

Return to Study Guide

First edition



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Victoria, Australia*

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Return to Study Guide

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Reading

Reading is in the order in which it appears in the text:

1. Knowles, M. S. (1980). *The modern practice of adult education: From pedagogy to andragogy*. New York: Cambridge, The Adult Education Company, pp. 24-39. (What is the role and mission of the adult educator)
2. McSweeney, P. (1990). How to conduct a literature search. *Nursing*, 4(3), 19, 22.
3. Bate, D., & Sharp, P. (1995). *Writer's handbook: For university students*. Sydney: Harcourt Brace, pp. 9-24. (Preparing an essay outline)

1. Introduction

In this return to study guide we have tried to cover the topics that give the most headaches to students returning to study. For various reasons you have made a decision to continue learning: for some it will be curiosity, others for career advancement and for many it is to catch up with current nursing practice. Whatever the reason, you have made a commitment by enrolling, paying fees, buying books and declaring you will give time for study. This guide aims to help you get the most out of the experience and to gain new knowledge as painlessly as possible!

Depending on your age, you will have studied nursing through various courses, taught at various institutions and some may even remember hospital education systems.

Times change! Whatever your past memories of learning, the adult student today is expected to be self-directed and independent, responsible for their own learning and academic outcome. This can be a daunting experience when you are not accustomed to finding your way around the higher education system. Some of the rules seem outdated, some seem to be trying to make life harder and some are really helpful. So the first thing you must do is to read your handbook and understand the rules governing the course you wish to do.

The Faculty and University Handbook, give you the policies for examinations, assignments, marking and unit outlines. These are crucial document for understanding how to get help if you want to change your enrolment, how the end of year marks are allocated, how to appeal results, and general administration matters for the University and Faculty.

Take time now to read this booklet or access the material through the university web site (<http://www.latrobe.edu.au>).

Now having read the course material thoroughly you can ask yourself why you are doing this. Be honest with yourself because it will mean you are facing the tasks you have set for yourself to complete your study successfully.

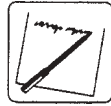
2. Aims

This guide aims to assist you to:

1. Identify your motivation and learning style.
2. Improve your writing skills.
3. Practise acceptable academic writing presentation.
4. Access resources for study.
5. Edit your work.
6. Prepare yourself for further study.

3. *Why am I doing this?*

You are doing this module as external study to assist you to get your mind focussed on study again. You are an adult learner who probably has a thousand other things on your mind at any given time. You may have work to deal with, nursing is not always easy work, a home to care for, family to consider and the day to day crises that are a part of life. Study is not impossible but it requires planning to fit it in around all these other commitments.



Exercise 1

To clarify your thoughts on why you are returning to study, write down some points in a notebook on the following:

- *Why did you select the course you wish to do?*
- *What are your major concerns about the course?*
- *What sort of issues do you think you will face?*
- *What kinds of things motivate you to keep going?*
- *What is your reward for completing your study well?*

Having cleared your thoughts and made notes you will need to keep your notebook and return to it sometime during your study to refresh your mind about your motivation and goals. You may find your first concerns and issues were not relevant but you have found others that are. You may find you are doing very well and have enjoyed the process of learning so much that your issues are minor and easily completed. The important factor is to remind yourself about the reason why you first started this enterprise and how you will be rewarded when you graduate.

Although you are doing this module by distance education, that is you do not attend class, you still have access to teaching staff by phone call or e-mail. Use this as a way to clarify your thoughts with another and if you are finding any aspect of your study material hard to follow. You will also find you can discuss your work colleagues, family and friends and that they may be able to help you by providing information or by just listening. Using others as sounding boards is often helpful, especially if you read your written work out loud to an audience you can pick up grammatical errors and missing thoughts! However, speaking is not writing so remember you are reading your written work, not presenting points to an audience.

We have stressed the fact that adult learning is different. The teaching and learning program at university level is based on this premise so we will take a few minutes to explore this more.

4. *Why is adult learning different?*

Education and nursing have changed enormously in recent years and for those of you returning to study after a number of years, the changes in education and the theories which underpin it may come as a surprise. Many of you will be more familiar with changes in nursing, but even here it is difficult to keep up with new ways of thinking and doing.

Some of you may have already studied something about self-directed learning or previously been a student in a self-directed learning program. If you have, skim read this section in case there is some new material. The reason for presenting it is that it is important that you understand where we, the lecturers, are coming from. Learning is a complex matter which, not surprisingly, has many definitions and may be explained in a variety of ways. A common explanation is that it is a transition from one state of understanding to another, or a change in our manner of 'construing' the world in response to the environment.

