



The Non-writer's Guide to Successful Writing Assignments

Many students have turned in an essay, only to receive a comment from the instructor such as “You did not follow instructions” or “Proofread, please!” What you wrote may have been brilliant, but if you have not paid attention to the assignment instructions, or your essay is full of technical problems, all your work may result in a disappointing grade. Follow these steps to ensure that you understand the assignment and write the best essay possible.

1. Remind yourself of the importance of good writing to your future.

- Ignore the little voice in your head that says writing assignments are unimportant or just busy work.
- Tell yourself that good writing practices will improve your grade in all your classes, and effective communication will set you apart from people in the workplace who have similar skills.

2. Carefully read the assignment until you understand it.

- Don't skim – read it carefully.
- Assess what type of essay is required: Process? Compare & Contrast? Expository? Descriptive? Argumentative? A hybrid?
- Determine the *purpose* of the essay – Entertain? Inform? Persuade? Analyze? A combination?
- Pay attention to any special instructions such as working in groups, journaling, including visual elements, and so on.
- If you don't understand the assignment – ask! Better to bother the instructor than get a bad grade.

3. Break the assignment down into parts, making a note of all due dates.

- Every writing assignment has a pre-writing or invention stage. Do you have to contribute to a forum or turn in anything in this phase?
- Take note of the date your research needs to be completed, as well as when your initial and final drafts are due.
- Write down all dates on an old-fashioned planner so that you can make a concrete work plan.
- Work in short, regular segments instead of waiting until the last minute.
- Use technology to automate reminders so that something does not slip through the cracks.

4. Choose a topic.

- If you are allowed to choose your own topic, select an issue that is Current, Debatable, Researchable, and Manageable.
- Keep narrowing down your topic until you can tackle it in one essay.

- The more local and concrete your topic is, the more persuasive you will be.

5. Pre-write, pre-write, pre-write!

- This will be covered in more detail in another module, but the more thoroughly you brainstorm, discuss, journal, and research before you start writing, the easier your writing task will be.
- A good outline is worth the effort; it acts as a skeleton on which to hang the organs, muscles, and connecting tissue of your essay.

6. Start research early.

- Research is arduous and takes more time than you think it will.
- Google and other search engines have spoiled us into thinking that our first search effort will lead to the perfect result; library research is not like that. Scholarly research requires a lot of reading and analyzing studies and sources until you find the perfect sources.
- Record your citation information right away so you do not have to go back and find it later.

7. Leave time for editing and proofreading

- Let someone look over your draft before you turn it in. A fresh pair of eyes can often see issues that we miss.
- Learn to take criticism – if you were standing in the street about to get hit by a bus, you would want someone to give you the truth.
- Proofread for punctuation and spelling issues before you turn the first draft in. Tell yourself, “This is a FIRST draft, not a ROUGH draft!”