The University of Nottingham

UNITED KINGDOM · CHINA · MALAYSIA

Planning and preparing to write assignments

An Academic Support Handbook for students

Introduction to 'Planning and preparing to write assignments'

This handbook on preparing to write assignments is designed to help you develop your strategies for planning. Hopefully, it will help you to get the most out of your experience of writing at University and provide encouragement for managing this type of assessment. A list of useful resources referred to here is provided at the end of the handbook.

- What sort of writer are you?
    - Writing University-level assignments
    - Where and when to work on writing tasks

- Understanding the question: Process words
    - Focusing on the content or topic
    - Course and subject-specific types of writing

- Planning your writing
    - Types of planning – spider diagrams / Mind Mapping™, outlines, lists
    - Planning assignments by paragraphs
    - "Help! Planning does not work for me!"

- Start thinking critically
    - Using SQ3R for reading and notetaking

- Gathering information and keeping good records
    - Building your list of sources

- Preparing for writing: presentation and style
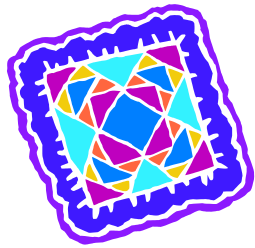   - Academic conventions

About this handbook

This handbook has been written and compiled for the students at the University of Nottingham by Dr Lisa Rull with assistance from Lynette Outram and Dr Barbara Taylor.

It has drawn on the teaching experience of the University of Nottingham Academic Support team and their associated hand-out material. The package on study skills for mature students produced initially by Dr Mark Dale for the former School of Continuing Education (now Centre for Continuing Education, part of the School of Education) has proven helpful. A list of 'Useful sources' is also provided at the end of the document.

Updated September 2014

The University of Nottingham
UNITED KINGDOM · CHINA · MALAYSIA

What sort of writer are you?

Creme and Lea (1997) identified four types of writer: you may recognise yourself in one of these, or may find you use a combination of approaches.

The diver writer		The diver leaps straight in and starts the writing process early on, in order to find out what she wants to say. The diver starts anywhere to see what emerges, before working towards a plan.
The patchwork writer		The writer works on sections (perhaps using headings) quite early in the process, and combines with linking ideas and words later
The grand plan writer		This person reads and makes notes, and leaves writing a plan or beginning writing until they have an almost complete picture of the essay ready in their head
The architect writer		The architect has a sense of the structure (perhaps before the content) and could produce a complex plan or spider diagram early in the process

The University of
Nottingham

UNITED KINGDOM · CHINA · MALAYSIA

Writing University-level assignments

Further advice is available from Studying Effectively which has a section on 'Writing' http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/studyingeffectively/writing/index.aspx. This site includes a number of video clips of students talking about writing at University.

The University of
Nottingham

UNITED KINGDOM · CHINA · MALAYSIA

Where and when to work on writing tasks (1)

It can be helpful to think about where you need to be to prepare, produce and revise your writing. You may not want to work through all the stages in the same location; for example, you may prefer to prepare for writing in the library (so you can easily access resources) or you may prefer to prepare in your room/accommodation (so you are not tempted to gather too many materials).

Choosing the right space to work in

Your room (study / bedroom)

Library / resource centre at University

Another room in the house (kitchen / living room table)

Computer room at University

Elsewhere (e.g. café)

What are the benefits of the location e.g. accessibility to materials (lecture notes, books), 24-hour access (opening hours)?
What problems may you experience e.g. distractions from family/friends, noise?

The University of Nottingham

UNITED KINGDOM · CHINA · MALAYSIA

Where and when to work on writing tasks (2)

The furniture and environment
- Your desk: have you got a clear working space?
- Your chair: are you comfortable and supported?

