Planning Your Assignment

LEAP Online

Academic Writing (Level 2)

Contents

Introduction

As discussed in the 'An Introduction to Academic Writing' tutorial, during your time at the University of Bolton you will be required to engage in different types of academic writing tasks. While academic writing is no easy feat, a common mistake University students make is to start writing their assignment shortly after reading the Module Guide. In reality, for you to produce a quality piece of academic writing, there are various steps you should undertake, starting with understanding the question and planning your answer.

Irrespective of your level of study, the general writing process for producing a well-structured assignment will remain the same. Therefore, this tutorial aims to support students with the process of deconstructing the question and planning a response – the foundation of your academic writing.

Analyse the Question

As alluded to in the introduction to this tutorial, many students choose to begin the writing process by immediately preparing a draft response to the question, without clear focus and allowing time to plan. While assignment deadlines are a common aspect of university life, time management skills often evade students through fear of the time restraints imposed by the assignment criteria.

Why should you waste time analysing a question? If this is a question you often ask yourself, it's important to remember that if you misinterpret the learning outcome, you risk losing out on valuable marks or, even worst, failing the assignment. Therefore, the first step in the writing process is to understand the question. By taking the time to fully understand the question at the beginning of the writing process, you can feel confident the content of your assignment will be relevant and your background reading is concentrated in the correct areas.

Let's look at the deconstruction techniques you can use to understand the question.

Deconstruction

A useful technique is to deconstruct the question to identify 'Command,' 'Subject' and 'Limit' words. Let's look at these in more detail.

Command words

Command words, also known as instructional or directive words, are often verbs that explain how you should answer the question. Words, such as 'analyse,' 'examine' and 'evaluate' are common Command words that will often appear in learning outcome. Below are some of the words that may appear:

Example command words		
Create	Evaluate	Analyse
Examine	Demonstrate	Explain
Discuss	Describe	Identify

Theory

Bloom's Revised Taxonomy
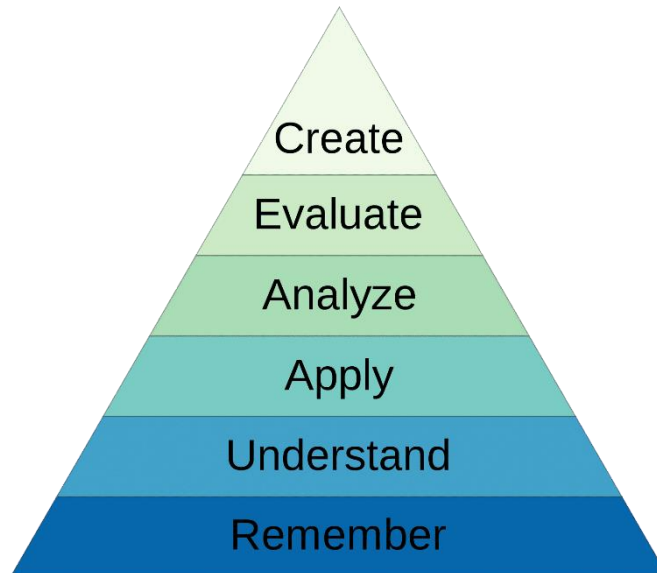
Bloom's Revised Taxonomy (2001, cited in Ruhl, 2021), provides education professionals with guidance on how to create learning outcome. The Command words in the table above have been placed in an order of growing complexity, bottom to top. From 'Identify,' 'Describe' and 'Discuss' through to 'Analyse, 'Evaluate' and 'Create,' these words aim to challenge your higher order thinking skills.

On this basis, therefore, you will find that Command words will change as you advance through the different levels of study at the University of Bolton. Let's take a look.

University of Bolton Learning Outcomes

Examples of Command words appropriate to the level of study include:

Level 3 and HE4 (first year undergraduate):

- Explain
- Describe
- Discuss
- Outline

HE5 (2nd year undergraduate):

- Analyse
- Appraise
- Compare and contrast

HE6 and HE7 (3rd year undergraduate and postgraduate):

- Critically appraise
- Critically evaluate
- Synthesise

HE7 may also include:

- Solve complex problems
- Develop creative or innovative solutions/recommendations

Considering Bloom's Revised Taxonomy, the common Command words have now been organised in order of growing complexity. From 'Identify' through to 'Create,' these words aim to challenge your higher order thinking skills. Let's take a look at each of them in greater detail.

1. Create

While most learning outcomes at the University of Bolton will ask you to produce a piece of academic writing, there may be occasions when you will be asked to create something. For example, you may be asked to prepare a presentation, viva or piece of work for your placement that you will need to present to your peers or Module Tutor. As such, you will need to create a piece of work that meets this learning outcome.

2. Evaluate

If the learning objective asks you to answer an evaluation question, the key is to consider all ideas/ arguments in order to arrive at a conclusion about its importance. You may also be expected to state the extent to which you agree or disagree with a particular argument or theory.

To ensure a thorough evaluation is provided on the topic, you'll need to consider both sides of the argument, supporting your claim with evidence, found from a wide-range of academic source material. Finally, you must tell the reader what your stance is, basing your claim on the evidence you've used that helped to inform your decision in arriving at your position.

