

Assignment types

Introduction

This guide will help you to:

- identify different types of assignment
- understand the structure of each
- have a better understanding of what you have to do to complete the different types of assignment

Essays

It's common to call a lot of different assignments an 'essay,' when in fact they are a report, a critical review, etc. A real essay usually follows this structure:

- 1. Introduction** – sets out the topic of the essay, establishing the question that will be answered. It also provides a small amount of background to the subject, defining any terms if necessary. Finally, it outlines what the different sections of the essay will be. Usually between 5-10% of the word count.
- 2. Main body** – here you put forward the information and arguments that help you answer the assignment brief. It should be organised in paragraphs. The order in which you put your points is up to you, but they must be presented in a logical structure which is easy for the reader to understand. Remember to cite all the sources you use to support your ideas.
- 3. Conclusion** – the conclusion summarises the key points from the main body, presents your answer to the original question, and may also discuss possible future developments in the area. However, do not include further examples or arguments that relate to the question. These should be in the main body of the essay. It should be a similar length to the introduction.

Reports

The names of the different sections of a report and their precise functions can vary according to the subject you're studying, but they roughly follow this structure:

1. **Abstract/Executive Summary (Business)** - a very brief summary of what was done and the conclusions you reached.
2. **Introduction** – gives less information about structure, and more about key terms, definitions, and the context of the research. This may include a section reviewing the relevant literature (this can be a separate section).
3. **Methodology** – the how and why of the research. May include experimental details, descriptions of any mathematical models used, etc.
4. **Results** – the most important information that was gathered by the research. Only highlights are presented, and the results are not explicitly discussed.
5. **Discussion** – a critical interpretation of the results, and discussion of their significance. Often refers back to the research context mentioned in the introduction.
6. **Conclusion** - a summary of the results of the research. This can include recommendations for future research and/or future action.

Presentations

When you prepare for a presentation, you need to know:

- what information you need to present to your audience
- what media you should use (e.g. PowerPoint, a flipchart, nothing)
- how long you have for your presentation.

Bearing this information in mind, write your script. Don't forget to signpost, telling the audience where they are in the presentation indicating when you've finished one section and started another – 'Now we've looked at [x], let's move on to [y].'

When you present avoid just reading from your printed script. If possible, bullet-point it on A6 index cards. Having to expand on short notes means you will sound more natural. It also allows you to look up when speaking and make eye contact with your audience – so you can be seen and heard.

Practice your presentation as realistically as possible. Stand up, imagine there is an audience in front of you or present it to a friend, running through the whole thing as if it were the real presentation.

In the real presentation, remember to keep your head up, and make eye contact with the audience. While talking, move around if possible, and gesture towards any visual aids so that they support what you're saying.

At the end, ask if the audience has any questions. If anyone has got a question, before you start to answer repeat or interpret their question so the rest of the audience can hear it.

Short answer questions

When tackling short answer questions, pay close attention to the key words – 'define,' 'describe,' etc., and follow those instructions. You may have a very limited number of words so don't include unnecessary information. Also, vary the length of your answer in each part of the question according to the number of marks available.

Critical reviews

You may be asked to review an article or book, summarising and then evaluating it using arguments and cited references. As with an essay, read the assignment question carefully.

- Start by giving the full reference for the work you're reviewing.
- In the introduction, give some context for the text, and then a summary of its main points.
- This is usually followed by a summary and evaluation of the text. How you structure this is up to you: if it's a short assignment it should be fine to summarise all the work and then evaluate it in a following section. However, you might decide it would be easier to understand if you divide up your summary of the text and evaluate each part as you go along.

Remember that in this context 'critical' does not necessarily mean 'negative'.

Annotated bibliographies

This comprises of a list of references from different sources, followed by a short summary of the main points of each source, which can include a critical evaluation.

- The references should be in the style used by your Department e.g. Harvard, APA, IEEE, etc.
- The summary/evaluation is quite short, usually about 150 words, although it can sometimes be longer.

- The evaluation addresses issues such as reliability, bias, how the source relates to others in the bibliography, and how it fits in with research you are doing, if this is relevant.

The contents of an annotated bibliography can vary a great deal, so clarify this with your tutor before starting.

Poster presentations

A poster is a visual report on work done by the presenter, usually as part of research in a particular field. A number of posters are displayed together, often at a conference, and with the presenter in attendance to answer questions.

The structure is often similar to a report, with sections like Introduction, Theory/Methodology, Results, and Conclusions. Illustrations, graphs and diagrams are used extensively to help explain the research, with text kept to a minimum.

Bear in mind the following:

- Text needs to be large enough to be read from a distance, and detailed enough to provide the key information (use bullet points)
- Graphs need to present the information clearly
- Space on the poster can improve clarity. Don't feel you have to fill every corner of the paper with information
- If you print it out yourself, don't use too much background colour – the ink can make the paper crinkly when it dries
- Check the size required well in advance. A2 is common, but larger is possible

Whilst the poster is a key part of the evaluation, your answers to the examiner's questions will also count. The first question will usually be 'what was your project about?', so have an answer ready for that, and prepare what you're going to say when describing the research in more general.

More advice from Academic Learning Support

For further study skills advice, and information on disability and specific learning differences such as dyslexia, enrol on the Learning Success Moodle page. Log into Moodle, go to tiny.cc/learningsuccess, and scroll down to click the enrol button.

To make an appointment for one-to-one study skills support:

- go to the Learning Success reception in the Student Centre (2nd floor, Northampton Square), or
- call us on 0207 040 0246