- Can you sit near a window (for natural light and ventilation)?
- Is the lighting bright enough / too bright? Do you need a spotlight?
- Clocks: does it help to have a clock visible?
- Noise and sound

- Does listening to music help you concentrate?   Sometimes, certain types of music can help with concentration (usually instrumental music, such as classical music).
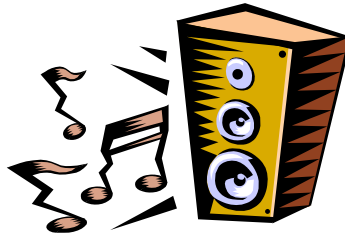
- Do you prefer to listen to music on headphones or via speakers? What impact could this have on your neighbours or family?

- Do you prefer silence? Is the University library too noisy or too quiet for you?

Time of day for working: when and how long

- Is this a productive time of the day to work? You may prefer to do certain tasks at a particular time of the day.

- Are you a morning person? If you are alert early in the day, you may want to reading or writing tasks now.

- Do you prefer to work in long chunks of time? Check out our 'Handbook on Revision and Exams' which may help you understanding more about your learning style and how memory works.

- Think carefully about the consequences of working late at night – how this may affect your eating and sleeping patterns, as well as attending lectures.

The University of Nottingham

UNITED KINGDOM · CHINA · MALAYSIA

Understanding the question: Process words

It is important to understand what the question is asking you to do. The 'process word' or instruction identifies this. Below is a list of common 'process words':

Account for	Explain why something happens, clarify, give reasons for
Analyse	Identify the main points and significant features. Examine critically and/or in great detail.
Assess	Identify the value of, weigh up (See also Evaluate)
Comment on	Identify the main issues, providing reactions and evidence (examples, sources, authors) to support your points. Avoid personal opinions lacking supporting evidence.
Compare	Show similarities between two (or more) things. Indicate relevance, importance and consequence of these similarities.
Contrast	Show differences between two (or more) things. Indicate relevance, importance and consequence of these differences. If appropriate, justify why one item/argument may be more convincing or preferred.
Compare and contrast	Show the similarities and differences between two (or more) things.
Criticise	Make a judgement – based on and using examples, evidence and reasoning – about the merit of two or more related things: for example, theories, opinions, models, items.
Critically evaluate	Weigh arguments for and against something, indicating and then assessing the strength of the evidence on both sides. Be clear about your criteria for how you judge which side is preferable/more convincing.
Define	Provide the exact meaning or a word, concept or phrase. Where appropriate you may need to identify other alternative definitions and/or disagreements about the definition.
Describe	Give the main characteristics or features of something, or give a detailed account of it.
Discuss	Explain and give arguments for and against an issue; consider the implications of. Provide evidence to support your points. Often used in connection with a quotation or statement that can be disputed.
Distinguish or differentiate between	Look for differences between…
Evaluate	Assess the worth, importance, validity, effectiveness of something using evidence. There will probably be a case both for and against (see Assess)
Examine	Look in detail – this may also involve 'critical evaluation' as well
Explain	Clearly identify why something happens or why it is the way that it is.
How far…	Usually involves looking at evidence/arguments for and against and weighing them up. (see also To what extent…)

The University of Nottingham

UNITED KINGDOM · CHINA · MALAYSIA

Understanding the question: Process words (continued)

Illustrate	Make clear and explicit, usually requiring carefully chosen examples
Interpret	Give the meaning and relevance of date or other material
Justify	Provide evidence supporting an argument/point of view/idea. Show why a decision or conclusions are made, considering and exploring objections.
Narrate	Focus on what happened as a series of events
Outline	Give only the main features or points on a topic, omitting minor details and emphasising the main structure (see Summarise)
Relate	Show similarities and connections between two or more things
State	Give the main features in brief and clear form
Summarise	Draw out the main points only (see Outline)
To what extent	Consider how far something is true and how convincing the evidence is, including any ways in which the proposition remains unproven (see also How far…)
Trace	Follow the order of different stages in an event or process

Process words list adapted from Cottrell (2003) The Study Skills Handbook. Second Edition. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan p.155

If you want to test yourself on 'process words', try the activity on the Open University website http://www.open.ac.uk/skillsforstudy/understanding-the-question.php

When reading essay or exam questions, remember to use the process word to help you break down the question and identify:

