What is an academic piece of work?

**TIME**

Take TIME to write your assignment

- Writing an assignment takes time, more time than you may expect. Just because you find yourself spending many weeks on an assignment doesn’t mean that you’re approaching it in the wrong way.

- It also takes time to develop the skills to write well, so don’t be discouraged if your early marks aren’t what you’d hoped for. Use the feedback from your previous assignments to improve.

- Different types of assignments require different styles, so be prepared for the need to continue to develop your skills.

We’ve broken down TIME into 4 key elements of academic writing: **Targeted, In-depth, Measured** and **Evidence-based**.

**Targeted**

Your assignment needs to be **targeted**. It should:

- be focused on the questions and criteria
- make a decision
- follow an argument
Focused on the questions and criteria

- At Teesside, you’ll find your assessment criteria in your Module Handbook.

- If it’s not in the criteria, it doesn’t belong in your assignment. You won’t have enough space in your word count to cover it, and you won’t get any extra marks for it.
  - Criteria are there to guide you. They let you know what you should put into your assignment
  - You usually need to cover all the criteria to pass an assignment
  - Use the words from the criteria in your assignment to make it clear when you are covering them

- Your question or criteria will include keywords or ‘clue words’ – the verbs that tell you what you need to do in your assignment. As you develop through your studies, the keywords will change, from simpler terms such as ‘identify’ or ‘describe’ to more complex terms such as ‘critically analyse’ or ‘synthesise’. See http://libguides.tees.ac.uk/ld.php?content_id=14149964 for definitions of the more common terms.

Make a decision
If you are given a question, you need to provide an answer for that question, which means that your assignment needs a conclusion.

In planning your writing, it’s helpful for you to think where you are heading before you set out, so that everything you write can have that end-point in mind.

Follow an argument
You should take your lecturer on a journey to your conclusion, so that they can see how your case builds up through your assignment. This means that your assignment needs to have a logical structure. The WEED model for paragraphs (see p.11) can help you to develop this structure.
Your assignment needs to be **in-depth**. You should consider your questions and criteria thoroughly, thinking about all possible aspects, and including the argument both for and against different viewpoints.

### Identify topic areas
In order to begin this process, you should try to identify all the different topics that might come under your criteria. The aim at this stage is to have as many ideas as possible. It’s worth trying different methods so that you can find out what works best for you.

- Go back to your lectures and note down the key points within each lecture.
- Create a mind map for your ideas.
  - Software can help you do this, e.g. Mindmup ([https://www.mindmup.com](https://www.mindmup.com))
- Find a way of noting down your good ideas whenever or wherever you have them.
  - Carry a small notepad with you.
  - Use software such as Evernote ([https://evernote.com](https://evernote.com)) which can be linked up to your phone and your PC

The next stage is to group your ideas into themes, which become keywords for your research and sections within your assignment.

### Research
Your assignment will be based on research. Research provides:
- evidence for the ideas that you have already identified.
- new ideas that you may not have thought of
- new terms for your ideas, so that you can find additional results

Research is needed so that you can get different views, recognising that there might not be a right answer. Researchers may have different opinions on best practice or on what something is. It’s good to show these differing opinions in your work.

Your research should be based on books, articles or government reports. As your assignment should be in-depth, your research needs to be from sources that go into detail, not summaries. Often websites or guidance leaflets won’t give you enough theory to underpin practice. The reading list for your module should be a good first step in identifying relevant resources.

For help to carry out your research, see the libguide for your subject area ([http://libguides.tees.ac.uk](http://libguides.tees.ac.uk)), especially the section on how to find journal articles.
**Reading**

When you're reading academic research, you don't need to read everything you find from beginning to end. There are strategies you can use to help you to decide if something is useful, before you go on to read it in detail. For help on reading quickly, see the handout at [http://libguides.tees.ac.uk/ld.php?content_id=14149970](http://libguides.tees.ac.uk/ld.php?content_id=14149970)

**Plan your assignment**

When you've finished identifying your themes or topic areas, you can then plan your assignment. A plan is useful because it:
- ensures that you cover all criteria
- allows you to keep track of where you are
- reduces repetition

Don't feel that you have to wait until you've finished reading before you start to write. You might find it easier to work with smaller sections, writing them up as you go along.

We've included a couple of sample plans to give you an idea of what they could look like. But it's even better if you devise your own style that works well for you.

**Visual plan**

This plan comes from Anna Barker, a previous Royal Literary Fellow at Teesside. You could have a large version on a noticeboard and add post-its in different colours to each section. As it makes use of colour-coding, it may be helpful if you're a visual learner.
Linear plan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Word count</th>
<th>Key points</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 3 etc.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Dividing up the word count enables you to give all criteria equal weight.
- You could include a ‘Key points’ column to remind you how this theme fits in with the overall argument of your assignment.
- You could use the ‘Notes’ column to provide a link to key resources, or to give yourself ‘to do’ instructions, or to comment on how far you are with writing this section.

