

TUTORIAL 2: GETTING STARTED ON ASSIGNMENTS

The primary purpose of this tutorial is to focus on getting started with assignments. We will look at assignment briefs, how to use marking schemes and rubrics to focus your efforts, the regulations around deadlines and extensions, and how to get started with desk-based research.

2.1 Assignment briefs and guidelines

A range of different assessment methods are included across your degree programme to offer all students various opportunities to demonstrate the extent of their learning and achievement of learning outcomes. Normally, the learning outcomes for each module are assessed with two or three pieces of coursework (e.g. a report, a policy brief, or a class test), and each coursework element is weighted. Coursework is typically compiled and completed over an extended period of weeks or months.

Assignment details are included in the module handbook or in a standalone assignment brief. It is essential that you read through the assignment guidelines and fully understand them before you start. If you don't understand the guidelines or the expectations therein, then you should seek clarification from the individual who set the assignment. Don't wait until close to the deadline, as it will be too late.

Assignments are most often linked to some combination of lectures, lab-based practicals and/or fieldwork. Lectures often provide the theoretical background and context for the module/assignment, and practicals and fieldwork the applications of this theory in the real world. Therefore, although you may not feel you are being assessed directly on the lecture content in some modules, you are in an indirect way. That means attendance at, and active engagement with, all lectures and practicals is essential for your understanding of the module content and in achieving a good mark in the assignment.

2.2 Marking schemes and rubrics

Each assignment is accompanied by a marking scheme or rubric. These take many forms, reflecting the content and focus of the assignment. We use marking schemes and rubrics for many reasons, including:

1. To make goals of the assessment clear and transparent.
2. To make standards explicit.
3. To aid discussion about assessment results between markers, and to aid clear feedback between markers and students.
4. To make marking efficient.
5. For those who scrutinise the quality of our modules and courses (e.g. external examiners), it is possible to check that the learning outcomes and the assessment criteria are in harmony.

Whatever form the marking schemes and rubrics take, you should use them to your benefit. Carefully follow the guidelines and marking criteria for each assignment and keep looking back at them as you

progress. A good idea would be to print the assessment criteria so that you have it in front of you as you proofread and edit your own work.

An example of a marking rubric for a typical first year assignment is reproduced in Appendix A.

2.3 Word counts and penalties

The University has agreed a set of word limit principles and penalties for exceeding word count in relation to the length of a piece of assessment. Where submitted work exceeds the agreed assessment limit, a margin of up to +10% of the word limit will be allowed without any penalty of mark deduction.

If the work submitted is significantly in excess of the specified limit (+10%), there is no expectation that staff will assess the piece beyond the limit or provide feedback on work beyond this point. Markers will indicate the point at which the limit is reached and where they have stopped marking. A mark will be awarded only for the content submitted up to this point. No additional deduction or penalty will be applied to the overall mark awarded. The student is self-penalising as work will not be considered/marked.

2.4 Getting started on assignments

This advice has been adapted from information on the University of Wolverhampton website (<https://www.wlv.ac.uk/lib/skills-for-learning/>).

Starting with an assignment plan

Planning your assignment can help in several ways. Firstly, it focuses you on what the assignment is really asking for. It then helps you create a structure for your assignment, and then guides you through populating that structure. It gives you a timescale to work to which, if followed, will help avoid any last-minute rush. By creating and following an assignment plan, your work will be better prepared, written and presented.

Step-by-step approach

1. Analyse the question/topic. What is it you are being asked to do? Is it an essay? Is it a presentation? Is it a report? Look for the type of activity you are being asked to carry out. Are you being asked to evaluate? Discuss? Compare? Report on a field- or lab-experiment? Each of these will result in a different final piece of work. Are there multiple sections to the question? If so, make sure you address each part fully.
2. What do you already know about the topic? Try making a list of everything you already know about the assignment subject. Can you identify any areas that you need to work on? Any obvious knowledge gaps that need filling?
3. Start your desk-based research. Use the internet and library (see below). Identify relevant information resources (see section below on 'ranking sources'). Start researching your topic. Stay focused on what you need to know for your assignment. Keep a list of searches you have conducted.
4. Read. When you have started your research, it is also time to start reading through the results. Make notes, identify which parts are important. Try and spot recurring themes, separate your

search results into these themes. This can then form the basis of your assignment.