- Process word – WHAT you need to do (your action)
…which will be used to write about the:
- Topic – the broad subject (there may be more than one)
- Focus – the specific aspect of the topic (again: there may be more than one)
You may need to decide, depending on what the module was about, which aspect(s) – the topic or the focus – has greatest importance

Sometimes questions may begin with other types of words such as 'is' / 'was' 'why' 'what is' or 'how important' – it can often help to write in the implied 'process words' or action
e.g.   (To what extent) is / was…   (Discuss / Identify) what is…
         (Discuss) why…   (Discuss) how important…

Here is an example showing how a question can be broken down:

| What is the	contribution of behaviouralism	to political science?
Process words	Focus (an aspect covered in the module)	Topic (based on what the module is about)

Focusing on the content or topic

Once you have identified the process word(s), you will need to identify the topic, if there is any specific aspect you should focus on, and if there are any restrictions that limit that focus even further.

Sample question:
To what extent have business taxation reforms introduced in the United Kingdom since the early 1990s' affected SMEs?

- Instruction: To what extent
- Topic: business taxation reforms
- Aspect/focus: affected <u>SMEs</u> ------------------------------------
- Restriction 1: United Kingdom
- Restriction 1: since the early 1990s
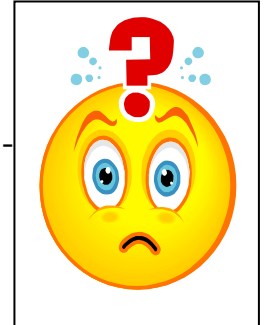
Subject-specific vocabulary

This question provides an example of the sort of subject-specific vocabulary you are likely to encounter in assignment questions: SMEs.

SMEs are <u>S</u>mall and <u>M</u>edium-sized <u>E</u>nterprises, and if you are studying a business-related module you are likely to come across this word. There are likely to be subject-specific words in your assignment questions.

If you are unsure what a word means, try checking:

- module handbook (there may be a glossary of key vocabulary)
- lecture notes
- lecture notes from previous modules/courses
- a subject reference book e.g. Dictionary of Business and Management; Dictionary of Philosophy; Encyclopaedia and Dictionary of Medicine, Nursing, and Allied Health; Dictionary of Social Work

Question elements adapted from McMillan and Weyers (2006) <u>The Smarter Student</u>. Harlow: Pearson Education p.222

Course and subject-specific types of writing

Different courses and degree subjects require different types of writing. For example, if you are studying science or business, then you may be more likely to have to write reports. If you are studying on a course with placements in health or social care settings, or in education, you may have to write reflective pieces. On courses involving visual or 3-d creative activities, you may have to develop a portfolio or workbook of your research processes.

Report writing
The University of Leicester provides advice on planning and structuring a report.

http://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/ld/resources/writing/writing-resources/reports

Writing for science
The Modern Physics Style Guide provides a good overview on writing for science – Appendix A is the key section http://rmp.aps.org/files/rmpguide.pdf

Reflective writing

The Health E-Learning and Media Team (HELM) website includes links to a variety of helpful Re-useable Learning Objects (RLOs). Amongst the RLOs available is one on Reflective Writing. This includes diagrams, a quiz, audio clips and video clips with a transcript of what is said about both individual reflection and reflecting on group experiences.

http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/helm/resources/learning-objects/rlo-school.aspx

Planning your writing

Why is planning useful?
Planning can help you organise and prioritise your information and reading so you focus on what you need to write about and remember the word count.

When can planning start?
Some aspects of planning begin from when you receive your list of questions to choose from. You probably already do some preliminary planning when you try to select which essay to write:

- Which questions do I feel more interested in?
- Is this because I have already got some information or sources which may help me to write one of the questions? (Have we had the lecture / seminar on the topic?)
- What do I think this question wants me to do – and do I feel I can have a go at it?

You may also be doing some 'planning' when you decide which sources and authors to start reading first:

- Breaking down the question can help you work out the main terms and topics you may need to write about – and therefore what information you need to clarify before you start reading in-depth (see 'Process Words')

You may start off with a very sketchy plan – just identifying what the three or four main sections of your essay need you to do, and based on breaking down the question. Remember the question from 'Focusing on the Content or Topic'?

