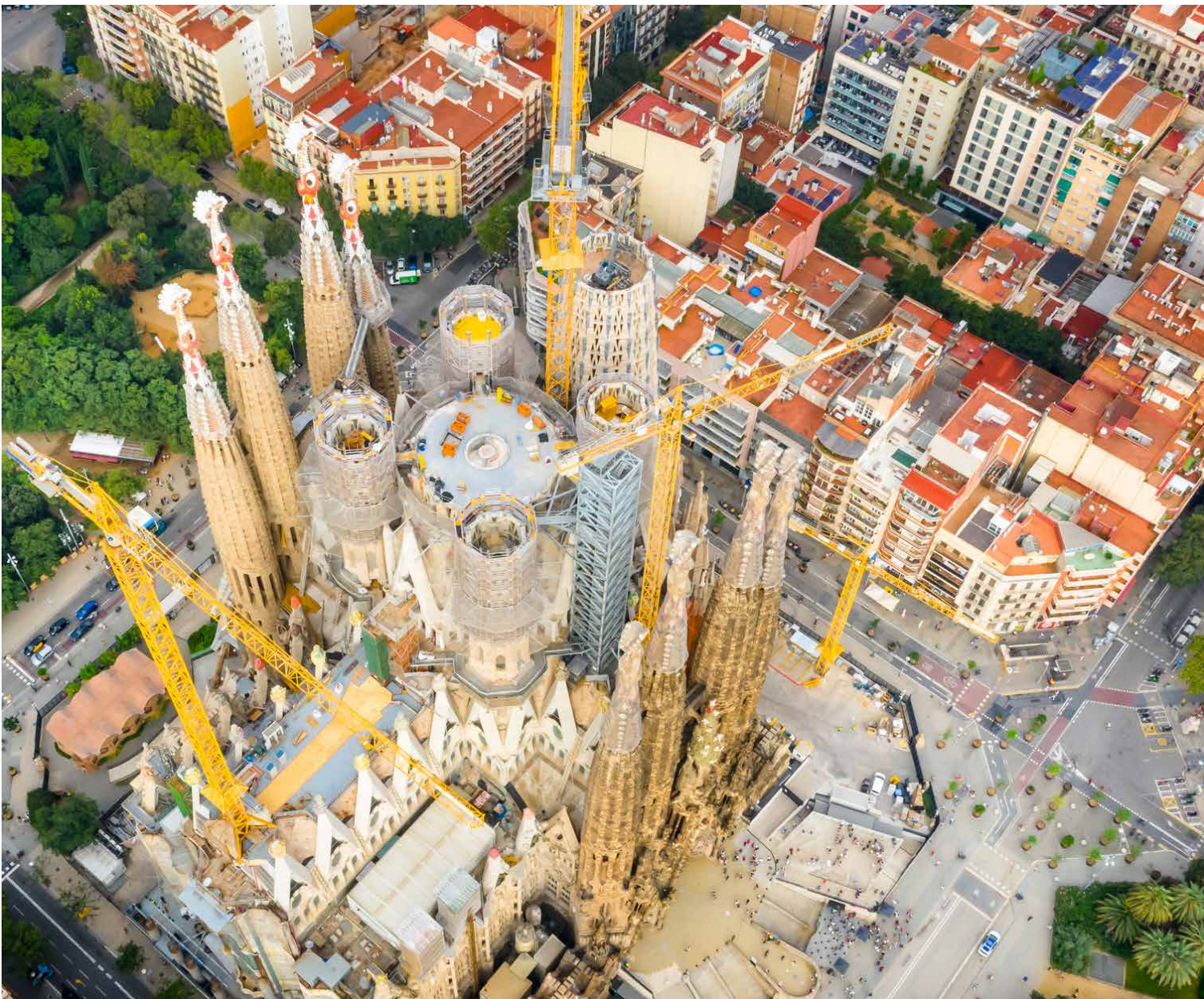


# PREPARING ASSIGNMENTS

## SKILLS FOR OU STUDY



Writing good assignments may not come naturally to many people, but you'll find useful tips and strategies in this booklet.

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# 1 TYPES OF ASSIGNMENT

University modules differ in the types of assignment required. You could be asked to complete any of the following:

- essays
- reports
- speaking assignments
- short-answer assignments
- computer-marked assignments
- end-of-module assessments.

We describe each of these briefly below, but your module materials give you a much better idea of what's required from you.

“ I feel I'm putting myself up just to be shot down. I'm really exposing my weaknesses. ”

You may feel a little lost when faced with your first assignment but don't worry, you're not expected to perform perfectly from the word go. Be patient and your skills will improve over time.

## 1.1 Essays

Essays have an introduction, a body and a conclusion, and you're usually given a word count to aim for.

The introduction (around 5–10 per cent of the word count) should outline the main subject of your essay, identify what your main argument or approach will be and the main points you'll cover. Restating the question title in your own words is often a good way of outlining your subject and helps you identify the major points involved.

The body of the essay (around 80–90 per cent) is where you set out your main argument. It should cover the points you've identified in a coherent and continuous 'story' from start to finish.

The conclusion (around 5–10 per cent of the word count) should summarise the points you've raised and tie up any loose ends in your argument. It should emphasise the key elements of your argument and it's often a good idea to refer again to the question title.