The experience of learning has certain characteristics that most of us would readily acknowledge, for example, it is very much a social enterprise in that:

- people have determined what content needs to be covered;
- we learn in a social context;
- our knowledge is shared;
- we help each other by sharing information;
- it involves an element of trust, usually we are putting ourselves on the line;
- it involves an element of risk-taking for good learning to take place.

Importantly, in order to learn or to understand we need to be somehow dissatisfied with our views and conscious that we need to construe the world differently, or else we wouldn't be motivated to learn.

Adult learning

Exactly how, or for that matter when, we reach adulthood is difficult to determine. Whether this is a continuous process of growth and development or a series of distinct stages is a matter of some debate in the literature. Clearly, however, changes do occur and preoccupations alter with major life events, such as job promotion, commitment to a stable relationship, parenting, divorce, death of parents, children leaving home, menopause, unemployment and retirement.

Adult learners

In the context of adult learning, the definition provided by Knowles is perhaps useful. He defines adulthood in terms of self-directedness: ‘... their self-concept becomes that of a self-directing personality’ (Knowles, 1990). Knowles (1980) in his seminal text on adult education also discusses the concept of maturation.



Reading

Please read ‘What is the role and mission of the adult educator’ by Knowles (1980, Reading 1).



Exercise 2

What is a seminal text? When do you think you should quote from such a text?

Is there a relationship between the hierarchy of Maslow, moving toward self-actualisation and the dimensions of maturation described in Exhibit 2 (Knowles, 1980, p. 29)?

Should further learning move us on this growth curve?

Self-directed learning (SDL)

Self-directed learning may be defined as a method of organising teaching. It is also a characteristic of learners that may be present in varying degrees, that is, the extent to which the learner is in control may vary.

The literature indicates that SDL is the natural learning preference of adults as they explore issues that are relevant to them. It is one of the most common ways in which adults pursue learning through their life span. It is also a way in which people supplement learning received in formal settings. Yet there is also evidence to suggest that many adult learners feel far from self-directed. Independence is a matter of degree. Most don’t feel confident. In tertiary study you will find some units will enable you to apply the unit’s objectives to your area of clinical expertise. In order to feel autonomous you need to feel free of internal and external constraints and to have a coherent set of personal values and beliefs.

A person is said to be autonomous to the extent that he/she:

- conceives of goals and plans;
- exercises freedom of choice;
- uses reflection;
- has the will power to follow through;
- exercises self-restraint and self-discipline;
- views him/herself as autonomous.

How the idea of SDL came about

The rapid rate of political, social and technological change that confronts us on an almost daily basis has increased the need for people to be self-directed. The world in which we live demands self-starters. It demands that people be self-directed and capable of being independent.

On the education front, changing enrolment patterns, increases in the ratio of faculty to students, re-evaluation of content and teaching methods are also influential factors. As a professional, freedom to build on your experience is important; you know so much already. Unfortunately we can't teach people now what they might need to know in 20 years time. Therefore, independence and flexibility is the way forward.

The advantages of SDL can be summarised as follows:

- Increased student satisfaction
- Increased responsibility for your own learning by setting your own goals
- Making your learning personally significant (different clinical backgrounds).

Now if you are feeling abandoned and uncertain of how to sort out what it is you need to know, remember that lecturers are always available to provide assistance, but you do need to ask for help.

SDL in the classroom

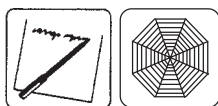
Where a unit has been organised around self-directed learning, the lecturer reduces the number of classes and exerts less control over the your time and thinking. As a result:

- you and teacher are in an equal relationship;
- each student pursues a different course of study;
- you develop knowledge of the topic and demonstrate the ability to think about and analyse it independently;
- you need to be to be self-disciplined, independent, and able to choose from available resources;
- the standard of work is usually high.

5. Time management and survival

You should now have some ideas about the style of learning required and the expectations of students studying at university level. The next action for you to consider is how to manage your time.

As a busy person with multiple roles, you have probably managed to fit in most of what you want to do in your day. Study time is another piece to put in your schedule. It is important to schedule time for study as it should be an enjoyable experience not a chore to be done in a rushed fashion with no time for reflection.

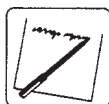


Exercise 3/websearch

Now is the time to access the Internet. Look up the following website (<http://www.allenandunwin.com/estudy/timemanagement.asp>) and read the articles. This e-study centre provides useful topics for students and is worth visiting again during the work ahead.

1. How do the authors describe the centring process?
2. What are SMART goals?
3. Have you developed Zone 3?
4. Do you procrastinate? If so, try the five anti-procrastination tricks listed.