> To what extent have business taxation reforms introduced in the United Kingdom since the early 1990s' affected SMEs?
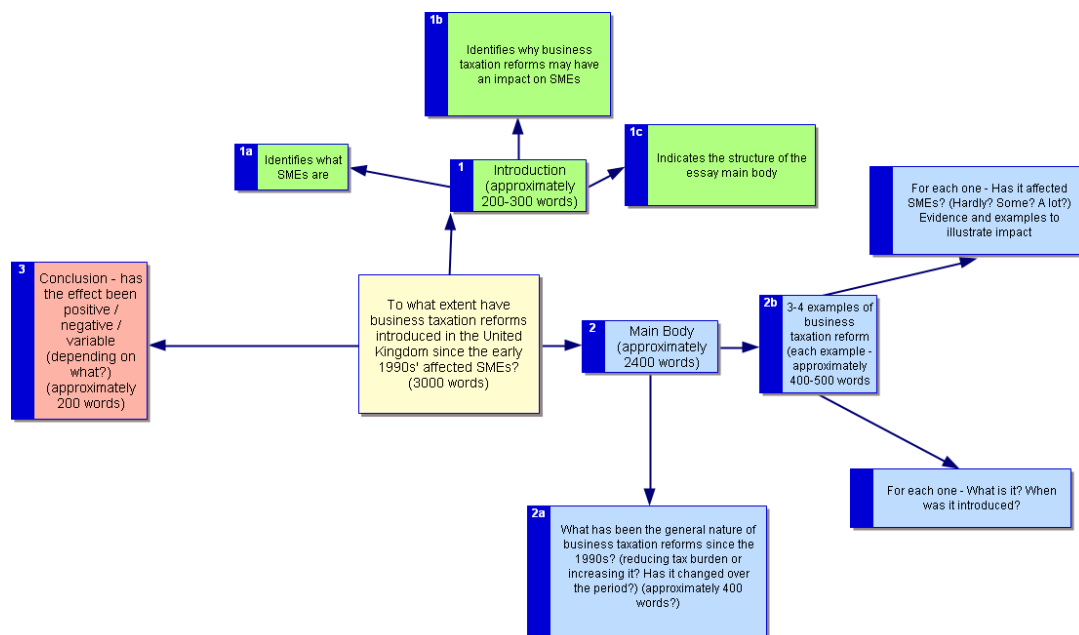
Types of planning: spider diagrams / Mind Mapping™, outlines, lists

Whatever type of plan you may do, this can help you structure your thoughts and ideas.

Spider diagrams and Mind-Mapping™
Start with an idea in the centre of your page – it may help to make a note of:
- the title
- the word limit

Think about the ideas that could be included: how they connect to each other. Mind-mapping is a particular way of organising ideas, and there are a number of mapping software programmes available that can help draw these (e.g. Inspiration, Mind Manager)
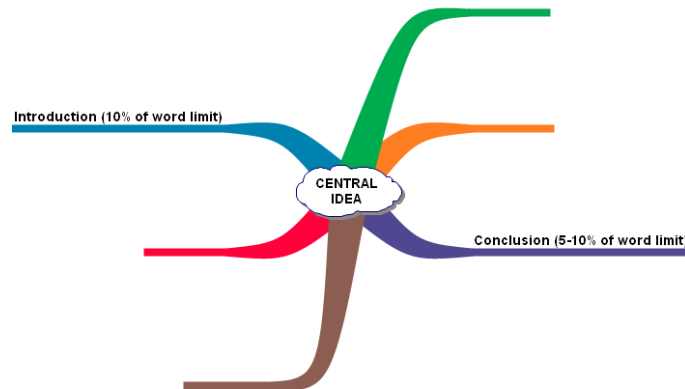
Outlines and lists
Many mapping software programmes allow you to view your plans in both outline and diagram form

CENTRAL IDEA
I.   Introduction (10% of word limit)
II.
III.
IV.
V.
VI.   Conclusion (5-10% of word limit)