**Your conclusion**

Your conclusion should leave the reader with the feeling that you have explored all the issues around the assignment questions and criteria, and that you have come to a decision as to the most appropriate answer. A good conclusion should:

- be about 5-10% of the final word count. If your conclusion is only one or two sentences, then the end will be too abrupt.
- set out a summary of what you’ve discussed.
- present your overall argument or findings, explaining why your viewpoint is important. This argument should not come as a surprise to anyone reading your assignment, as all your writing should be leading up to it.
- include the implications of your findings, for example in practice
- refer back to the assignment question - this makes a good final sentence.
- NOT contain any new material whether that is new evidence or new ideas.
- NOT head in a different direction from the way you’ve been arguing your points through your assignment.

You can use phrases such as ‘In conclusion..’ or ‘To sum up..’ to introduce your findings.
Your introduction

Although you can think about your introduction at the planning stage, it’s actually best to write it last, when you’ve finished the rest of the assignment. An introduction needs to provide a kind of ‘menu’ for the assignment, to say what it contains. You’ll find it much easier to write the menu when you’ve written the assignment. The simplest way to do this is quite directly - by saying ‘This assignment will discuss such-and-such a subject’. Then you can set out the steps which the assignment takes.

A good introduction should:

- be about 5-10% of the final word count
- frame the subject, setting out the boundaries for your assignment. If you’ve decided to focus on one particular aspect, it’s good to let your lecturer know that in the introduction
- put the subject in context, for example giving definitions. This shows that you understand the topic that you’re going to discuss. Make sure that you use the terms from the criteria but don’t just repeat the criteria
- say what you are going to argue
- guide the reader, giving signposts as to what the assignment contains. This means that if you say you’re going to cover A, B and C, your assignment should talk about them in that order, so that the lecturer knows what to expect

Godwin (2014) recommends that you see the introduction and conclusion as two mirrors – everything you say that you are going to cover in your introduction should be followed up in your conclusion.
An academic writing style is measured. By this, we mean that it’s:
- cautious
- emotionally neutral
- formal – written in the third person and in full sentences

**Cautious**
As there are different viewpoints, you should be wary of sounding too definite. There might not be a correct answer, just a slightly more likely answer. Therefore, you should introduce an element of doubt into your writing. Rather than saying that something always occurs, it’s usually better to say that it may occur, or that it sometimes occurs. Words indicating caution include: “tends”, “suggests”, “could”, “may” or “possibly”. Examples of the different styles are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cautious ✓</th>
<th>Non-cautious x</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>These findings would seem to suggest</td>
<td>These findings were definitely caused by</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This apparent contradiction may be due to..</td>
<td>This contradiction was due to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A possible explanation may be …</td>
<td>The explanation is …</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Emotionally neutral**
You should be basing your argument on previous research and on evidence, so there’s no need to appeal to the emotions of your reader. This approach is very different from newspapers which try to stir your feelings, in order to make their articles appear interesting. Examples of the different styles are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emotionally neutral ✓</th>
<th>Emotive x</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A key strength of the research was</td>
<td>The research was fantastic because</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A limitation of this study was that</td>
<td>This study was ridiculous because</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Further research needs to be carried out</td>
<td>This research is hopelessly inadequate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Third person
Academic writing is usually written in the third person, avoiding ‘I’ or ‘you’. Your lecturer isn’t interested in your opinion— they want to read about what experts have said, and what this means. The one exception is when you’ve been asked to write a piece of reflective writing, which is much more personal, so will involve you talking about your own feelings and experiences. Advice on reflective writing is available from: http://libguides.tees.ac.uk/reflective

Examples of the different styles are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Third person ✓</th>
<th>1st or 2nd person x</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>This essay will consider</td>
<td>In this essay, I will consider</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It will include an explanation of..</td>
<td>You will see that I explain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It could be argued that..</td>
<td>We will be arguing that..</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A formal style
A formal style of writing is written in proper, full sentences not in shorthand or bullet points. A sentence makes sense standing on its own, as it expresses a complete idea. Complete sentences have two parts:
1. **Subject:** who or what is the sentence about?
2. **Main verb:** what is the subject doing? This verb needs to belong to the subject, so it has to fit in with whether the subject is singular or plural.

Incomplete sentences, also known as fragments, may be missing a subject or they might not include a matching verb. Examples of full sentences and fragments are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Full sentence ✓</th>
<th>Fragment (incomplete) x</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>This essay will also focus on the nurse’s role and how this role can support decision-making.</td>
<td>Also a focus on the nurse’s role and how this role can support decision-making.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Therefore, this situation may lead to poorer outcomes.</td>
<td>Therefore leading to poorer outcomes.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It’s best if your subject and verb are close together near the beginning of the sentence, so that your reader doesn’t have to try hard to work out what you’re saying. For more advice on sentence structure, see Copus (2009).

Your lecturers will also expect that you include correct spelling and punctuation (for example in your use of apostrophes). There are lots of sites on the web which can help you (such as https://howtospell.co.uk and http://www.grammar-monster.com).
As academic writing is formal, you should avoid contractions such as there’s or it’s. Spell the words out in full e.g. there are or it is. You should also avoid slang expressions.