## 1.2 Reports

Reports are broken up into sections as listed below. Some types of report may require all these sections, or the question may tell you which to include. If you aren't sure what's required, then check with your tutor and your module materials.

### The sections of a report

- Title
- Abstract (or executive summary)
- Introduction
- Methodology
- Results (findings)
- Main body (discussion)
- Conclusions
- References and acknowledgements.

The abstract is a self-contained, brief summary of the report, describing its scope and main findings. This has to be written last as you need to complete the report before you can do this properly.

The introduction gives the purpose and scope of the report and there's often a set way of writing it. Outline the aim of the investigation or experiment and list the objectives or intended outcomes. Your introduction should also provide background information on why the investigation was undertaken. Finish with a sentence that leads into the next section of your report.

The methodology section, where required, is used to describe each step of the research you conducted. For example, did you conduct interviews or experiments, and how was this set up? How did you measure your results?

The results section describes the findings of your research clearly and concisely. Don't go into the implications of your findings here, that's covered in the main body of your report. Tables, graphs and diagrams are useful here.

The body of your report is the largest section and you may want to break it up into sub-sections, which you could number if it helps. However, there may be stipulations in your module about how you order the information. It may be presented:

- in chronological order
- as a statement of the problem, followed by an analysis of possible courses of action and ending with a recommendation
- as the pros and cons for a proposal followed by the recommended action.

However you organise the body of your report, you're expected to discuss your findings in detail by analysing and interpreting your results and explaining their significance.

The conclusion should be brief – it serves to sum up the main points of your report in the same way as it would in an essay-style assignment. No new information or points should appear in your conclusion.

## 1.3 Speaking assignments

Speaking assignments are used in language modules, where you're expected to record yourself speaking in the foreign language you're studying. You can make notes to refer to when you record your submission but do make sure you keep your delivery natural and not sound as though you're reading directly from a script. Try to use notes just to glance at from time to time to refresh your memory. Have some handy phrases ready, such as: first, secondly, by contrast, to conclude.

Write up or down arrows above those parts of a sentence where your voice should rise and fall – the intonation pattern.

Highlight key words or those you find difficult to say, and underline or highlight the parts of unfamiliar words or phrases to show where the stress or emphasis falls. For example, in English:

emphasis, patt<sup>er</sup>n

and in French:

touristes, table

Make your notes simple enough and your writing large enough to follow easily. Complex or detailed notes in small writing are difficult to use. Notes are more useful than full sentences.

Practise speaking your responses for the assignment before you record your voice. Make sure that you state your name, module, your personal identifier (PI) number and the time length of the presentation on the recording. Always check afterwards that the whole of your presentation has been successfully recorded.

Practise recording with different volumes to find out which setting works best and how far from the microphone you need to be while you record.

## 1.4 Short-answer assignments

Some assignments, or parts of assignments, are broken into several short sections. The length of the answer required could be anything from 30 to 500 words.

Short-answer questions are designed to test your:

- knowledge and understanding of ideas and facts
- skills in applying a process to data or information.

It may seem easier to provide short answers than long essays, but it's just as important to read the question carefully and to take account of the process words (see Section 3.2). It's all too easy to wander away from the subject matter or overshoot word limits by including irrelevant information. Be concise, keep to the point and stay within the word limit. But make sure to write a full explanation rather than list a series of bullet points.

The question set may involve manipulating some given data. You should demonstrate the thinking behind your answer by showing the logical steps you've taken to reach it.

You could include a diagram, table or graph to present information, which helps to keep the word count down.

## 1.5 Computer-marked assignments (CMA)

Some modules use computer-marked assignments (CMAs). The questions have multiple-choice answers and you usually mark a box next to the answer you think is correct. Although you're provided with the potential answers you'll find that CMAs can be just as challenging as other forms of assignment and need a lot of thought to find the correct answers.

Multiple-choice questions test your knowledge of factual aspects of the module. Some might ask you to choose a correct statement, others might give you some information and ask you to choose an answer to a related question.

The answers you're given to choose between sometimes vary only subtly, so you need to read the question carefully. If you find that you're stuck on a question, try leaving it for a while and come back with fresh eyes. But don't agonise for too long as each question probably carries only a few marks.

If your module contains CMAs you can find out more about how you complete and submit them in your module materials.

## 1.6 End-of-module assessments (EMA)

An EMA is used on some modules instead of a traditional exam. The main difference is that the EMA can be completed at home rather than in an exam hall on a set date. It's sometimes completed at your own pace and so can feel a little like an ordinary assignment. However, because it replaces an exam, you can't pass the module without doing it and your EMA score is one of the main factors used in determining your module result.

An EMA sometimes involves you doing a little research and very occasionally is collaborative.

The arrangements for an EMA do vary so make sure you refer to your module materials for details.