5. Develop a first draft. You now have a quantity of information about different themes, all relevant to your assignment. You can now write a first draft using the information you have gathered, and the data you may have generated and analysed to answer the assignment. At this point, it is just a first draft, it does not need to be perfect. The key thing is to get words down. And don't worry about exceeding the word limit at the first draft stage. It is easy to edit down later.
6. Second draft. Read through your first draft. Think how it can be improved. Does it fully answer the assignment? Do the paragraphs flow? How does it compare to the word limit set? How does it match the marking scheme/rubric? Do you need to add more? Do you need to cut anything? Re-arrange? Have you used the literature to support your work?
7. The final draft. Check your work against the assignment brief. Have you answered everything you need to answer? How is the word limit? Is everything referenced? Have you conformed to the standards of academic writing?
8. Proofread. It is essential that you proofread your work. Use the spelling and grammar check functions in MS Word, but do not rely on them. Proofreading is easier if you print your work off first. You may ask someone else to proofread your work such as a friend or partner, but it is not advisable to ask someone who is also doing the same assignment as you or a fellow student on your course.
9. Print the final copy for one final review. Go through it carefully, correct all the typos you found when you proofread your work, move sections if required, check for clarity throughout, save it and submit it electronically, or print and hand it in if required. Check your assignment brief for how you are expected to submit your work. The majority will be submitted through the relevant module area on Blackboard.

2.5 Finding information and ranking sources

To read around your subjects and complete assignments, you need to find information relevant to the topics or assignments that you have been given. Although lecturers will give information about key reading, you also need to find information and read around the subject independently. There are two key sources of information that you can use: the University library and the Internet.

Ulster University Library

By the time you are reading this handout you should have had your library induction so you should know what is available to you. Information sources in the library come in two forms:

- Physical books, reference texts and journals available on the shelves in the library;
- Online or electronic resources and databases which you can access from campus or at home.

The library has a series of searchable online catalogues which you need to learn to access and use to find information: <https://www.ulster.ac.uk/library/electronic-resources>

The support on the library site is excellent, with FAQs, contact details and training videos: <https://www.ulster.ac.uk/library/help>

Please note that sometimes you will come across a journal paper that you want, and it is not available directly as a PDF from the UU library. In that case, you can request a copy of papers by using the library document delivery service: <https://www.ulster.ac.uk/library/services/document-delivery>

The Internet

The Internet contains huge resources in terms of information, and you will already be very used to finding information quickly, especially through Google. Some of the information on the Web may have come from good quality academic research papers or reliable Government or newspaper sources, but it also can be really poor quality, un-researched, unsubstantiated, inaccurate and at times deliberately misleading. What you must learn is to differentiate between the various types of information available and decide what is worth reading and what isn't.

Search wisely

A simple Google search for a topic phrase may produce thousands of results, not in order of their academic level. Consider who may have the information you need and go there directly: for instance, a government website for statistics or a national society. Try Google Scholar or databases like Web of Knowledge (via the library's website) to source journal articles.

Evaluate sources carefully

Academic books and journal articles go through a process of peer review by experts before they are published. Most websites do not. Consequently, you need to do your own evaluation before deciding whether to use an online source. Things to think about include:

- Is it associated with an authoritative organisation? E.g. a university, research group, official or Government body? Check the URL extension: for instance .ac.uk, .edu, .gov are likely to be okay.
- Consider what sort of reader you think it is aimed at. E.g. academic, popular, juvenile.
- Is there a date of last publication?
- Is the information supported by evidence?
- Is its purpose to support or promote a particular viewpoint or agenda, or a commercial purpose? Not necessarily a reason not to use it, but a warning to be cautious and critical.

2.6 Assessment schedules, declarations and extensions

2.6.1 Schedules and deadlines

Assignment deadlines are set by module teams and are advertised at the beginning of each semester. It is up to you to manage these deadlines around other commitments. You typically have two pieces of coursework (sometimes three) per module, so you will normally have six to nine deadlines to meet per semester. Our advice is to mark these clearly in a calendar at the beginning of the semester. The university has harmonised assessment submission days and times. Assessments will be submitted:

- Monday – Friday.
- Deadlines are scheduled for 12.00 (noon).
- Deadlines are not normally permitted during published vacation periods.
- Deadlines are not normally permitted on Bank Holidays or a day that the University is closed.