Now is the time to plan



Exercise 4

Make yourself a schedule of tasks to do over the semester. Put it up where you will see it daily. Stick to it and complete each task as it comes up. Include on your plan the times for semester deadlines for assignments, university dates for exams, holidays. This will keep you on track and alleviate last minute panic attacks for deadlines, etc. The rule of thumb is to plan ahead by working backwards! Put your due date for the assignment on your plan then give yourself three working weeks to write it. This means you will start to draft your work in time for revision before submission and avoid the need to request an extension.

Sometimes it is a good idea to use a long-term planner for the whole year. You can then map your deadlines and put in some time for yourself. We all need to have a break during the holiday periods. Often students leave work to be done over the university break times and then they do not have time for themselves and this creates the potential for a stressful next semester. Reward yourself, take a break!

The best time to study

We all have different methods of learning, but some tips are:

- Always look at your notes after you have read or been to a lecture. Refresh your memory and make more detailed comments that night, before you forget. Notes are the hallmark of good study habits. You need to read them again when you are writing assignments, etc., and there is nothing more frustrating than not being able to make sense of what you have jotted down.
- Always write down any reference in full as you go. It makes no sense to have to look up a book or article again because you do not have a full reference.
- Avoid cramming if you have an examination. If you have been keeping up to date with your reading you should not have to do more than a general revision to bring material back to your thinking. Cramming only makes for confusion.

- Plan your major study time when you are most alert and productive. Morning people may do this before work at 6am, or if you are a night person before you go to sleep. Personal preferences are important and should be given priority on your plan as you are more likely to stick to the times when you are most comfortable.

6. *Study skills and developing new habits*

Acquiring good study skills often means undoing some already acquired habits. To heighten your awareness of your own habits I have included a 'study inventory' which was devised by Peter Edwardes (1989), whose book has some other interesting study skills exercises. You may be able to obtain this text from your local shire/council or hospital library.

Study inventory

Table 1 is a list of 25 statements about study habits. Consider each carefully. If the statement is very unlike you, circle the number in the left hand column (A), and if the statement is very like you, circle the number in the right hand column (C). If you think your study habits are somewhere in between, circle the number in the middle column (B). Then add all the circled numbers together to obtain your score. (How to rate your score is shown in Table 2.)

Reading skills

I have sometimes read a book just before going to sleep and on picking it up the following night found I could remember hardly anything about it. Even though I actually read each word, nothing sank in—I was just passively recognising the words without attaching meaning or context to them. No doubt you have had a similar experience at some time. Reading at its best (that is, when you are not tired and can focus your mind properly) is an active process which can help you improve your level of understanding about a particular topic.

Reading for study purposes can be quite anxiety provoking. Several commonly heard statements are:

- 'It takes me so long to read an article'.
- 'I always forget what I have just read'.
- 'I try to remember every word or concept but I just keep forgetting them'.
- 'It takes me so long to read the prescribed material, I just cannot keep up, help!'.
- 'Every time I read something related to this topic my brain hurts'.
- 'I take a lot of notes but this does not help either'.

Table 1				
	A Very unlike me	B	C Very like me	
General study habits				
1	Because I don't like some courses, I don't study for them	1	2	3
2	I try to use what I have learnt in other courses in my study	3	2	1
3	I prefer to watch television, although I know I should be studying	1	2	3
4	I find I am too tired to study properly	1	2	3
5	I seek out the company of friends when I should be studying	1	2	3
Concentration				
6	I prefer a quiet place where I can study	3	2	1
7	I tend to 'daydream' when I try to study	1	2	3
8	It takes me a long time to get ready to study	1	2	3
9	I find it hard to concentrate when I study	1	2	3
10	I have to be in the right mood to study	1	2	3
Time management				
11	I can't study if I am under pressure to finish an assignment by a certain time	1	2	3
12	I spend too much time on unimportant things	1	2	3
13	I find my study time is always too short	1	2	3
14	I make sure I know when my assignments are due	3	2	1
15	I work on the most important tasks first	3	2	1
Reading and note-taking				
16	I try to summarise what I have learned	3	2	1
17	I have trouble finding time to read all of the material	1	2	3
18	I organise my study notes carefully	3	2	1
19	I find it difficult to take notes during class	1	2	3
20	I try to read all the material as quickly as I can	1	2	3
Examinations				
21	I get nervous and don't do my best	1	2	3
22	I think and plan before writing an answer to a question	3	2	1
23	I finish early and hand in my exam paper before the time is up	1	2	3
24	I plan how much time to spend on each question before I begin	3	2	1
25	I try to follow my outline notes when answering each question	3	2	1

Table 2**How to rate your score**

Score	Rating
25-30	Excellent study habits. You should achieve very good results. Keep up the good work.
31-40	Good study habits. Concentrate on your few weak areas.
41-50	Some good study habits, but there is room for improvement.
51-75	Very poor study habits. You need to improve in most areas of study.

Check the five statements in each of the five sections of the table to see which study habits you need to improve.

