The Writing Process Step 3: Drafting an Assignment

Time management

When you are writing assignments for your university courses, expect to revise your written work a minimum of three times before it is ready for assessment. Revising means making large-scale changes to your paper, such as re-developing and re-drafting sections. Therefore, you will need time not only to generate ideas and to plan your assignment before the drafting stage, but also to revise and edit your work before submitting it.

The best approach is to draw up a timetable for each assignment. Your timetable should allow time for you to complete the five stages of the writing process: inventing, planning, drafting, revising and editing.

Note that drafting (attempting to write your draft or part of your draft) comes in the middle of the writing process, not at the end. In other words, do not attempt to do all of your research and then ‘write up’ your draft at the last minute. Writing down your ideas and notes, planning and organising your paper’s structure, and drafting and revising are all part of the ongoing writing process.

Never submit a rough draft for assessment - which is what would happen if you did not revise and edit your writing.
A Blueprint for Success

Just as every person has a unique fingerprint, no two approaches to writing are the same. Your university career is the opportunity to discover the most effective writing methods for you. The following options are ones with which you can experiment:

- Write first thing in the morning.
- Write when your environment is quietest.
- Work in short spurts of 20 minutes.
- Make a checklist or table and tick off each small task as you progress.
- Write your first draft by hand.
- Use computer software (like Inspiration®) to generate ideas, mind map and plan.

Make use of all the written feedback you receive, from tutors or from other students, to help you work towards the most successful writing methods for you.

Look through past writing assignments carefully to try to see what types of errors you commonly make - for example, you might often have difficulty in structuring an argument, in creating strong paragraphs, with sentence structure, or with word choice. You can then take steps to try to ensure that you do not repeat the same types of mistakes. Also be sure to identify the types of strengths that are common in your writing, and continue to build upon these strengths in every assignment.

Check the assignment criteria and the general writing guidelines in your module or course handbook each time you tackle an assignment.
Knowledge and Skills

Every assignment requires you to display certain content knowledge that is in line with the learning objectives for the associated module. Learning objectives are usually stated in your handbook and in the assignment criteria, but if you are unsure, ask your tutor.

In addition to content knowledge, you need to identify what type of writing skills each assignment demands. Here is a list of assignment types and the kinds of writing each type requires. For more information, see CAW's handouts on each assignment type.

An Essay

There are different types of essays, but the aim of most essays is to persuade your audience of a particular point of view. You will need to supply evidence (clearly referenced in the Harvard referencing style laid out in the CU Guide to Referencing in Harvard Style) to back up every key point that you make. You will also need to discuss each point fully by providing explanations and concrete examples.

To structure an essay, it is essential to come up with a thesis statement or statement of argument that sets out your main point in simple terms (you cannot persuade a reader if you cannot state clearly what it is that you are aiming to persuade him/her). An argument is analytical, not descriptive, and involves setting up a kind of debate in the main body of your assignment where you present a balance of evidence but convince the reader of a key idea or perspective.

A Report

You are also required to write an argument in a report because you do not just describe the subject, you also need to give an analysis of the subject (e.g., whether a company is performing well or not). Therefore, a report must also have a clear thesis statement or statement of argument.
Reflective Writing

This type of assignment requires you to explain fully what you have experienced, what you have learnt, and how you will apply this lesson to your professional practice. Often in academic writing students are discouraged from using the first person (for example, ‘I think that…’). This is because using ‘I’ makes writing sound subjective, not objective, and therefore less convincing. However, in reflective writing you may refer to yourself in the first person.

A Literature Review

This type of assignment can be a paper in its own right, or it can be one section or chapter of a larger research paper. A literature review requires you to demonstrate your knowledge of the literature on a topic, and also to review this research (think of a film review, which identifies key strengths and weaknesses). As you critique the literature - by explaining how it is useful but also by pointing out its limitations - identify a gap in the field.

A gap is an aspect of the topic that has not yet been researched, or that has been under-researched or inconclusively researched. If you are writing a 3rd-year dissertation, master’s dissertation or doctoral thesis, use this gap to develop your research problem or question, which should aim to fill this gap. Keep in mind that most literature reviews require you to formulate a thesis statement or statement of argument and to use the literature under review to make a point, not just a list.