2.6.2 Student declaration

Students must comply with the following declaration at the point of submission (discussed in more detail in Tutorial 3):

Student declaration

I declare that this is all my own work. Any material I have referred to has been accurately referenced and any contribution of Artificial Intelligence technology has been fully acknowledged. I have read the University's policy on academic misconduct and understand the different forms of academic misconduct. If it is shown that material has been falsified, plagiarised, or I have otherwise attempted to obtain an unfair advantage for myself or others, I understand that I may face sanctions in accordance with the policies and procedures of the University. A mark of zero may be awarded and the reason for that mark will be recorded on my file.

2.6.3 Late submission of coursework

Late coursework submissions may impact your progression through modules and exam boards. Late submission of coursework in one module can also have knock-on effects in other modules, causing you to fall behind. Additionally, the timely submission of coursework requires the organisational and time management skills expected by future employers. The short message, therefore, is to try and avoid late submissions.

However, we do accept that sometimes life and personal circumstances can impact on your performance at university. Therefore, late submission of coursework is allowed under certain circumstances. If you fail to submit coursework or sit an exam, whether this is due to authenticated medical or compassionate circumstances, you must complete and submit an Extenuating Circumstances (EC1) form following the instructions below.

2.6.4 Extenuating Circumstances (EC1) forms

The university defines extenuating circumstances as circumstances beyond your control which either prevented you from attending an exam or submitting your coursework by the due deadline. Anything which is unforeseeable or unpreventable may be considered an extenuating circumstance (e.g. family bereavement).

You should apply for an extension on the first day of illness/absence and no later than 5 working days following the exam date or the submission date. You can apply for an extension in two ways:

- I. **Self-certify** In the absence of medical evidence, you can self-certify for an extension of up to 5 working days. Example of use would include a short illness where medical attention is not required e.g., noro-virus, gastroenteritis, acute period pain, flu, food poisoning, diarrhoea, fractured hand/arm on dominant side etc. Minor ailments e.g., colds, hay fever, hangover, sprains/fractures on non-dominant side etc. are excluded. Self-certification is normally only allowed 3 times across a course in a single academic year.
- II. **Medical/compassionate evidence** With supporting medical or compassionate evidence you can request an extension longer than 5 days.

To submit an extension request:

- I. Download an EC1 form here: <https://www.ulster.ac.uk/student/exams/extenuating-circumstances>
- II. Complete the EC1 form and email it as an attachment to ges@ulster.ac.uk

2.6.5 Students with specific learning difficulties or long-term medical conditions

Students with an episodic or fluctuating medical condition who are known to Student Wellbeing and have reasonable adjustment recommendations in place will have to notify the relevant member of teaching staff of their inability to attend or submit but will not need to self-certify for a disability related absence of less than 5 working days.

Other students may have additional support offered through reasonable adjustment recommendations (RAR) on the basis of a specific learning difficulty (e.g. dyslexia). In some cases, the RAR might specify 'flexible deadlines':

"This student should be afforded flexibility with coursework deadlines where possible. It is the responsibility of the student to contact the relevant member of teaching staff in advance of any coursework deadline to negotiate a possible extension in line with University procedures".

END

Appendix A: Marking rubric for a typical first year assignment – a report based on field data collected by year 1 marine science students as part of their induction field trip