Outlines/lists can allow you to see how ideas follow on from each other. Think carefully about the order of paragraphs and what links each: is the link …

- further information? – adding more detail, another example
- a contrast or counter-argument? – an alternative, highlighting a problem
- information about consequences? – showing the impact, usually uses words relating to 'because', 'so' 'therefore'
- showing the next stage in a sequence – for example, in an experiment

The University of Nottingham

UNITED KINGDOM · CHINA · MALAYSIA

Planning your assignment by paragraph

Theme
- State the theme in one sentence   - Why is the theme important?   - What evidence are you going to use to prove your point?   - What is the source of the evidence? (what is the reference)   - How can you link this paragraph to the main theme of the assignment and can you link it to other paragraphs?   - How many words should you allocate to this?

- Create a set of cards that you can shuffle, amend or discard until you find a suitable running order
- Decide on themes by using spider-diagrams/mind-maps, key topic headings or any other planning technique you find useful

Paragraph plans
Sometimes, if you have already started to draft out your ideas in written form, it can help to go back over the text and create a 'retrospective plan'. A short summary of the keywords or topics from each paragraph can help you see where there may be repetition of ideas – or where you have missed something out.

"Help! Planning does not work for me!"

Firstly, try not to get worried if you find planning difficult. Your course tutors may be able to advise you, or you can come and talk to us at Academic Support.

As discussed in "Preparation: what type of writer are you?", there can be many approaches to writing and certain consequences can follow from your actions.

E.g.

Action	Reasoning	Potential consequence
I do detailed plans	Provides direction	• Cannot stick to plan • Too many points to make
I cannot plan at the start	Do reading and notes before deciding what is relevant Gives you lots of knowledge and understanding about the topic	• Too many notes • Lots of highlighting on my texts • Too much information gathered • Lots of irrelevant information for the question • Difficult to prioritise what to include

For example, you may dive straight in to writing and read material as you go along so that you get started with both research and writing quickly. You may feel that it will cut down how much reading you need to do if you work out your ideas first and then look for sources to back up your points. However, you may find you have to revise or edit your work quite a lot to stay focused on the question. Additionally, if you find it hard to paraphrase or summarise what a source says in your own words, you may find it hard to find sources that make exactly the point you have written.

Other students will read each text in turn and then write about it, perhaps piecing together information and ideas in sections. This way they can keep control of all the information about a particular text or topic. However, paragraphs / sections should logically follow on from each other. It can be hard to get all the material into an appropriate order, with links to make things clear. There may also be repetition if you write about each source in turn, and you may miss some of the connections between ideas (not being critical enough).

Preparation: Start thinking critically

Further advice is available from Studying Effectively 'Creative thinking' section within Managing your studies http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/studyingeffectively/studying/creativecriticalthinking/index.aspx.

Academic writing will usually need you to deal with:

- What? – factual and/or descriptive information e.g. what, who, when, where
    - can include giving examples and supporting these with quotes or summarising/paraphrasing source material in your own words (do not forget to still provide a reference to a source as evidence)

- How? – identifying processes and methods (again, can include giving examples to illustrate how something is/was done)

But the most important aspect is

- Significance – this is the most important as it deals with 'why?' or 'what if?'
    - What are the consequences of accepting a point of view or idea?
    - What is the impact of a theory or concept or an event or an action?
    - What is the relative importance of a piece of evidence (e.g. a point of view, an interpretation etc)?
    - Why do viewpoints or nursing researchers disagree/agree/change opinions over time?
    - What is the weight of evidence – how and why is the evidence convincing? Are there enough examples to illustrate this point?
    - Look for connections between points

Using SQ3R for reading and notetaking

SQ3R: survey, question, read, recall, review			
S		**Survey**	What is your text? Look at the title, front and back cover information, contents, and index – or the abstract. What do the introduction and conclusion tell you?
		Question	Is it relevant to your particular focus? What exactly do I want to learn / what level of detail do I need?
3	**R**	**Read**	Read material in small chunks – regularly checking back to your title or purpose for reading this text. Remember your question.
		Recall	Close the text and try and note down what the key points were. Re-read and identify key phrases or quotations – remember to use quote-marks
		Review	Did you answer your question? What are the key points? Are your notes clear? Can you summarise this text without looking back at it? Discuss it with others

Survey – prepare yourself for reading. Do you need to start with something more basic to give you an introduction to the subject?

