

Union Theological College

*Ten Steps to Planning and  
Writing an Excellent  
Assignment*



## TEN STEPS TO PLANNING AND WRITING AN EXCELLENT ASSIGNMENT

Sitting down to prepare and write an assignment can be a daunting task. Following these ten steps will help you to develop good academic practice and thereby improve the quality of the work that you submit. Make sure that you also apply the feedback that you have received from your previous assignments to any new piece of writing.

### **1. Read the assignment title and instructions very carefully**

Begin by analysing the assignment title so that you are sure you know exactly what is being asked of you. It is not enough simply to know the gist of what the question is about. An assignment will normally ask you to answer a specific question, not to write generally. If marking criteria have been published these should also be used to guide your preparation.

Break down the precise question so that you work out the main things that you need to address in your preparation. Once you have separated out the component parts of the question think about possible ways to address them.

Double-check the deadline of when the assessment is due so that you set aside adequate time to complete the assignment. It may help to put all your deadlines on a chart so that you can see at a glance when everything is due.

### **2. Engage with the best available scholarly sources**

You should read as widely as possible in order to familiarise yourself with the best recent scholarship that is relevant to your assignment. Pay particular attention to the module's reading list and make sure that where possible you are interacting with up-to-date sources drawn from a range of books and journal articles. You should endeavour to find relevant material that is not included in the indicative reading because this can aid you in presenting an answer that has a degree of originality.

Although you may make use of internet sites such as Wikipedia or GotQuestions to introduce you to the topic, you should avoid citing these as sources in your written work because in nearly all cases these are inappropriate scholarly sources. Search tools such as ATLA and GoogleScholar will help you identify the best available learning resources. The Gamble Library has a number of guides to help you with this that are available in video and pdf format: <http://www.union.ac.uk/About-Union/Gamble-Library/Gamble-Guides.aspx>

### 3. Make sure to interact with the relevant primary texts

In most of the disciplines there will be primary texts that you will be expected to interact with e.g. the Biblical text, historical sources or the writings of important theologians. It is very important that you demonstrate that your understanding is rooted in first-hand engagement with these sources rather than simply that which is borrowed from the secondary literature.

### 4. Read with purpose and take systematic notes

Rather than starting the book at page one and reading it slowly in a linear fashion many find an active approach to reading such as the SQ3R method helpful.

Survey	Look at the table of contents, the introduction and the conclusion. Are you ready to read the book or do you need a more basic introduction?
Question	Is this book or article relevant to your assignment? If so, how will it help you answer the question?
Read	You are now primed to read the material because you have a sense of the argument, structure and value of the text.
Recall	<p>Rather than writing down everything that seems to look important you should develop a more strategic approach to note taking. Close the book and try to confine yourself to writing down the key points in your own words. Use this writing process to help you clarify and develop your thinking. This will help you avoid a merely passive recording of information and has the potential to transform your reading into an active and constructive process.</p> <p>Identify a few important quotations and add these to your notes – be very accurate in the way in which you record the quotation and make sure to include the exact page numbers or url of any quotations you may end up using.</p>
Review	What information have you gathered? How does what you have read help you answer the question?

### 5. Plan your essay before you start to write

All essays need structure. It is important that you do not present a merely narrative account without any analysis or a coherent argument. Careful planning will help you organise and prioritise your material. If you have defined your essay plan in advance you will find it much easier to actually produce the assignment.

Most assignments will require you to advance an argument that has a clear and

coherent structure. Consequently, it will often be helpful to try to formulate a thesis statement or 'big idea' that summarises your response to the question. You will need to think about how to present supporting evidence for your argument and deal with possible objections that might arise.

As you plan, do think about the readers of the essay. Ask yourself what will be the best way to demonstrate to them that your argument is sound, well-reasoned, supported by compelling evidence and leads logically to your conclusion?

## **6. Structure your essay according to your plan**

Your opening paragraph should not simply introduce the topic in a generic way in order to get it out of the way. Rather, the introduction should include a concise but clear introduction to how you plan to answer the question. Divide up the rest of the essay into paragraphs so that the reader can readily see the layout and progression of your argument. The heart of the essay must fulfil the intentions stated in your introduction and should lead to a definite conclusion. Here you should be ruthless – ensure that every paragraph is linked back to the big idea that you are arguing for. The conclusion is your final chance to recap and summarise the argument you have advanced.

