

Writing assignments: how to deconstruct an essay title

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This is the first in a four-part series of study skills articles that will help you write better assignments. The series will cover deconstructing titles, effective research skills, reading and critical thinking strategies, and how to write academically.

To write well at university level it is important to approach the assignment in a purposeful and methodical way. This article will provide step-by-step instructions on how to deconstruct and respond to an assignment title, how to relate it to the course's module aims and how to respond to case scenarios. The most important aspects of approaching your assignment are organization and understanding. Your tutors want to see that you can demonstrate an understanding of the topic, and that you can organize that understanding clearly to your reader.

Organizing your thoughts

It is important to approach your assignment in a methodical and organized way from the start. Before you begin, make sure you have the following: a good English dictionary (such as Oxford or Cambridge); a nursing dictionary; an A1 sized pad of paper and colour pens. You will also need your module or course guide, lecture notes and class notes.

Step 1: Identifying the key terms

Copy out your assignment title onto the centre of the A1 paper. The assignment title contains key words and they must be thoroughly understood. There are two types of key words: process words and content words. Process words give you instruction and tell you what to do in the essay, such as 'discuss', 'identify', 'evaluate' and so on. Underline all the process words in red. The content words tell you what to look at: again it is very important that you understand these. Underline them in blue. Don't worry if you underline most of the words in the title – a well written assignment will mainly be made up of content words.

Step 2: Understanding the key terms

Next you must ensure you understand all the key words. *Table 1* contains a list of process words to help you ensure you respond correctly to what each word is asking you to do. Copy out the explanations onto your A1 pad next to the process words. It is important that you do copy them out as this helps you internalize what you should be doing.

Next you need to look up all the content words first in the nursing dictionary then in the English dictionary. Copy out the definitions next to the words on your A1 pad (include bibliographic details and page numbers for referencing in case you decide to use the definitions in your assignment). Even if you feel that you know the definitions of the words, ensure you still look them up. This process helps you focus on your assignment and it also helps to slow you down. One of the main errors in student writing is that students rush into it, without pausing to reflect. It is important to give your brain a chance to process information and internalize it.

Step 3: Internalizing the assignment

Internalising the assignment is an important part of the process of understanding it. The next step is to put the assignment title into your own words. Write it in a different colour on the A1 paper near to the original wording. Check that it clearly correlates to the original version and if it does not, reword it again. It is common for students to over-complicate an assignment so make sure that you keep it simple. Remember that you are graded on your ability to follow instructions so do not be tempted to over-complicate them as it will lose you marks.

Step 4: Establishing 'working definitions'

You need to establish working definitions of the key topic areas in your assignment. For example, if the assignment is about 'diversity, rights and equality' then you need to develop an understanding of these terms before you embark on any research. You may have a sufficient understanding of the terms from your key lectures, or from looking them up in the dictionary. If not, go back over your lecture notes and establish a basic and clear understanding of the words.

Peer discussion can be very useful at this stage, as can conversations with your tutors. At this stage it does not matter how basic your understanding is as long as you have one with which to embark upon your research. Your understanding will develop as you research the assignment. It aids understanding to have a basic grasp of the topic that can be built on, rather than trying to establish an understanding from scratch through your research. The working definitions that you start with probably won't be included in your final assignment: they are simply a tool to help develop a more sophisticated understanding through research.

Table 1. Key terms and meanings

Key term	Meaning
Account	Account 'for' asks you to give reasons for. An account 'of' asks for a detailed description.
Analyse	Make a detailed examination or investigation into something.
Assess	Consider in a balanced way the points for and against something.
Comment	State clearly your opinions on the topic in question. Support your views with evidence.
Compare	Look for the similarities and differences.
Contrast	Emphasize the differences between things.
Criticize	Give your considered opinion about the practices/theories, back up your opinions with research.
Define	Give the precise meaning of something. Show how the distinctions you make are necessary.
Describe	Give a detailed account.
Discuss	Investigate or examine by argument; give reasons for and against.
Evaluate	Make a judgment about the value/importance/worth of something.
Explain	Make plain, interpret, give reasons.
Extent	'To what extent' asks you to weigh up the evidence for and against something, to state 'how far' something is valid.
Illustrate	Use examples, diagrams and so on to explain and make clear.
Interpret	Make clear the meaning of something, give your own views backed up by evidence.
Justify	Show adequate grounds for decisions or conclusions.
Outline	Give the main features, structure or general principles of a topic, omitting details.
Review	Make a survey of; critically examine the subject.
State	Specify fully and clearly.
Summarize	Give a concise account of the main points of a topic.