Question – work out how you you want to use this information. Is it preparatory reading before you go into more detailed material? Which section could it help you write (your introduction? Is it about one of the examples you will discuss?)

Read – try not to read for too long.

Recall – think about how you want to take notes and what sort of information you need to write down. Do you want to do visual notes such as mind-maps or spider diagrams (see 'Planning your writing' and 'Types of planning')? Try to summarise in your own words wherever possible. Any key phrases or sentences should be accurately written out with quote marks at the start and end of the author's words.

Review – check what information you have gathered? Do your notes reflect the key points from the source?

Gathering information and keeping good records

Reading journals can help you keep track of your searches and your actions on located sources and materials. Choose a format that suits you e.g.

➢ plain notebook – so you can do a page per day

➢ combined plain notebook with a-z section so you can organise useful resources in alphabetical order (to help build your bibliography/reference list)

➢ small notebook so it is portable

Process of searching: make a note of...
1. Date of your search(es) – at the top of the page is best
2. Keywords used
3. Locations searched (e.g. databases) – UNLOC library? It may be a specific database (e.g. PubMed) or it may be a general search location (e.g. Web of Science)

You may find that different databases and locations for searching have different bits of information (boxes to complete) to produce an effective search. You may need to keep a separate record – maybe at the back of your notebook) as to how each search system works.
Do think about printing out a screenshot of how the screen is laid out to help you recall where information needs to be entered.

4. Once you have done your search - how many records are found? – this may be 0 (zero) or 235649 (lots!)
5. Keywords or terms used to narrow/expand the search (e.g. date published, additional keywords, language of publication)
6. How many records do you find now?
7. Which ones followed up? – you may want to print out the list of how many found (once reasonable length, or just the first 20 records?)
   ❖ abstract - read/printed/saved
   ❖ useful/not useful? – why not helpful??? (so you avoid it next time, or if it becomes helpful for something different)
   ❖ full text - read/printed/saved
   ❖ notes taken or copy printed off [where stored?] – system for collected or filing notes

Building your list of sources

1. Find at least one source (preferably one which includes a reference list / bibliography of sources)
   a. Check your module handbook for recommended reading
   b. Check lecture notes and PowerPoint handouts for authors names or sources

2. Once you have one source, you can potentially find more
   Authors
   a. Has the author written anything else on the subject? (before or since)
   b. Are they a significant author on this topic (do they appear more than once on your reading list? Are there a lot of texts by them in the library? What is their current status in your discipline/subject area?)
   c. Check citation indexes for whether this author/item has been cited by other sources since it was published

   Titles and keywords
   d. Can you use the title to identify 'keywords' to look for further sources?
   e. If the item is an article, does the article identify keywords?
   f. Can you look for other articles published in the same journal?

   Reference lists / bibliographies
   g. Use the references or bibliography to find earlier potentially relevant sources

3. Evaluating what to follow up and how much detail you need
   o Look back to your initial plan
   o Look at your list of possible sources to use
   o Which section would each source be most useful for?
   o Remember – don't spend too long getting background information

Preparing for writing: presentation and style

Check what your department prefers:
- Text layout – double-spaced with an extra line space between paragraphs

Chen's (2006) study used a smaller sample group of 114 hospital patients aged over 65 years of age, selected by accidental sampling. Accidental sampling compromises a specific group and only those available at that time are selected; this sampling method provided the study with the required range of patients for its research as the patients used gave a variety within their target group (Parahoo, 2006).

The study evaluated a wide range of factors, to evaluate the risk factors associated with malnutrition. Research was taken using a face-to-face interview by a trained nurse within 48 hours of admission. The evaluating factors were: age, oral health, cognitive status, visual/hearing impairments, medication use, social economic status, functional status and social support, depressive symptoms and nutritional status. The results showed that risk factors to malnutrition were higher medication intakes, female gender, lower functional status and higher depressive state.

