? For instance, this could be facts, examples, theories, information to support a particular viewpoint (evidence) or counter-arguments to provide balance in your analysis of the topic. As you become more familiar with the issues, the easier it will be to think critically about what

you are reading (Ch 11) and consequently build your response to the task you have been set.

PRACTICAL TIPS FOR ORGANISING YOURSELF FOR WRITING

Explore the full range of material available. In the early years of university study, many students follow the same practices as they used at school, often with too much reliance on handouts and/or notes from a single core textbook. At university you will be expected to read more widely by identifying source material beyond titles given as a basic starting point. You may benefit from exploring your library by browsing in areas related to your studies. There may be a whole range of material that has potential to expand your reading and understanding.

Spend an appropriate amount of time reading. This is a vital part of the writing process, but you should recognise the dangers of prolonging the reading phase beyond your scheduled deadline as noted previously. Students may delay moving on to the planning and writing steps because they are uncomfortable with writing. Facing up to these next steps and getting on with them is much less formidable once you get started, so it's best to stick to your time plan for this assignment and move on to the next step in the planned sequence.

Conserve material. In the process of marshalling information for a writing task, you will probably obtain some interesting and potentially useful material that proves to be irrelevant to the current writing task. Keeping this information may help at a later date for further assignments or exam revision. This personal cache of information could be useful in revitalising your knowledge and understanding of the topic.

GO And now …

8.1 Practise categorising instruction words. Go to Table 8.2 and mark out all those instructions that would invite a response asking you to do something practical, describe, analyse or construct an argument.

8.2 Examine some of the assignment titles that you will have to complete in a selected subject. Taking the whole question into account, identify what type of approach is needed – doing something practical, describing, analysing or arguing. You may find that within the same question/task you will have to do some describing in order to analyse or argue. The key is to avoid devoting too much time to the descriptive element at the expense of analysis/argument. You could also apply this activity when revising by using questions from past exam papers.

8.3 Try creating the wording for a task in a selected subject for yourself. Think about the clarity of the wording of your task. Is it ambiguous? Is it unclear? Identify your topic, aspect and restriction(s). Reversing the student-examiner roles can sometimes be a helpful way of developing your understanding. This could be an excellent preparation for exams because it helps with anticipating possible exam questions and reflecting on how you would answer them. This can help to broaden the range of possible questions you could feel comfortable tackling in exams.