Such statements are common among people who are returning to study, especially those who have had a significant break. Furthermore, it is not unusual to find the amount of reading expected in topic areas to be overwhelming.

There are several strategies that can enhance your reading speed and understanding.

The active reader

First you need to become an active reader. Survey the material you intend reading. Spend time browsing through the article or text you are about to read. Note the manner in which the author organises the material, for example, headings and subheadings. Take careful note of the table of contents, and of in text diagrams and tables. Read the introduction, or abstract or summary/conclusion. This will give you some idea about the subject matter of the article. Some authors refer to this as pre-reading. Sometimes they recommend including the first and last sentences of each paragraph, as well as the abstract. Others suggest that you identify key words and phrases.

Do not just accept—evaluate

The strategy used to evaluate the argument is questioning. People often have a tendency to believe the ‘written word’. It is important to remember that it is only a point of view. For the argument to be widely accepted, it must undergo debate, testing and validation.

A critical reader will develop a better understanding of the arguments than one who passively reads material. Formulate questions, for example:

- What does the title tell me?
- Why am I reading this article?
- What is the author attempting to say?
- Has the article covered all the issues that it said it would?
- Are there alternative views on this issue?
- How does the argument of one author compare with the argument of another?
- Which points of view do I accept and which do I reject?

The message is: as a thinking reader you will enhance your ability to understand and develop a point of view about a given topic. This is especially so if you have read widely in that particular topic.

Other factors to consider

How many new ideas are there per paragraph? A general rule of thumb is that there should be only one. If there is a number of ideas per paragraph ask yourself: ‘Is the writer conveying a clear message or would it be better to read something simpler and get a good grip of the topic first?’ After reading the article attempt to

recall the main points. This provides an opportunity to write a summary of it for future reference. I have suggested highlighting or marking the main points as you go, but writing while reading is not recommended; concentrate on the task at hand. Summarising at the completion of reading and without reference to the article will provide you with feedback about what you have understood and what areas require further development.

Another strategy is to skim through an article in the first instance to establish if it is relevant to your line of inquiry. You will increase your vocabulary by reading widely and prolifically, looking up words you do not know as you go.

Getting the most out of a library

Having suggested some ways in which you can improve your reading, the next question we deal with is: 'How do I find what I need to read in the library?'

You should have no trouble looking up a recommended book in a library catalogue, or finding the right journal on the shelves or via the internet. But what if you are starting from scratch? What if you want to write an essay on an area in which you have not read very widely—let's say postoperative pain management? How would you go about locating what to read?



Reading

Please read 'How to conduct a literature search' by McSweeney (1990, Reading 2)

The article by McSweeney on how to conduct a literature search before doing a research study applies equally well to the problem of doing a search to expand your knowledge before writing an essay. Read it before proceeding.

Searching the literature is a very important skill to have mastered before you commence tertiary studies. University libraries are huge and a bit intimidating when they are crowded with students at the beginning of term and their resources and staff are really stretched. Remember librarians are specially trained to help people with searches, but you will be able save their time and yours if you are familiar with the technique and have worked out a plan beforehand. You may wish to visit other libraries closer to your home and you can access the library at La Trobe via the internet.



Exercise 5

Please try out the technique at the library at your hospital or a public library in your town or suburb, or better still in a TAFE or university library. Many hospitals are happy to have registered nurses using their library to this purpose. Do not undervalue the importance of this exercise. Library skills are essential for university students and you will be floundering if you do not acquire them ahead of time.

Level of coursework

The level of the course in which you enrolled also has implications for the expectations of your study skill. If you are a Bachelor level student you will have larger classes and tutorial groups and will be at the beginning level of study. You will be given opportunities to learn how to write and present your work professionally. The beginning student has to make the transition from high school to university and has usually not had much work experience. When people return to take up postgraduate study the expectations are higher in that the student has already done some writing and knows how to find their way around clinical problems. Work experience helps in applying clinical knowledge but theoretical application is different in style and presentation.

At Graduate Certificate level the work is clinically oriented and builds specialisation skills. You will find that theoretical application is critical in your work. You must reference current evidence based reading material and be prepared to critique what you read. The application of research and theory to practice is what makes the difference in raising the standard of clinical work.

In the Postgraduate Diploma you are expected to undertake a small research project and to study theory in more depth. There are opportunities to apply your research to actual practice related projects. At this level you are expected to be self-directed in learning and to make the links between research and practice with a level of inquiry that takes a critical approach to the work. You should be able to make comparisons and to evaluate clinical outcomes.