- Margins (top and bottom) – usually approx. 2cm (use the 'Header/Footer' as space to add module code details etc, and for page numbering)

- Margins (sides) – usually approx. 3cm on left and 2.5 on right (may be more for longer assignments such as dissertations which may need binding)

- Font choice – use a simple sans serif font such as Verdana (used throughout most this handbook) or Arial

- Font size – Verdana and Arial are slightly larger sized fonts so 11 will be large enough (as used here). Times New Roman (a serif font) is smaller and so usually needs to be in 12.

Academic Conventions

First person or third person?

First person
- Reflective writing will probably allow you to talk more about your personal experiences – e.g. for some Counselling courses, Nursing and Midwifery, Social Work, Teaching etc (practice-based courses)
- You can use words like 'I' 'me' 'my'
- It is a good idea to use a recommended reflective cycle to help organise your reflections about your actions and experiences (e.g. Gibbs, 1988)
- Make sure you do not spend too much of your word limit just telling your reader the story of what happened ('what' and 'how')
- Allow enough space to talk about 'why' you felt that way ('significance' – see 'Start Thinking Critically')

Third person
- Most academic writing will be written in the third person because it is less subjective
- You should avoid words like 'I' 'me' 'my'
- Try 'This essay focuses on …' rather than 'I will focus on …'
- Academic writing in the third person stops the essay being too personal – any other student could have written the same essay using these sources

Avoid contractions
- Write in full words like 'did not' and 'is not' (rather than didn't, isn't etc.)

Avoid conversational phrases and metaphors
- We do not always realise how often we use phrases that are common in conversation or the number of metaphors or clichés we use to explain our thoughts. Leave out or rephrase these sorts of words and phrases:

Phrase	What to do	How to do it differently
sort of / kind of	Avoid	Unless you want to say 'a bit' or 'slightly'
you know	Avoid – your reader does not know unless you give them some evidence	
gonna		use 'going to'
to the bitter end	Avoid	Try 'until the end of…'
that wasn't the half of it because…		'that was not the whole issue because…'
lots of stuff	Be more explicit	try 'lots of…' and identify what you are discussing

The University of Nottingham

UNITED KINGDOM · CHINA · MALAYSIA

Useful sources

Cottrell, S. (2003) The Study Skills Handbook. 2nd ed. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. [4th ed. published 2013]

Creme, P. and Lea, Mary R. (1997) Writing at University: A Guide for Students. Buckingham: Open University Press

Gibbs, G. (1988) Learning by Doing: A guide to teaching and learning methods. London: Further Education Unit.

Levin, P. (2007) Conquer Study Stress.   Maidenhead: Open University Press.

McMillan, K. and Weyers, J. (2006) The Smarter Student: Study Skills and Strategies for Success at University. Harlow: Pearson Education

Open University (2009) Activity: Process Words. Skills for OU Study. Available at: http://www.open.ac.uk/skillsforstudy/understanding-the-question.php. Accessed on: 24 Sept 2012.

Palmer, S. & Puri, A. (2006) Coping with Stress at University: A Survival Guide. London: Sage.

University of Nottingham (2009) Study Resources. Academic Support. Available at: http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/StudentServices/StudyResources.   Accessed on: 15 Sept 2014.

University of Nottingham (2009) Counselling Service. Available at: http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/counselling/index.aspx. Accessed on: 15 Sept 2014.

University of Nottingham (2009) U-Now: Open Courseware. Available at: http://unow.nottingham.ac.uk/resources.aspx. Accessed on: 15 Sept 2014.

University of Nottingham (2009) Past Exam Papers [restricted access via Student Portal]. Available at http://www/is/gateway/exampapers.phtml. Accessed on: 13 July 2011.

University of Nottingham (2009) Studying effectively. Available at: http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/studyingeffectively/home.aspx.   Accessed on: 15 Sept 2014.