Try structuring the paragraphs in the body of your essay in this way:

- Topic sentence – open the paragraph with a statement, claim or assertion
- Supporting evidence and explanation – marshal appropriate research and explain its validity
- Final sentence – close the paragraph by linking back to the point that you made in the topic sentence

## **7. Cite supporting evidence in an appropriate manner**

Make sure your assignment is not a string of quotations from your research. Instead, cite primary and secondary literature in support of the argument you are seeking to advance. Rather than quote a secondary source verbatim it is often better to paraphrase the text that you are appealing to because this demonstrates that you have read with understanding. As a rule, you should only include an exact quotation from a secondary source if the *way* in which the author says something is as important as *what* they say.

Assignments must be your own work, that is, they must be written in your own words, presenting your own analysis and argument. To use someone else's work or words without acknowledgement is called plagiarism and is regarded by the College and University as an academic offence. Plagiarism involves using the work of others without adequate acknowledgement either intentionally or unintentionally.

You can create a misleading impression in a variety of different ways:

- You fail to place a citation in the text even if you include the text in your bibliography
- You paraphrase by merely changing a few words here and there
- You use a patchwork of phrases copied verbatim from a source
- You use the words of a book without quotation marks and hope no one will notice
- You cut and paste from the internet without clear acknowledgment

This is not only a matter of honesty and academic integrity. If you plagiarise you are undermining the learning experience because you are not working hard to develop your own views and to acquire your own voice as a thinker.

All direct quotations must be indicated with quotation marks. Quotations longer than three lines should be indented (that is, have an increased margin) on both sides, and be single line-spaced (the rest of the text being 1.5 lines or double spaced). Such indented quotations do not require quotation marks.

You should always quote accurately, but for the purpose of integrating quotations you may make minor changes (change a pronoun, for example) as long as you enclose all such changes in square brackets [ ].

A consistent and clear style of citing references in the notes and bibliography is required. The Institute of Theology requires undergraduate students to use the Harvard System of citation. The Learning and Development Service at Queen's provides information on the system. Please consult the Institute of Theology Undergraduate Handbook or visit:

<http://www.qub.ac.uk/directorates/sgc/learning/WritingSkillsResources/Referencing/>

A very helpful Harvard reference guide may be downloaded from:

<http://www.qub.ac.uk/cite2write/harvard.pdf>

A bibliography should be provided at the end of the assignment that includes all books and articles that you have consulted (whether actual quotations are drawn from them or not).

## **8. Produce a first draft**

By now you should have a good idea of what you want to write. You do not need to

stare at a blank screen waiting for the perfect opening line. In fact, you do not even need to start with the introduction. Every paragraph needs to be written, so start to turn your plan into prose from wherever seems best. Remember that this is only the first draft so the important thing is to keep writing.

It is important that you present your assignment with proper spelling, grammar and punctuation. Remember that scholarly writing is very different to spoken language or more informal styles of the written word. Try to be direct, clear and interesting. Simple words and constructions and short sentences are often best, but variety does prevent boredom. Where possible, the use of inclusive language is important.

Take special care to avoid the following:

- contractions e.g. can't, don't, isn't, won't
- incorrect use of the apostrophe e.g. do not confuse it's and its
- clichés, colloquialisms or anything else that is too chatty in style
- common spelling mistakes e.g. where/were, their/there, practise/practice, effect/affect and too/to.

## **9. Redraft, edit and polish your assignment**

This is essential. When you reread your draft you will almost certainly find that it is not as clear or coherent as you had thought. What you thought you had said may not necessarily be there on the paper. You should aim to produce a first full version at least a week before the submission date. This will allow you to step back and gain sufficient distance from your work to identify areas for improvement.

It is much easier to review a document if it is printed out with double-line spacing to accommodate your notes and corrections. Also try reading your work aloud as a way to hear your mistakes and judge how you are getting your point across.

You should proof read and edit your essay for each of the following:

- The flow of the argument – ensure that you have signposted the logical thread that runs through the essay
- Language – proof read your work to check spelling, grammar, punctuation, redundant words and unclear phrases
- Format – make sure you check the layout, font size, margins, line spacing and page numbering
- Referencing – ensure that you include all quotation marks and citations

## 10. Submit your assignment and wait for feedback

Make sure it is submitted on time and follows the guidelines on expression, presentation, length, and referencing outlined below. See also the information about late submission and extenuating circumstances procedures in Appendix 3.

Writing clearly and cogently is an important skill which you can develop during your course at Union College. In order to provide you with clear feedback on your writing skills each piece of written work you submit is returned with 'traffic light' system feedback.