The Master's level courses are designed to facilitate the development of your areas of interest and for you to undertake research at a more in-depth level. These programs develop advanced clinical specialists who are able to work independently in the areas they chose. Evidence-based clinical protocols are part of the learning experience and the expectations are that you will be self-motivated to further career progression and advanced clinical outcomes. At this level you should demonstrate sound writing skill and verbal presentation. It is expected that you would publish papers from your work and be able to participate in conferences and seminars.

7. Understanding the academy

Life at university is made easier if you understand the processes involved in how the place operates. There is a hierarchy and chain of command similar to other large organisations. The Vice Chancellor is the top of the command, followed by Pro-vice Chancellors who have various portfolios such as Research and Development, then the Deans of Faculties who manage the specific discipline areas, followed by Heads of Schools and Departments. Each school or department have academic staff who hold Senior

Lecturer, Lecturer or Tutor positions. Professors and Associate Professors are appointed as academic leaders in a particular field and all academic staff are expected to undertake research. Support staff keep the organisation running and ensure student matters are managed. Such matters as record keeping, enrolment and timetables are done through the office staff under the control of the Registrar or Executive Officer.

It is important to know the appropriate person to contact. The Faculty Handbook is the best guide to find out whom you should contact.

University life also has many other social and sporting activities. Find out what the Student Union does and what clubs and activities could interest you. There are discounts available for purchases at certain shops, movies and restaurants when you join some student clubs and associations.

8. *Resources needed for success*

The main resource is your ability to seek information about whatever topic you are studying. This means accessing the library or the Internet, reading current articles and text books and contacting people who may be of help. Patience, persistence and being prepared to do draft versions of your work will ensure you will do well. It is nearly impossible to write an assignment in one attempt and obtain high marks. You must critique your work and improve it by editing and considering what you can do to ensure you have answered the topic well. An external editor may help by proof reading and finding grammatical errors but you may find that the person does not know the content material of your topic.

9. *Style guide*

The School of Nursing and Midwifery has an extensive style guide (*Guide to assignment writing*) to help you in your writing and presentation. Access this through the School's webpage (<http://www.latrobe.edu.au/nursing/resources>).

10. *How to write your essay/ assignment*



Reading

Please read 'Preparing an essay outline' by Bate and Sharp (1995, Reading 3).

Assignment writing is the most common form of assessment in many disciplines in higher education. It is no longer just a matter of learning a set of materials by rote and letting the examiner know you remembered it, at least on the day of the exam. Assignments usually aim to find out whether the student can analyse and synthesise previous knowledge on the topic, develop a logical and convincing argument and bring some insights of their own to bear on the topic. While some of the stress of exam time is removed and assessments are usually spread out over the semester, some students complain that this requires more work. Certainly this method takes up more thinking time, but the knowledge gained is usually broader and deeper and your analytical skills are sharpened as a result.

Just as there are tricks to remembering certain formulas for exams, there are tricks to writing a good essay. Keep in mind that the essay or assignment you write is your means of communicating your ideas. Your assignments will usually be read by one of the lecturers taking the unit, but not always. Whichever is the case, your assignment will be read by someone who knows the topic in depth and is up-to-date with the articles that have been written on that topic. An essay that is well planned, progresses logically through an argument and from one idea to the next, and shows a depth of knowledge is a pleasure to read, even if the reader is very familiar with the topic. It is even more of a pleasure if the reader does not have to stumble over spelling and punctuation errors—this detracts from the communication of the essay.

Choosing a topic

Sometimes a lecturer will give you more than one topic from which to select. Choose carefully—the topic that appears to be relatively easy or simple may not be the easiest to write about. Sometimes it is easier to write about a topic that has more than one side to it—simply because there are more points to bring out in the body of the assignment and the topic is more interesting to write about, and therefore to read about.

Before you begin to write, three pieces of preparation are necessary. The first is an analysis of the assignment topic itself. This involves considering how the topic has been worded and asking several questions: What does the topic ask me to do—what are the instructional words? What is the topic about—what are the key terms that indicate this? Is there more than one part to the topic and, if there are several parts, what are they? We will give you some practice in analysing the wording of the essay topic when you come to Exercise 6.

Once you have satisfied yourself that you know what is required, the second piece of preparation is to collect the information you need. You can do this in several ways. Review the literature on the topic by searching the library catalogue to see what recent articles on the topic have been published in journals. By now you will have been to a library and found out how to do a literature search.

You can use the reference lists from the prescribed texts and articles to find additional articles to read on the topic. At the end of this study guide you will note a list of references that were used in its preparation. Every article should conclude with a list of references that the author used in preparing his/her article. One way of extending your reading is to retrieve these articles and see if they add further useful information or ideas.

The next important task is to select the information you think is relevant to the assignment. At this point you should not discard any material or information; hang on to it until the assignment is finished because, in the process of writing, your ideas of what is relevant may change.