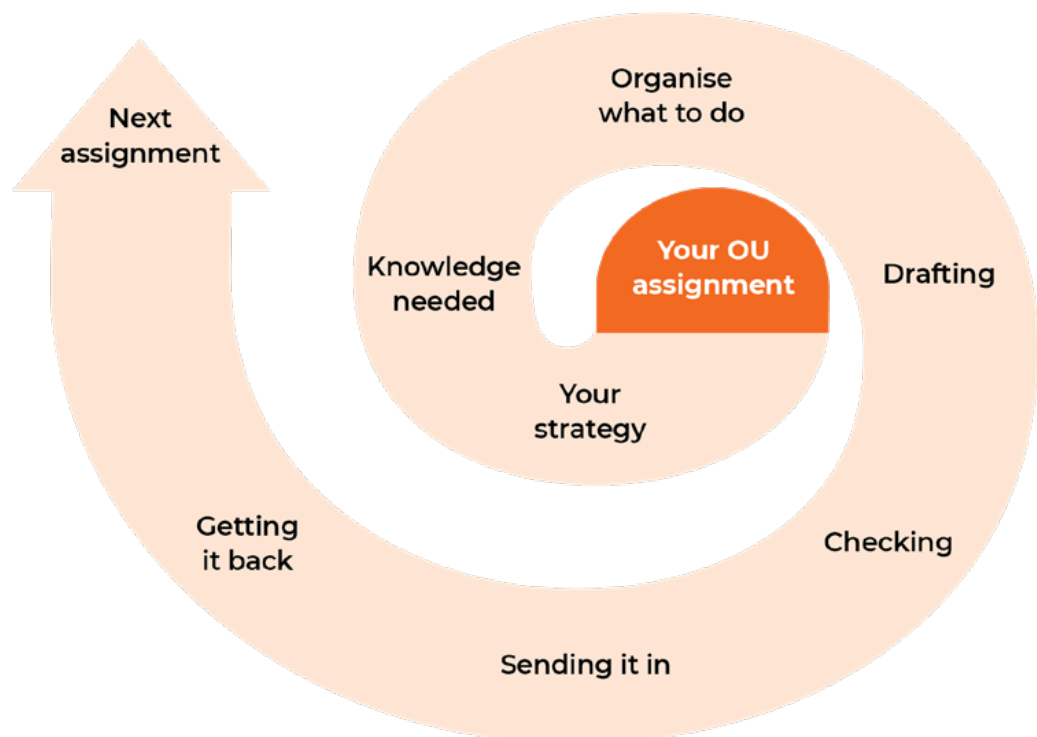




# 2

## THE STAGES OF PLANNING AN ASSIGNMENT

There's no single correct way of writing an assignment. However, there are some common principles and processes that will help keep you on track while you're putting it together (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1** The seven stages in planning your assignment.

Different academic disciplines require different types and styles of writing. Always read the assignment question and guidelines carefully and ask your tutor if you're not sure about anything.

## 2.1 Creating your own strategy

Creating your own strategy is all about knowing what the assessment requirements are for the module and deciding what result you want to get. If you know what's required to pass the module, and what's required to get a distinction, then you can decide what's feasible for you. Many students have busy lives and are time limited. They may therefore decide to do just what's necessary to pass the module.

Other students might want to devote more time to doing well in assessments.

Check your module calendar for assignment deadlines and start to think about allocating time to the work needed.

If you think you might have problems meeting the deadline for an assignment, then get advice from your tutor before the cut-off date.

## 2.2 Knowing what's needed

Make sure you know what's needed by checking your module materials to find out about your assignment. Take time to understand what the assignment is asking from you.

It may be that your assignment's divided into separate sections, each with its own marks, so you can see where to spend the most time. Make sure you know what's required of you and that you don't miss anything out. Keep to any word limit you're given as exceeding it may lose you marks.

“ I have no idea where to begin. The last assignment I wrote was when I was at school. ”

You can discuss any questions you have about the assignment with your tutor, student support team or your fellow students.

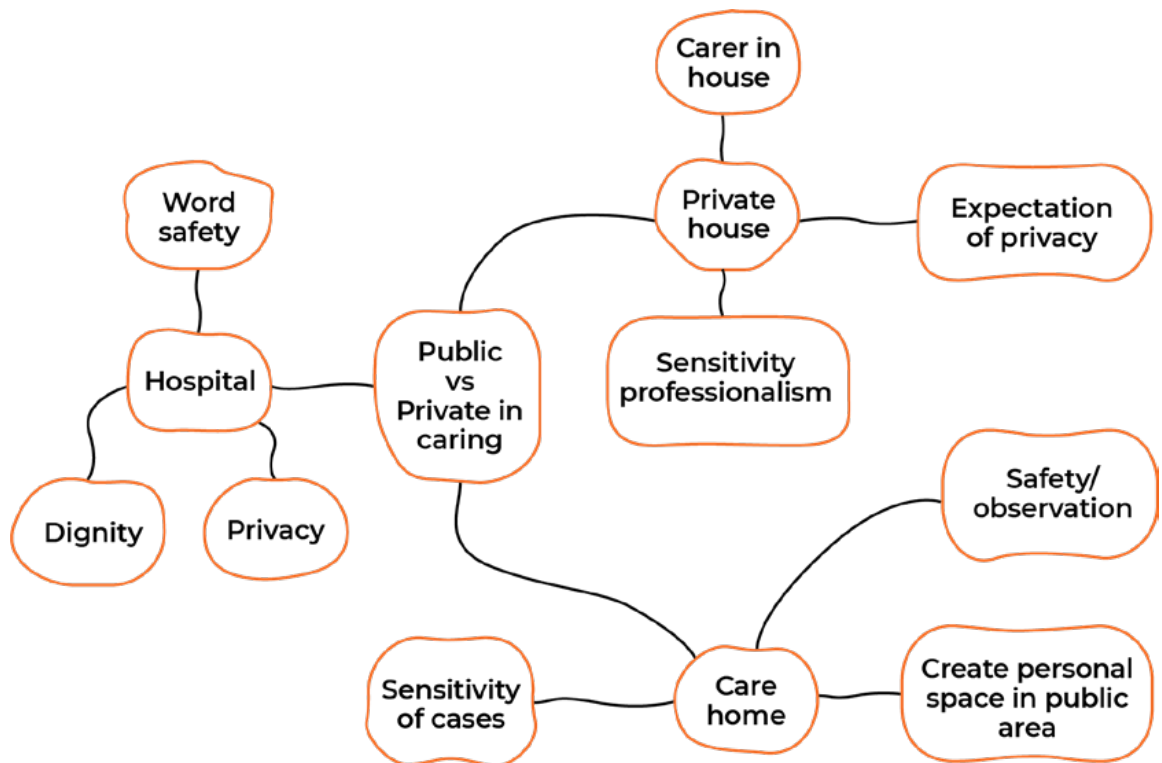
Make sure you keep the assignment task in view while you work; keeping your eye on the question helps keep you on track.

