

Planning a written assignment

Written assignments form a key part of assessment in Masters degree courses. They can demonstrate to the marker that you are..

1. Accessing the appropriate amounts and type of literature
2. Developing an analytical approach in your thinking.
3. Have a thorough and contemporary understanding of the topic

This section covers...

[Reading the assignment guidelines](#)

[Decoding questions / guidelines](#)

[Searching for literature](#)

[Developing a structure](#)

[Tip for organising the process](#)

[The role of the supervisor](#)

Reading the assignment guidelines – this may be stated as a question, or as instructions. In either case they must be read very carefully. A mistake or misinterpretation at this stage could result in wasted effort. Discuss with your supervisor if unsure.

Consider the key things that the assignment requires. For example...

Describe = outline the main points

Discuss = put the case for and against a proposition.

Critically analyse = carefully consider the relative weight of evidence and debate to arrive at conclusions.

[\(Back to top\)](#)

Decoding questions / guidelines – now look at the whole question and carefully interpret what is required. Highlight key words or phrases. You may find it useful to put the question into your own words. Sometimes a structure to a possible answer may make itself known. Take into account the word limit in relation to the question and do not plan too much space for initial description, history or background. It is tempting to write over-long introductions – they are relatively easy to write, but do not tend to attract too many marks. If you have any doubts at this stage, then this would be a good time to discuss your initial ideas with a supervisor.

[\(Back to top\)](#)

Searching for literature – at this stage you must undertake your initial reading. Reading widely is the key to success in a Masters course. As a very rough guide only - an assignment of 4000 words may require that you read 50 or more sources and many of these will eventually be referenced within your work. Others may prove useful background reading and some will be discarded altogether. Start with basic texts to help identify the scope of the subject and the key areas of debate, but later search for more specific literature. Aim for academically credible literature – ideally research based.

[\(Back to top\)](#)

Developing a structure – the initial reading will start to indicate what the key issues are within the topic. Use these to start thinking about the structure and headings of the assignments. Avoid the temptation to design the structure before you read – you **must** be led by the evidence and **not** look for evidence to match your views.

Repeat the above two stages - until you are clear that you have robust arguments based on careful reading. Refine your structure as the evidence mounts. You may identify a model or theoretical framework which will act as a structure for the assignment. Take note that the writing of the full text assignment does not happen until this stage is reached.

[\(Back to top\)](#)

TIP – when reading and developing a structure you must have a systematic means of taking notes and keeping track of the sources of the material. The following is suggested (but you may develop your own system)...

- Get a sheet of paper for each of your subheadings and label them accordingly. As you progress through your reading, add suitable references and quotes from each article/book to the appropriate page in a recognisable short hand.
- As each page fills with such references, you will start to be able to identify common themes and

threads. You can start to cluster associated references and use arrows etc to link with other references. This is where the analysis and possible synthesis is taking place.

- Ensure that you can trace each shorthand reference back to the source book/article by using a coding system, and add each new reference to a reference list as you use them. This avoids missing out a citation, and the onerous task of listing a large number of references at one sitting. (See the use of EndNote in the section on 'Referencing').
- The final stage is to create full text using the notes. Complete **one section** in full draft, and take this to your supervisor for advice on content, style etc.

[\(Back to top\)](#)

The role of the supervisor – A supervisor will be nominated for each assignment. They are there to help you in the **process** of writing the assignment, therefore it is in your interests to seek their counsel. However, they cannot provide you with the initial ideas, nor should they be asked to give an opinion of the final outcome. The optimal approach would be to seek advice at an early planning stage, with an outline of the proposed work, and then once again later with a partial draft.

Supervisors will not normally review a complete draft. In particular, please note that the supervisor may not be able to return work and feedback at short notice, particularly in the weeks immediately prior to the submission deadline. Face to face meetings are usually much more productive

than email exchanges; give sufficient notice for a personal appointment (usually one or two weeks).

You will find more detail on the role of the supervisor and student responsibilities in the course handbook or website.

[\(Back to top\)](#)