Reading essay instructions

One of the important keys to writing an interesting and relevant essay is a careful reading of the topic. Analysing the topic is fundamental to the later structure of your writing. There are certain words that are very frequently used in instructions to students and lecturers often have their favourites. It is *vital* that you understand what these words *actually ask you to do*. If, for example, the instruction says *analyse* the topic, then there is no point in just writing a *description* of what other writers have said on the topic. Or, if you are asked to *argue* a case, writing a detailed *list* of the relevant points will fall short of what is required. In order to help you understand the difference between commonly used instructions, some of the most frequently used instructional words are listed in alphabetical order below.

Account for	Asks you to explain the cause of ... This instruction indicates that you should 'show your grasp of the topic by your ability to identify and explain why something happens' (Williams, 1989).
Analyse	Asks you to examine in detail all the elements of a topic in a clear and concise fashion.
Argue	Requires you to systematically support or reject a position by presenting your reasons and evidence, indicating that you are aware of any differing points of view (Bate & Sharp, 1980).
Assess	You will need to identify a number of factors or methods and come to some conclusion about their worth, effectiveness or consequences.
Comment	Asks you to express an informed point of view about the topic or issue. You will need to back up your opinion by indicating that you have read sufficiently widely to be informed.

Compare and contrast	The word compare requires you to find similarities and differences between two or more ideas, policies, approaches, methods, treatments or events. Although these days the terms are often used interchangeably, contrast usually means concentrate more on the differences.
Describe	This term asks you to recall facts, processes or events (Bate & Sharp, 1980), but Williams (1989) points out that this is not an invitation to write all I know about ..., and advises paying close attention to the rest of the question.
Discuss	Here you are asked to respond to an identified issue, probably with two or more sides to it, to present arguments for each with evidence to support them and to reach a conclusion.
Evaluate	You are required to weigh up a number of factors or differing arguments and their supporting evidence, and come to a conclusion regarding their strengths and weaknesses. Remember that no single argument is likely to have all the strength on its side.
Explain	This term mean ‘to make intelligible’, to make the meaning clear. You should examine the topic in detail and deal with the causes or consequences—do not simply describe.
Illustrate	You are being asked to show by example, by describing in detail or showing diagrammatically what the topic means.
List or enumerate	This term usually means to provide a series of items in point form. It is important to read the rest of the question to see if there are further clues as to what is required.
Outline	Here you are being asked to organise your essay in a systematic way, giving the core points without a great deal of detail.
Prove or show how	You are being asked to demonstrate a detailed knowledge of the topic and prove a point or establish a theme (Williams, 1989).
Relate	Indicate the connections between ideas, policies, approaches, methods, treatments or events to show a relationship.

Review	Means to critically examine the main points of an issue, argument or piece of writing. In the body of the essay you will probably want to show you have read sufficiently widely, or have sufficient experience in regard to the topic, to be able to do this.
State	You are being asked to put forward a definite position or point of view.
Summarise	Here you usually being asked to write a succinct short piece indicating the important points with little detail.
Trace	This means giving a description of the development of ideas, policies, approaches, methods, treatments or events over time, usually starting at the present and going back to earlier developments.

This list does not, of course, cover every possible instructional word that might be used in an essay topic, but its length and the differences in meaning do illustrate the need for careful reading of an essay question.



Reflection

Cover the right hand side of the page and see if you can describe the core of the instruction that each word on the left side provides.



Exercise 6

In the two sample essay topics below, highlight the instructional words; underline the key terms and put brackets around the main part.

Topic 1

Summarise the key factors in emotional states likely to be engendered by returning to study. Comment on how these accord with your own experience.

Topic 2

Discuss the notion that encouraging students to take responsibility for their own learning is analogous to encouraging people to take responsibility for their own health. Explain how written learning contracts might help students to take on more responsibility for their learning.

To see how this could have been approached, check following Topic 3.

Now let us look at a topic which is more closely related to nursing practice and analyse what is required. The assignment is as follows.

Topic 3

Using holistic nursing practice as the underlying concept, discuss the nursing care of the surgical patient from the time of admission to discharge.

Mrs Mary Trelawny, a 75-year-old, is admitted to hospital in a debilitated condition. Following nursing assessment, her problems are identified as follows ...

Following examination of research literature, discuss in detail the nursing strategies that could be adopted to address each of these problems. Your discussion must include independent and collaborative nursing intervention.

Highlight the key instructional words and underline the key terms, for example:

*Using holistic nursing practice as the underlying concept, **discuss** the nursing care of the surgical patient from the time of admission to discharge.*

Mrs Mary Trelawny, a 75-year-old, is admitted to hospital in a debilitated condition. Following nursing assessment her problems are identified as follows ...