## 2.3 Organising what to do

As you gather your notes and relevant module materials you'll begin to make decisions about what to use in your assignment. While you're gathering ideas for your assignment don't hold yourself back. Jot down everything that comes to mind even though you may discard most later.

If you need to include quotes and evidence then make a note of the sources they come from (e.g., books or articles) as you select them, so you have the information for your reference section.

When you're ready to go into the detail of what you want to write, start by writing a list or drawing a mind map to organise your ideas into a plan. This helps you to decide what to include, what to exclude and the order the points should go in. Plans help you to keep to the question. Try comparing your plan to the assignment task to see if you're still heading in the right direction. Plans also make your drafting process easier as you don't need to keep everything in your head: instead you write it down in your plan (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2** Mind mapping can be a productive way of getting your ideas to flow

## 2.4 Drafting

Don't expect to write perfect text at the first go, you need to spend time going back over and rewriting or reorganising your paragraphs.

### First draft

If you're writing an essay, your plan should show how your argument will progress throughout your assignment. Your ideas should lead logically from one to another until you have built the overall thesis of your essay. To do this you need to put your ideas into a sequence.

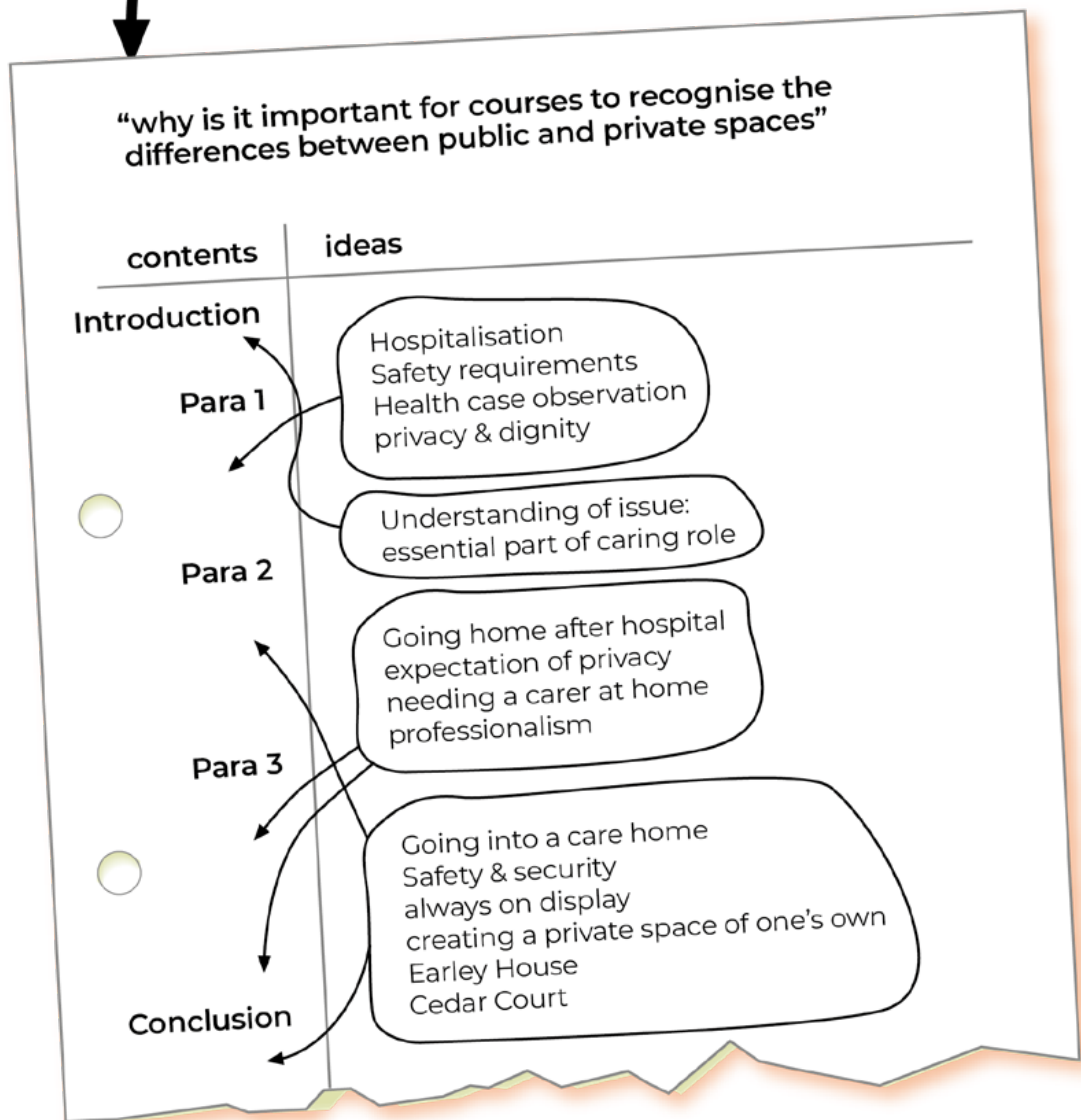
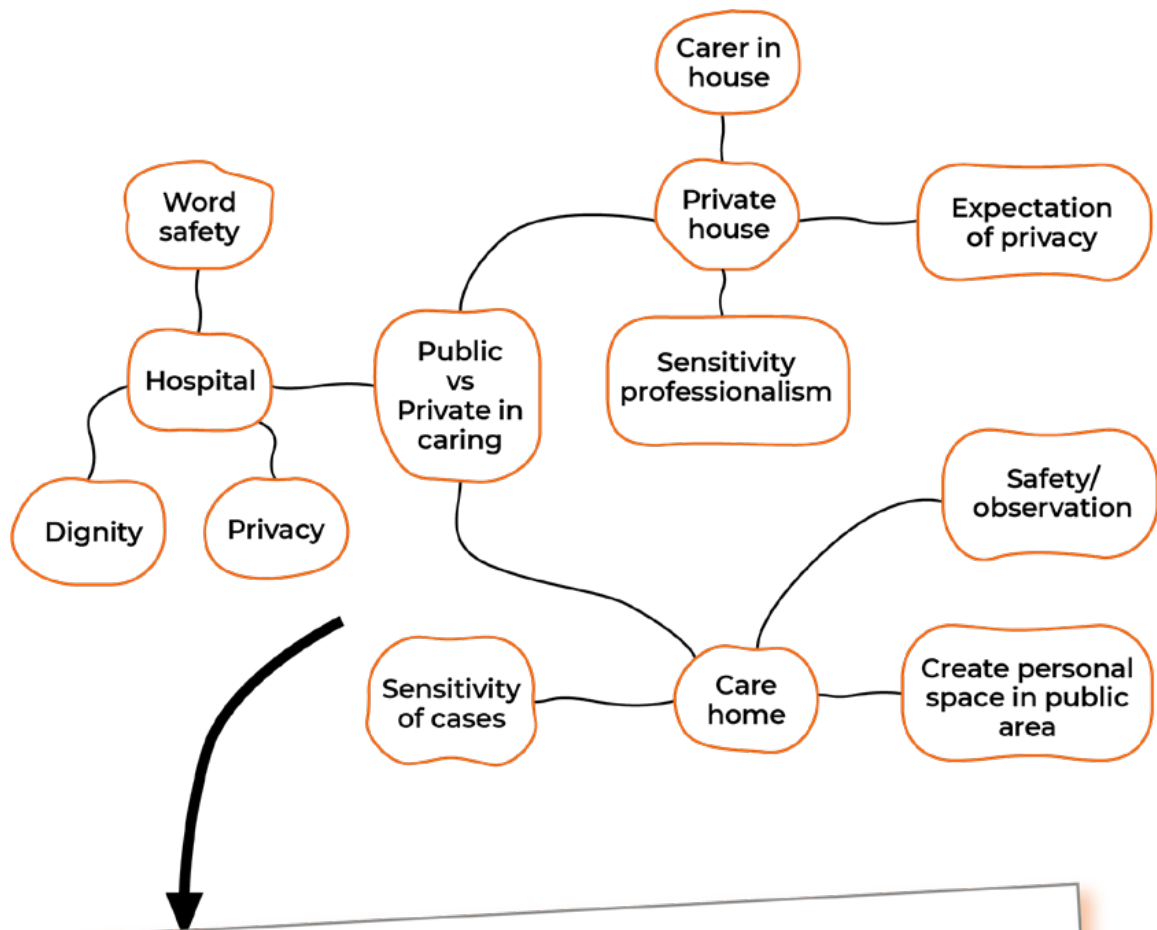
Try writing your ideas on the right-hand side of a piece of paper and map each one to a part of your essay (see Figure 3).

When you construct your paragraphs, make sure that you:

- describe the idea clearly
- give reasons for its relevance to the essay question
- provide evidence to back up the idea.