Examples of the different styles are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Formal ✓</th>
<th>Informal x</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The content is not limited to...</td>
<td>The content isn’t limited to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The important factors to consider are</td>
<td>The cool stuff about this is</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In summary, this essay has …</td>
<td>In a nutshell, this essay has ..</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

You’ll notice from these comments that this handout hasn’t been written in an academic style. We’ve deliberately chosen a less formal style, using contractions, and ‘you’, ‘we’ to make it friendlier, and easier to read.
For more examples of an appropriate writing style, see University of Manchester (2017).

![Image](image-url)

**EVIDENCE-BASED**

Your assignment needs to be **evidence-based**. You should:
- reference all the ideas in your work
- paraphrase your evidence
- apply critical thinking to your evidence

**Referencing**

We’ve already discussed how you need to carry out research for your assignment. It’s not enough just to do the research. You also need to reference it correctly to show that your assignment is evidence-based.

In the libguide for your subject area, you’ll find a tab called ‘How to Reference’. This web page provides help on referencing. If your subject area uses Harvard, you should follow the guidance in Pears and Shields (2016). There are lots of copies in the library at 808.027/PEA and there is also an online version available at [http://www.citethemrightonline.com](http://www.citethemrightonline.com)
Paraphrasing
As you incorporate your references into your writing, you need to summarise what the relevant authors have said, and put it into your own words. This skill is known as paraphrasing. It’s better to paraphrase than to use long quotations, as this enables you to show your lecturer that you’ve understood what you’ve read, and also to reword the evidence so that it fits in with the case you’re making. Long quotations will use up too many words, and are not well-regarded in academic writing.

To paraphrase:
1. check that you understand all the terms in the sentence or paragraph
   - Use a dictionary to look them up
2. put the book or article away so you’re not looking at it. Write a summary from your own understanding.
   - Can you change the order of the words?
   - Are there synonyms for any of the terms?
3. check against the original to make sure your version uses different words

For more help with paraphrasing see our libguide on referencing which is available from: [http://libguides.tees.ac.uk/referencing](http://libguides.tees.ac.uk/referencing), Godfrey (2016) or the ‘How to reference’ tab on your libguide.

Applying critical thinking
As you progress through your studies, you’ll be required to evaluate the quality of the evidence that you find. Even articles published in quality journals can be based on poor argument, illogical reasoning and limited evidence. This skill of evaluating literature is often described as critical thinking. For advice on what it means to be a critical thinker, see the support materials at: [http://libguides.tees.ac.uk/critical_thinking](http://libguides.tees.ac.uk/critical_thinking)

Students from School of Health & Social Care will usually be required to apply a more structured critical appraisal approach. You should have been taught how to do this as part of your modules, but there are also supporting materials at: [http://libguides.tees.ac.uk/critical_appraisal](http://libguides.tees.ac.uk/critical_appraisal)
Bringing it all together

Once you’ve found all your evidence, and have decided what to say in each section, you need to write it up as paragraphs. Each paragraph should be on a single topic, making a single point. A paragraph is usually around a third of a page. We find Godwin’s (2014) WEED model very helpful for constructing paragraphs.

W is for What.
You should begin your paragraph with the topic or point that you’re making, so that it’s clear to your lecturer. Everything in the paragraph should fit in with this opening sentence.

E is for Evidence
The middle of your paragraph should be full of evidence – this is where all your references should be incorporated. Make sure that your evidence fits in with your topic.

E is for Examples
Sometimes it’s useful to expand on your evidence. If you’re talking about a case study, the example might be how your point relates to the particular scenario being discussed.

D is for Do
You should conclude your paragraph with the implications of your discussion. This gives you the opportunity to add your commentary, which is very important in assignments which require you to use critical analysis.

So, in effect, each paragraph is like a mini-essay, with an introduction, main body and conclusion.

Finally
Allow yourself some TIME to proofread your assignment. You’ll probably want to proofread it several times.

You should read it through at least once for sense and structure, to see if your paragraphs flow. Check that your introduction matches the content of your assignment. You’ll also want to make sure that you’ve been concise in your writing style. As you only have a limited number of words, it’s important not to waste them. Watch out for repetition, and for words or phrases which aren’t adding anything to your argument.

You’ll then need to read it again to check for grammatical errors, typos and that your references are correct.
It’s best if you can create some distance from your assignment by coming back to it after a few days. It’s also often easier to pick out mistakes if you read your work aloud. For more advice on proofreading, see the handout at: http://libguides.tees.ac.uk/id.php?content_id=14149904

More help
Help with your academic writing is available from the Learning Hub in the library – see http://libguides.tees.ac.uk/learning_hub. We run drop-ins, workshops and one-to-one tutorials.

There are also Royal Literary Fellows at the University, who can offer you advice and practical assistance to students on all aspects of your writing. They are professional writers and not members of academic staff. More details about their service are available at https://www.facebook.com/rlfteesside

References