*Following examination of research literature, **discuss** in detail the nursing strategies that could be adopted to address each of these problems. Your discussion must include independent and collaborative nursing intervention.*

Topic 1

***Summarise** the (key factors in emotional states likely to be engendered by returning to study). **Comment** on how these accord with your own experience.*

Topic 2

***Discuss** the notion that encouraging (students to take responsibility for their own learning) is **analogous** to encouraging people to take responsibility for their own health. **Explain** how written learning contracts might help students to take on more responsibility for their learning.*

Normally in approaching an assignment at tertiary level it is important to read widely. Using only the prescribed texts is not usually acceptable; they are there to facilitate your progress in the topic.

It is important to have a purpose and be selective in your reading so that you do not expend unnecessary effort. It is just as important to be purposeful and selective in the articles you draw on in writing your assignment. Including everything you have read will not impress your reader, but a careful selection of articles that support your argument or discussion will.

Think about the topic and sort your information and ideas into groups. Summarise your reading and paraphrase ideas in your own words.

One of the important points about paraphrasing is that no one wants to read an assignment which is composed of phrases such as 'Jones (1990) said this' and 'Smith (1991) said that'. It is much

more acceptable and interesting to read if you paraphrase what Jones said and then acknowledge Jones as the source, for example, 'changes in way people are informed about an illness has come about, in part, as a response to a more educated and knowledgeable population (Jones, 1990)'.

By summarising your reading at this point you will be already putting the material in your own words. It will also help you organise your material into the sections or points that you intend to cover in the assignment.

Now is the time to write an outline or rough draft. What is the purpose of an outline at this point?

First, it will help structure the assignment or essay. It will help you identify the main points you are making and prevent you getting sidetracked.

Second, the outline will help you organise the points you are going to cover in a logical sequence. Your reading should have elicited an argument and the evidence to support it and this needs to be presented in an orderly way so that the reader can follow the steps of your reasoning.

Structure of an essay or assignment

The assignment should have three sections:

1. Introduction
2. Body of essay or assignment
3. Conclusion

Introduction

The purpose of the introduction is to briefly tell the reader about the topic, including a bit of background and an indication of the view that you are putting forward. It is important to capture the interest of the reader and direct them to the points you are going to make in the body of the essay. The outline of the points also provides direction for the essay or assignment. An introduction does not usually include referenced material since you are telling the reader what you are about to do in your own words. As a general rule, the introduction should be about 10 per cent of the essay.

Body of the essay

The body contains your response to what you have been asked to do. If you have been asked to 'describe' it contains the description, or if you have been asked to 'analyse', it contains your analysis, or if a 'discussion' has been called for then this is where the discussion takes place.

The structure of the body is a series of paragraphs which deal with the points from your reading which you have selected as relevant to your topic. A paragraph is a unit of writing that provides structure to the writing; it guides the reader from one point to the next. Each should contain one point in the sequence of points being

put forward, together with that point's supporting evidence. These pieces of evidence will also be building up support for your general argument or discussion. It is important that the points follow a logical sequence—the outline you have made should help ensure that this happens. As a very rough guide a paragraph should be about 100 to 200 words.

Often there is more than one point of view on a topic. Each point of view may have some points with which you agree **and** some with which you do not. **For example**, supposing the topic related to the way in which the health dollar should be spent. You might have reservations about the relatively high cost of 'high tech' medical interventions in comparison to the relatively low expenditure on illness prevention, **yet** realise that the arguments for and against either side have some positive features. In the process of arguing for one side or the other, you will make your argument more convincing by acknowledging that you have considered the positive points of the other side, **but nevertheless** pointing out that you think the weight of opposing evidence leads you to your conclusion.

You will note that the paragraph above contains five sentences, each of which contains an idea. Sentences are important parts of the structure of paragraphs. A sentence expresses a main idea. Sometimes you may want to connect one idea with another in a sentence or between sentences. You can do this by using connecting words or phrases. In the paragraph above I have used several connecting words—some within sentences and one at the beginning of a sentence. The connecting words and phrases have been highlighted. These and the others listed below can also be used at the beginning of paragraphs to link the points you are making.

Some connectives:

to add to an idea	and, next, in addition, moreover, furthermore, first, second.
to make comparisons or contrasts	likewise, similarly, in comparison, in contrast, however, but, yet, on the other hand, nevertheless.
to illustrate or support	for example, that is, for instance, in other words.
to summarise	to sum up, in summary, in short, in conclusion
to express a result or show relationships in order, space, time	therefore, hence, consequently, thus, meanwhile, afterwards

Common mistakes in assignment writing are:

- More than one point in a paragraph, which confuses the reader.
- Straying from the points that are part of the argument and heading off on sidetracks.

- Failure to provide evidence for assertions and properly referencing ideas.
- Repeating points that have already been made in another paragraph.
- Not defining the terms being used so that the reader is not sure what you mean.