The evidence you use to back up your ideas could be direct quotes from books and articles or a simple paraphrase of someone else's argument or theory. In either case you must properly reference the source of the evidence you use.

Essays need a narrative flow. If the main points aren't linked to each other, your assignment will read like a list of unrelated points. Using linking words and phrases such as 'however', 'nevertheless', 'consequently' can help with this (see Section 5.1).



**Figure 3** Once you've come up with the ideas you want to write about, you need to sequence them into a logical progression

## **Second draft**

Once you've finished your first draft you'll have the main structure in place, but you'll probably find that a lot of further work is needed to get it into shape. While making your second draft you can check the logical order of your argument and change the order of some points if you need to.

At this stage you should also go through your references to make sure you haven't missed out the source details of any of your quotes or other supporting evidence.

Finally, an essential part of the drafting process is acknowledging when to let go! It's all too easy to continue to edit your assignment without seeing much benefit.

## **2.5 Checking**

Once you've finished drafting the content you should check your grammar, punctuation and spelling – they can help you improve your marks. Also make sure you've covered all the practical requirements given in your module materials, such as using the correct formatting and including your name and personal identifier (PI) number.

## **2.6 Sending it in**

Check your module materials to find out how you're expected to submit your assignment and the cut-off date for its receipt – make sure you allow enough time for it to be delivered.

## **2.7 Getting it back**

This is also an essential part of the assignment process. Part of the purpose of this is to help you improve your skills for the next assignment, so reading the feedback is important.

Although you'll first want to see what mark you've achieved, take some time to go through the feedback comments carefully to identify how you could improve your mark in future. If you've any queries about anything said in the feedback, ask your tutor.



# 3

## UNDERSTANDING THE QUESTION

Before you begin to tackle your assignment you must be sure you understand what it's asking you to do.

Every question has key words. 'Content' words tell you about the topics to be focused on and 'process' words tell what you must do with the content.

First look carefully at the question and identify the key words or phrases.

### 3.1 Content words

Here are some examples of content words in two assignment titles.

Compare your own education to date with that of one of your parents, one of your children (if you have any) or a friend from a different generation. Which points of comparison seem important to you and why?

Using examples from the case studies of Jean and Emma in Chapter 5 show how the local environment, including housing, can influence health and well-being.

## 3.2 Process words

These are the words in the question title that tell you what you should do with the subject matter. For example, you might be asked to **compare** two theories or to **justify** someone's ideas. Some of the most common process words are shown in the table below.

**Table 1** Common process words

Compare	Show the similarities and differences and, perhaps, reach conclusions about which is preferable.
Contrast	Focus on the differences, although you may also note that there are similarities.
Criticise/ Evaluate	Make a judgement (but don't give a personal opinion) about the merit of theories, or opinions, or about the truth of information, backed by a discussion of the reasoning involved and by evidence from the module materials.
Define	Give the exact meaning of a word or phrase. In some cases, you may need to give different possible definitions.
Discuss	Explain, then give two sides of the issue and any implications.
Explain	Give details about how and why it is.
Justify	Give reasons for a point of view, decisions or conclusions. Also mention any main objections or arguments against.

Here are those question titles again, this time the process words are in bold.

**Compare** your own education to date with that of one of your parents, one of your children (if you have any) or a friend from a different generation. Which points of comparison seem important to you and **why**?

Using examples from the case studies of Jean and Emma in Chapter 5 **show how** the local environment, including housing, can influence health and well-being.



As you can see content words are those that contain the 'content' of the question. The process words are those that tell you what to do with the content. Note that there's an implied process word in the final sentence of the first question but the question's essentially asking you to explain why you think the points of comparison you've chosen are important: 'Explain which points of comparison seem important to you and why?'



# 4

## INTRODUCTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

### 4.1 Introductions

The length of your introduction should be in proportion to the length of your essay at between 5–10 per cent of the total word count. Try to keep to one paragraph, especially if the word limit is under 1000 words.

The job of an introduction is to identify the main question or issue and define the key words or terms. You should highlight any major debates that lie behind the question and signpost the stages of the content or the argument.

If you write the introduction before you start, it's a good idea to check and revise the wording for accuracy after you've written the first draft.

For report-style assignments, there's often a set way of writing the introduction. The aim of the investigation or experiment should be outlined, listing the objectives or intended outcomes. You should also provide background information to make clear why the investigation or experiment was undertaken and perhaps also say

what you don't intend to write about, to indicate the scope of your report.

Finish your introduction with a sentence that leads into the body of your report.

## 4.2 Conclusions

Your conclusion should demonstrate that you've answered the question set for the assignment. You can do this by:

- referring to the key words (both process and content) in the title
- summarising the key elements of your argument and the main content of the body of your essay or report
- perhaps (especially in a report) suggesting what needs to be considered in the future.

Conclusions shouldn't be too long. For an essay or report of fewer than 1500 words a concluding paragraph of 50–100 is probably sufficient. It shouldn't be longer than the introduction.

Avoid introducing new ideas or examples into your conclusion. Summarise only the main points and don't repeat examples.



# 5

## WRITING PARAGRAPHS

Paragraphs divide the writing according to topics or major points. Each paragraph should contain one main idea or topic and you should be able to identify what that is.