Criteria	1* (outstanding) 80-100%	1* (excellent) 70-79%	2.1 60-69%	2.2 50-59%	3 rd 40-49%	Fail (marginal) 35-39%	Fail 0-34%
Introduction (10%) The introduction should: 1. present the nature and scope of the problem; 2. review the pertinent literature (within reason); 3. briefly outline the method of investigation; 4. conclude with a clear statement of aims/objectives.	Outstanding introduction. Clearly presents nature and scope of problem. Comprehensively reviews pertinent literature. Concludes with a clear statement of aim(s) and objectives.	Excellent introduction that presents the nature and scope of the problem, reviews the pertinent literature, and concludes with a clear statement of aim(s) and objectives.	Good introduction that presents the problem, reviews some of the pertinent literature (with some omissions), and concludes with a statement of aim(s) and objectives.	Acceptable introduction that presents the problem, reviews some pertinent literature (with obvious omissions), and concludes with a statement of aim(s) and objectives.	Limited introduction that presents the nature of the problem, but background information is inaccurate and/or lacking, and the aim(s) and/or objectives are incomplete.	Inadequate introduction that presents the problem, but background information is inadequate, and aim(s) and/or objectives are incomplete.	Poor introduction that fails to present the nature and scope of the problem, and/or does not review any relevant literature and/or fails to present achievable aim(s) and/or objectives.
Methodology (10%) The study area should be introduced, outlining key geological, ecological and oceanographic processes. The methods should be in the past tense and in sufficient detail that a competent scientist could replicate the work.	Outstanding methodology that is clearly explained and is written in sufficient detail that a competent scientist could replicate the work.	Excellent methodology that is appropriately explained and written in sufficient detail that a competent scientist could replicate the work.	Good methodology that is appropriately explained and written in sufficient detail that a competent scientist could replicate much of the work.	The methodology is written in sufficient detail that a competent scientist could replicate much of the work, but might struggle with some aspects.	The methodology lacks some detail making it difficult for a competent scientist to replicate much of the work.	The methodology lacks detail making it very difficult for a competent scientist to follow the methods and replicate the results.	Inappropriate methodology. The methodology lacks detail, is inappropriate or indecipherable.
Results (40%) Results should be presented as tables, figures, and analyses. Patterns, trends and outliers in results should be described. Links to figures and tables should ensure internal consistency.	Results are highly relevant, accurate and comprehensive. Data are presented professionally and the patterns and trends in the data are accurately described. Data are synthesized in a novel way to present additional insight.	Results are relevant, accurate and complete. Data are presented professionally and the patterns and trends in the data are accurately described.	Results are relevant and accurate, but contain minor errors. Data are well-presented, but may contain some errors in, or omissions of, labels and/or units. The patterns and trends in the data are generally well-described.	Results are relevant and acceptable, with any gaps being minor. Labels and units may be missing and/or incorrect in places. The patterns and trends in the data are described, with some omissions and misunderstanding.	Data are incomplete. Labels and units may be missing in places, and data presentation is inappropriate in places. Patterns and trends in the data are inadequately described.	Inadequate presentation of data, with many gaps. Inappropriate and inaccurate presentation or treatment of data, with little or no description.	Incomplete data, missing data, no description of patterns and trends. Poorly labelled and presented figures and tables.
Discussion (20%) Should discuss results in light of the scientific literature, should draw conclusions and briefly discuss the limitations.	Outstanding discussion. Limitations to the study are discussed. Conclusions are completely justified by the data.	Excellent discussion. Limitations to the study are outlined. Conclusions are justified by the data.	Good discussion. Some of the limitations to the study may be outlined. Conclusions are drawn, largely supported by the data.	Acceptable discussion. Some of the limitations to the study may be outlined. Conclusions are drawn, but may contain some gaps in logic.	Limited discussion. Limitations to the study are only discussed in a trivial sense. Conclusions that are drawn are somewhat illogical.	Inadequate discussion. Limitations to the study may not be discussed. Conclusions are illogical and not always supported by the data.	Poor discussion. Limitations to the study are not discussed. No conclusions are drawn. Poorly structured, with a weak narrative.
Presentation (10%) The IMRaD structure should be used as outlined on Blackboard. Figures and tables should be drafted professionally.	Outstanding, well-directed presentation, logically and coherently structured, using correct grammar and spelling.	Excellent, well-directed presentation, logically structured, using correct grammar and spelling.	Good quality presentation, well structured, using correct grammar and spelling.	Orderly presentation and structure with acceptable grammar and spelling.	Acceptable presentation and structure, grammar and spelling.	Poor presentation and structure, grammar and spelling.	Inadequate presentation, structure, grammar and spelling.
Referencing (10%) The Harvard referencing system should be used. A good range and depth of literature should be cited.	Extensive evidence of integrating appropriate supplementary sources. Outstanding referencing and bibliography.	Evidence of extensive reading of supplementary sources. Excellent referencing and bibliography.	Evidence of reading a range of supplementary sources. Comprehensive referencing and bibliography.	Evidence of reading directed reading and some supplementary sources. Adequate referencing and bibliography.	Evidence of basic reading only. Limited referencing and bibliography.	Minimal evidence of reading. Inadequate referencing and bibliography.	Little or no evidence of reading. Little or no referencing and bibliography.