Green	Your writing skills are good. The assignment is well-focused and has a clear introduction and conclusion. The main ideas are presented and arranged to form a coherent whole. The word choice is specific and memorable. Sentences are fluent and expressive. There are virtually no errors of punctuation, spelling, grammar or capitalisation.
Amber	There are some areas where your writing skills could be improved. Some or all of the following may apply: Aspects of the content are irrelevant in terms of topic and task. Sections and paragraphs do not form a clear whole. The flow of the text is abrupt and the relationship between sentences lacks smoothness. There are consistent errors in some areas of grammar, spelling and punctuation.
Red	Your writing skills need to be improved significantly. Some or all of the following may apply: The organisation and arrangement of ideas is neither clear nor coherent. Many sentences lack fluency. Frequent grammatical errors, as well as errors in spelling and punctuation, make comprehension difficult in places.

If more than one piece of written work which you submit receives an amber or red light, we will schedule a meeting with one of your tutors to discuss how you may enhance your writing skills.

## Appendix 1

### ABBREVIATIONS

The following abbreviations are commonly misused. Note the punctuation as well as usage although full stops are tending to drop out of abbreviations in modern usage. Generally, abbreviations may be used in footnotes.

cf.	Latin <i>confer</i> – ‘compare’ normally used to compare opinions or Scripture verses similar to the one being discussed. Note c.f. is incorrect despite being found in some spell checkers.
e.g.	Latin <i>exempli gratia</i> – ‘for example’
etc.	Latin <i>et cetera</i> – ‘and so forth’, ‘and others like it’
ibid.	<i>ibidem</i> – ‘in the same place’  Used in footnotes or endnotes, when you are referring to the <i>same book</i> and the same page as in <i>the previous footnote</i> . Since it always refers to the very last book cited (whether or not that was by the author you intend to cite), be careful in using it. It is probably best to avoid using it.
idem	‘the same’ (author)  This is not an abbreviation and so does not have a full stop after it. It is probably best to avoid using it.
i.e.	<i>id est</i> – ‘that is’
v./vv.	verses/verses  Note the full stop; and that there is always a space between this and the verse number. It is NOT used when the book and/or chapter are cited (e.g., Jn 1:14). For example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• In v. 5 there is a textual variant.</li><li>• Chapter three contains a reflection by the author in vv. 31-36.</li><li>• The author’s reflection on the Son of Man is at Jn 3:31-36</li></ul>

**Note:** Conventions for the transliteration of Hebrew and Greek script are dealt with in the appropriate classes.



## **Appendix 2**

*The Harvard system of referencing is now used for all Queen's undergraduate modules. However, for **Queen's postgraduate assessments** as well as some **Union College Ministry assessments** the Chicago Manual of Style is still used and the following information is relevant.*

### **Footnotes**

#### **Why use footnotes?**

Footnotes are necessary to acknowledge all quotations and key ideas from your sources which are not common knowledge. If a statement is not extraordinary, it may be included in the body of the paper without need of further comment in a footnote. For example, 'Jerusalem fell in AD 70' is common knowledge and does not need to be referenced. Put footnotes at the bottom of each page, not at the end of the assignment.

#### **Use footnotes to give the source of:**

- direct quotations
- an unusual or disputed opinion
- important statistics
- any similar facts which support the argument or expand on it in a way not possible within the confines of a short paper
- a pithy or memorable phrase.

#### **Other points about footnotes:**

- Footnotes are essential to an assignment not only to avoid plagiarism, but also to indicate your sources to the marker. They strengthen the authority of your work.
- You may also wish to use footnotes to make additional points, comment on sources, or present information which supports your argument but which would clutter the main body of the assignment. However, you must avoid doing this excessively.**Footnote Numbers**
- These should appear at the end of the quotation, or at the end of the passage to which they refer, and should be placed after the full stop or other punctuation.
- Numbers should be used consecutively throughout the assignment and should be superscript.
- Footnotes should appear at the bottom of the relevant page.

#### **For more information see:**

<http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/home.html>

## *Appendix 3*

### **Exceptional Circumstances**

Occasionally, circumstances can arise which are outside a student's control and can prevent them from performing to their full potential in assessments and examinations. This may be due to illness or injury, a serious illness affecting close family member, bereavement or an unforeseen and unpreventable event leading to stress.

#### **Queen's Students:**

The Institute of Theology has set up the Exceptional Circumstances Committee to consider such cases of students. Guidance and the relevant forms are available from the Institute Sharepoint (<https://intranet.qol.qub.ac.uk/theology/>)

#### **PTFI/PGDipMin Students:**

Arrangements have been made for PTFI and PGDipMin students in relation to exceptional circumstances. Please see page 45 of the College Handbook 2018/2019. The relevant form is available on the College online Student Resource Centre as well as at Appendix 3 of the College Handbook 2018/2019.