The start of a new paragraph indicates a change of focus. Paragraphs sometimes start with a 'topic sentence' to introduce the new focus, and subsequent sentences then expand upon the topic.

Paragraphs can help the reader identify the progression of your argument. When each paragraph contains a new main idea, the reader has a visual clue to when your argument is moving on to the next stage.

Common mistakes include making each sentence a new paragraph, or, at the other end of the spectrum, having no paragraphing in your writing at all. Poor paragraphing makes it very difficult for your reader to follow your argument (see Figure 4).



(a)



(b)



(c)

**Figure 4** a) Not using any paragraphs turns your assignment into one long block and makes it very difficult to read. b) Making every sentence a new paragraph can make your assignment feel like a list. c) A well-structured assignment is immediately apparent to the eye.

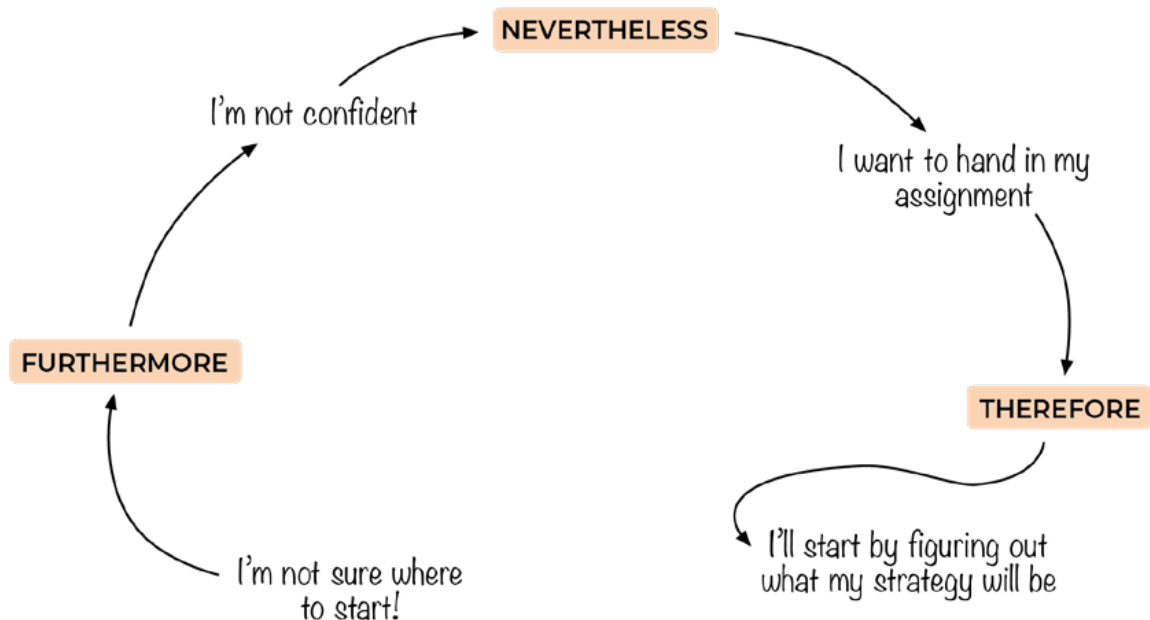
If you find it difficult to know where to start a new paragraph, try using mind maps to help identify the logical divisions in your argument – they can help you separate your ideas from each other. Making notes in the margins of your draft might also help you decide where one idea ends and the next starts.

## 5.1 Linking words

Linking words help to make your argument flow, and once you've sorted out where your paragraphs start and end, they'll help you link those ideas into a coherent whole.

Linking words remind the reader of the thread so far and provide signposts to what's coming later (see Figure 5). They can be used to:

- link ideas in a sentence
- link sentences
- link paragraphs.



**Figure 5** Linking words are an essential part of any writing

Try using some of the following linking words in your next assignment.

**Table 2** How and when to use linking words.

To add a point	To contrast two points	To note consequences
and ... also ... In addition ... Similarly ... Not only ... but also ... Moreover ... Furthermore ...	but... However ... although ... On the one hand ... on the other hand ... Yet ... Nevertheless ...	because ... as ... since ... So ... Therefore ... As a result ... Consequently ...
To illustrate, or give an example	To move on to the next point	To summarise or conclude
for example ... that is ... namely ...	Then ... After this/that ... Subsequently ...	Finally ... In conclusion ... To conclude ... To summarise ... In sum ...



# 6

## PARAPHRASING, QUOTING AND REFERENCING

Whenever you mention another person's publication, idea or theory you must acknowledge the source of the material so it's clear that you're not claiming the idea or information is your own. If you don't acknowledge the source, and especially if you copy the exact words, you run the risk of being accused of plagiarism.

In your assignments you're usually expected to include information and ideas from your module books.

You'll usually find information about avoiding plagiarism and the style of referencing preferred by your module in your assignment guidelines provided with the module materials.

### 6.1 Good habits

You can make writing assignments and avoiding plagiarism much easier by being rigorous in your notetaking habits. While you're reading through your materials, if you take note of a particularly useful quote or if you paraphrase an idea you should also record where it came from. Use the bulleted list below as a guide.