Step 5: Understanding the learning aims

Look in the course or module guide for the learning aims/outcomes. These basically tell the student what they should learn on the course, and they can be useful in helping frame the way you approach an assignment. They state exactly what a successful student will learn. So, if the learning aims state that the successful student will learn A, B, C and D, then it clearly makes sense to put A, B, C and D in your essay. Exercise caution and common sense though: if the course is weighted 50% exam and 50% assignment, for example, then you need to think carefully about what learning aims are being addressed in the assignment and what will be addressed in the exam. If it is not clear, speak to your course tutor. Once you are clear about what the learning aims are, map these onto your A1 pad in a different colour. The words you have written will function as 'anchors' and will help keep you focused in the right areas. Get in the habit of checking your thoughts against them. If you cannot see a clear correlation between what you are writing down throughout this process and the learning aims, then you can be certain that you are going off on an inappropriate tangent.

Step 6: Understanding the scenario

If you need to write your assignment based on a response to a scenario, you need to think carefully about what the scenario is directing you to consider. Scenarios are

written substitutions for placements and allow tutors to examine your responses to potential real-life situations. A common error students make is assuming that all the details of a given scenario are relevant. It is part of the task to prioritize what is relevant and focus on it, and leave out unnecessary details. Another common error is that students make assumptions about the information in the scenario: do not be tempted to jump to conclusions – stick to the facts that you have been given. Ask yourself the following questions:

- How can the module aims be mapped against the scenario? (This will help you think in the right areas and in the right way)
- What is relevant in the scenario in relation to the topic(s) of the assignment?
- What is important in the scenario? To help you identify what is important start by crossing out all the irrelevant detail
- Does the scenario foreground any particular professional values/conduct?
- Are there difficult problems in the scenario? If so what are they and how might they be addressed?

Remember that scenarios are used to examine your responses to difficulties that you may encounter as a qualified health professional. So try and think like a health professional and demonstrate professional values where appropriate. Once you have thought carefully about the

scenario rewrite it as a spider-gram on your A1 paper. Be sure to include only relevant details.

Step 7: Brainstorming

By this stage you should have the assignment title written on your A1 paper with the process and content words clearly identified and defined. You should also have a version of the title in your own words as well as basic working definitions of all the topic areas of the title. You should have the learning aims clearly written down and a spider-gram that includes all the key aspects of the scenario (if there is one). Next you need to brainstorm. This is a process where you write down all your ideas, thoughts and understanding of the topics. The idea of brainstorming is that you put down everything you can think of. It does not matter if it is correct or not at this stage. The idea is that you get a response on the paper. Use your lecture and class notes and your module guide to prompt your thinking. Try to use colour pens and cluster similar pieces of information together as this will help your brain navigate the information on the page. Next you need to cross out everything that is not relevant. Again use the learning aims and the definitions of the content terms you have already done as your guide. This crossing out stage is a useful process because the irrelevant material should not find its way into your assignment later as you have already rejected it at this early stage.

Step 8: Organizing your brainstorm

Now you should have a piece of A1 of ideas. The next stage is beginning to organize that information. Academic writing always starts with the 'big picture' and moves into detail. The key to success is not to give too wide a view of your topic: it is always better to look at less in more detail, rather than look at a lot with no depth. Bearing this in mind, ask yourself what is the 'big topic' in your

assignment? If you can't see the big picture, then try and ask yourself what the obvious starting point is. For this, it is very useful to imagine that you are going to teach the topic to someone who has no knowledge of it at all: where will you start to help them understand? Once you have an idea of where to start, number your points 1, 2, 3 and so on. Try and look for relationships between your points as you number accordingly.

Step 9: Establishing a research plan

Now copy out your numbered list on a new piece of paper. Use colours again to keep all your points visibly separate. Now you have a clear research framework and you should be able to identify clearly what areas you need to research. It is also a good idea at this stage to map your word count to this plan. About 10% of a word count should be put aside for the introduction and 10% for the conclusion: if the word count is 2000, this will leave 1600 words for the main body. You can then work out how many words you have to dedicate to each of your points.

Researching for an assignment can be a very stressful and time-consuming experience for many students. The next article in this series will give you advice on how to research effectively and how to use research to support your arguments so that you can get the best possible marks.

Conclusion

Based on years of experience of teaching nursing students to write more successfully, this article will help you write well at university level. It offers various strategies to help you organize your material and think in academic terms about the topic of your assignment.

It provides a step-by-step process to establish a focused research plan.

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