The purpose of the argument or discussion is to lead people to your point of view by appealing to reason. Thus the argument must be supported by fact and not just opinion. Hence you need to supply evidence and examples from the literature to support what you are saying. Always distinguish between your opinion (what you think is true) and what you can prove or support by evidence. Discuss important points fully because, although you are writing for an informed audience (the lecturer), you cannot assume that a full discussion is unnecessary. You need to let the lecturer know you understand the point and why it is important. Likewise, define terms fully, even though they may be commonly understood, for example, the nursing process, holism.

The use of sweeping terms should be avoided. Examples are: *everybody knows*, *all*, *always* and *must*.

Conclusion

Having made all your points in the body of the essay it is time to pull the main ones together in a conclusion. This is not the time to bring up new issues or make new points and therefore the conclusion should not include any referenced material; it will be in your own words. You may, however, include your reflections on the topic or your recommendations if either seem appropriate.

11. Criteria for grading assignments

It is important to identify a number of the criteria which may be used by academic staff for determining the grades listed below. It is a guide only; particular units and topics may have specific requirements.

A: 80–100% (An excellent piece of work)

- Demonstrates superior ability to handle the task/topic and present the material.
- Demonstrates much evidence of critical appraisal of reference material and independent and/or creative thought.
- Demonstrates superior ability in problem analysis and logical development of arguments.

B: 70–79 % (A very good piece of work)

- Demonstrates very good understanding of the task/topic and/or breadth and depth of knowledge/reading.

- Demonstrates some evidence of critical appraisal of the reference material and independent and/or creative thought.
- Demonstrates above average ability in problem analysis and logical development of arguments.

C: 60–69 % (*A good piece of work*)

- Demonstrates a good understanding of the task or topic and/or a fairly good breadth and depth of knowledge/reading.
- Demonstrates limited evidence of critical appraisal of reference material and/or creative thought.
- Demonstrates average ability in problem analysis and development of a logical argument.

D: 50–59 % (*Just satisfactory piece of work*)

- Demonstrates rather limited understanding of the task/topic and/or limited scope of knowledge/reading.
- Shows very little (if any) evidence of critical appraisal of reference material and/or creative thought.
- Demonstrates below average ability in problem analysis and development of a logical argument.

N: < 50 % (*Unsatisfactory piece of work*)

- Demonstrates inability to satisfactorily complete the task/topic set.
- Shows inadequate use of the reference material.
- Shows an inability to analyse problems and develop logical arguments.

12. Assignment checklist

Does your essay/assignment have ...

An introduction

- Approximately 10% of word limit.
- Does it contain the main points discussed in the body of the work?

A body

- Do you have paragraphs linked in a logical sequence by topic sentences?
- Is there one main point for one paragraph?
- Have you discussed the points outlined in the introduction?

A conclusion

- Have you tied together the main points and different parts of the argument?
- Have you made certain not to include any new material?

Look at your presentation

- Have you referenced correctly?
- Have you acknowledged all ideas from other sources?
- Have you checked spelling?
- Is the work within the word limit?
- Have you complied with the standards expected?

Double check using grading criteria

- Have you answered the question?
- Have you observed the word limit?
- Is there evidence of wide reading?
- Does the discussion follow a logical sequence?
- Is there appropriate use of *current* reference material?
- Is the work well presented?
- The next section deals with other important aspects of assignment writing.

13. Be your own editor

Proof reading your work is essential. Some tips for this are:

- Run the spell checker.
- Put the cursor on each line and read line by line for errors.
- Print a hard copy and read it twice—look for spelling errors, style mistakes, the meaning of sentences, and highlight any errors for correction.

Read your final copy out loud to another person. Does the sentence structure make sense, is the punctuation correct, is the English expression meaningful, is there a logical flow to your ideas, is the work precise with no waffle, have you answered the topic question and included all your ideas from your notes, etc.

Be careful!

Remember there is nothing more annoying to the reader than to find incomplete sentences, poor spelling, poor punctuation, no logic to the content and scrappy presentation. This is not the hallmark of good writing.

14. Seeking help

If you are floundering at any time seek help. Your unit coordinator will assist you, the School staff will help you find assistance, the library can help, and student services can help. Don't leave it until you begin to panic. Seek out other students and get together to provide a mutual support group. Ask questions about any matter you are not clear about. If you don't ask you will put yourself under unnecessary stress and make things worse.

15. Life goes on

Returning to study can invoke worry and anxiety—or joy and liberation. Whether your response is either of these or somewhere in between, remember that life does go on. Hundreds, if fact thousands of students everywhere have much the same joys and woes, you are not alone. You are working towards your goal and you will get there. The rewards will be worth the effort.

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