## 6.2 Referencing

A full reference includes a short in-text reference to each source, with a list of the full details at the end of the assignment. The purpose of a reference is to enable your reader to find the original publication from which you drew your evidence, or upon which you based your argument.

References usually comprise the following information:

- author name and initials
- year of publication
- title of chapter and book (or title of article and journal)
- name of publisher
- place of publication

The exact format of references varies between academic disciplines and modules so it's a good idea to check your assignment handbook for information on the style of referencing preferred. One guide is to see how they're handled in your module materials.

## 6.3 Paraphrasing

Most of your assignment writing will consist of paraphrasing the work of other people. It's an important skill in academic writing.

When you paraphrase someone's argument, you restate their argument but in your own words. You need to make clear that it's someone else's work that you're building upon. You can do this simply by mentioning the author's name, as in the following example, and then listing the full reference details at the end of the assignment.

Halliday (1978) claims that children develop their language by interacting with those around them.

By expressing ideas or concepts in your own words you gain a deeper understanding of the material you're writing about.



## 6.4 Quoting

If you find that an author has summed up an argument in a particularly convincing way, you may want to quote them directly. When you quote a person's precise words, put their words in speech marks ('...').

Halliday (1978, p.1) claims that 'A child creates, first his child tongue, then his mother tongue, in interaction with that little coterie of people who constitute his meaning group.'

You can either insert this quote into the body text of your writing, as above, or you can use a display quote style, separating it from your body text, placing it on the next line and indenting it, in which case it's usual to omit the speech marks.

Although quotes can be a good way to add interest to your writing, be careful not to rely on them too much. A quote should back up the argument you're making, it shouldn't make the argument for you.

It's a common mistake to let the quote do all the explanatory work, so remember, write in your own words and use a quote simply as supporting evidence for your argument.



# 7

## CHOOSING A WRITING STYLE

The purpose of academic writing is always the same: to take a topic and put forward ideas and reasons that explain it, using words, quotes, statistics or practical examples drawn from experiment or diagrams.

Academic writing needs to sound more formal, or impersonal, than most other writing styles. However, academic disciplines do vary in the way language is used. What's expected of you may depend on whether you're following an arts or a science discipline. The best guide to how you should express yourself in an assignment is the module materials themselves. Look at your text books and at your assignment handbook.

“ I enjoy writing, but there seems to be a mystique to this kind of ‘academic’ writing that I can’t fathom. ”

Take note of feedback from your tutor on your previous assignments. Your tutors will give you guidance on how to improve your writing skills for your next assignment.

In some academic writing, expressing yourself in the first person is acceptable (e.g., 'I think that ...'). However, in most the passive voice (e.g., 'it is thought that ...') is preferred as it's more impersonal and objective.

#### Tips on writing style and expressing yourself well

- Avoid colloquial and idiomatic language.
- Learn to avoid personal pronouns such as 'I', 'we', 'you'.
- Try to use objective language. Useful phrases are: 'It can be argued that ...', rather than 'I think that'.
- Make your writing concise by cutting out redundant words, for example: 'absolutely essential' (just say 'essential'); 'combined together' (just say 'combined'); 'The great majority of' (just say 'the majority of', or even 'most').
- Be aware of specialist terminology. Sometimes words are used in different and very precise ways, for example, the words 'mouse' and 'window' are used in a particular way in computing. In science, 'melting' is not the same as 'dissolving'.
- Use a thesaurus to help you avoid using the same word too often.
- Make sure your sentences aren't too long, otherwise the reader is likely to lose the thread of your argument. There should be one idea per sentence. If a sentence is too long you may be trying to convey too much information in it.
- Use inverted commas around words or phrases that you use in an unusual or contentious way.



# 8

## IMPROVING YOUR WRITTEN ENGLISH

Many students worry about expressing themselves accurately and clearly in assignments. Developing a good writing style sometimes takes years of practice.

### 8.1 Writing for university

Although academic English is different from everyday written English, the ability to write in an academic style is something you learn as part of your university study. Don't expect to be able to write in academic English until you've read your module materials, learned some of the terms and begun to write about your subject.

At the beginning of your studies you won't be expected to produce perfectly written assignments. Level 1 modules are geared towards helping you start writing for university and your tutor will help you develop your writing skills.

As you progress through Level 2 and Level 3 you'll find that greater skills are expected of you. You'll still be given guidance on writing where necessary, however feedback will concentrate more on the content of your assignment.

## **8.2 Grammar, spelling and punctuation**

There are plenty of helpful resources if you're worried about your grammar and spelling. Find a comprehensive dictionary and thesaurus to help you check spelling and find new words to use – some are available online. The spell check facility in your word processor can be very useful but do be careful about relying on it as you need to be sure the correct word is in place.

## **8.3 Your tutor and your student support team**

Feedback on your assignments helps you to develop your writing skills. The comments help you develop your skills in communicating your ideas. Take time to refer to what you did in the light of the feedback and see whether you can apply that advice to the next assignment. Don't lose marks needlessly by repeating errors that you can easily put right.

If you're not sure about any of the comments, or how they affected your marks, ask your tutor for clarification. You could also contact your student support team; they may offer learning skills workshops or even one-to-one sessions to help you improve.