3. Analyse

If the learning objective asks you to analyse the topic or argument, then you would be expected to deconstruct the same. Ultimately, you would need to break the topic/ argument up into key components and critically examine each part. To ensure this is done correctly, you'll need to incorporate appropriate debates and evidence in your work, that considers both sides of the argument and how each component interconnects. An important question to ask yourself when you analyse source material is, what does the evidence suggest? By keeping this question in mind, it will help to inform your stance and avoid becoming too descriptive in your writing. Your stance should be clear to the reader and ensure it links back to literature.

4. Examine

To answer this learning outcomes, you are required to examine a research topic or argument by establishing the main facts/ issues/argument and examining them in fine detail. As such, you should adopt a critical approach with this style of question. We will examine what it means to be critical later on in this Tutorial.

Given you are examining a topic area, it might be a good idea to provide context on the importance of the main facts/issues/argument that you have examined. For instance, consider whether the main facts/ issues/argument have contrasting views among scholars. If they do, note this and examine how they are different.

Learning outcomes that ask you to 'examine' should be viewed as a question that requires you to critically examine key pieces of evidence that help to inform your analysis.

5. Demonstrate

The key to dealing with this type of learning objective is to provide multiple examples, supported with evidence and a logical argument. Ultimately, you should demonstrate how a research topic/ argument is valid by using source material (evidence and theories) to support your claim.

Unlike a piece of writing where you need to 'discuss' a topic and lean slightly more towards one- side of the argument, here you should state your position and support your claim with appropriate evidence to build a strong argument.

6. Explain

If the learning objective asks you to 'explain,' then you simply need to clarify the topic. To do so, you should set out the main ideas on the topic. Writing an exploratory piece of writing requires you to understand the process, therefore, it is regarded a high-order thinking skill and this is likely to be reflected in the marking criteria.

7. Discuss

If the learning objective asks you to 'discuss,' then you are required to present key ideas/ issues on a topic, albeit in a thorough, structured way. It is important that you consider both sides of the argument, and arrive at a conclusion based on the content and emphasis of the discussion. By considering both sides of the argument (for and against) there will be an element of objectivity involved, although it may be unequal. For instance, your discussion may slightly lean more towards one-side of the argument.

8. Describe

If the learning objective asks you to 'describe,' you should give an account, which maybe in relation to an event, entity, feature or process, etc. For example, a nursing student may be asked to write an essay describing the process for...

9. Identify

Finally, you may find certain essay style questions will ask you to 'identify' a key point regarding a research topic or argument. Simply, you should highlight and describe the main idea on the topic, in a coherent way.
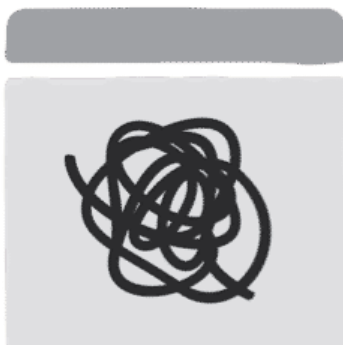
Pause and Reflect

The above list provides examples of common Command words that will more than likely appear on learning outcome throughout your time at the University of Bolton. However, this list is not exhaustive. Can you think of any other Command words that may appear? Take a moment to pause here and write down a list of Command words.

A more extensive table of Command words, together with their meaning, can be found under 'Additional Resources' section of this tutorial.

Planning Your Assignment

Subject Words

Subject words give context to the question and will form the basis of your research. You may be asked to write about: a process, event, place or time period. When you undertake your research, it is these keywords that you will need to search for.

Limit Words

Limit words will keep you focused on a particular area, such as:

Limit Words	Notes
Time	You may be asked to write about a specific period in time. For example, evaluate how **19th century** reforms changed education in the United Kingdom for working-class children.
Place	The focus of your assignment may be on a specific place. For example, evaluate how 19th century reforms changed education in the **United Kingdom** for working-class children.
Group of people	The focus of your assignment might be on a variation of demographics, such as age, people from different socio-economic backgrounds and gender. Using the above example, **working-class children** should be your focus.
Extent	If the learning outcomes ask you to focus on a particular area, make sure you do just that. Using the above example, the learning outcome asks you to focus on the "**United Kingdom**", "**19th century**" and "**working-class children**" only. For this question, you wouldn't start talking about education for upper-class children in the 20th century. For learning outcomes where the extent is not clearly highlighted, provide details on what you believe is the most appropriate or relevant. If you're in doubt, check with your Tutor.

Planning Your Assignment

Where to go to next

Take a look at the Command words under the 'Additional Resources' section of this tutorial and why not consider completing the [Academic Writing](#) section on LEAP Online to develop your knowledge.

Produce Your Ideas

Now that you've deconstructed the question, the next step in the writing process is to produce your ideas. Using your lecture notes, you may find it useful to:

- Look at the question again and write down what you already know about the topic
- Identify any gaps between your existing knowledge and what you need to know. Make a note of this
- You may then find it useful to brainstorm to produce and organise your ideas

## Let's examine brainstorming in more detail.

What is brainstorming?

According to Wilson (2013) braining storming is a technique that can be used to increase creativity, generate ideas and find a solution to a specific problem. This technique can be used individually or in a group situation to produce ideas and plan out the steps of an assignment.

Again, while this part of the writing process requires more of your time, this technique should avoid you hitting what is commonly known as writers block.

Some brainstorming techniques include:

Mind-mapping

Mind-mapping, also known as pattern note-making, clustering or a spider diagram, is a creative way of recording information and developing ideas quickly. Your ideas can branch off from the central node, using lines, images, symbols and words to connect information.

Stroyboards
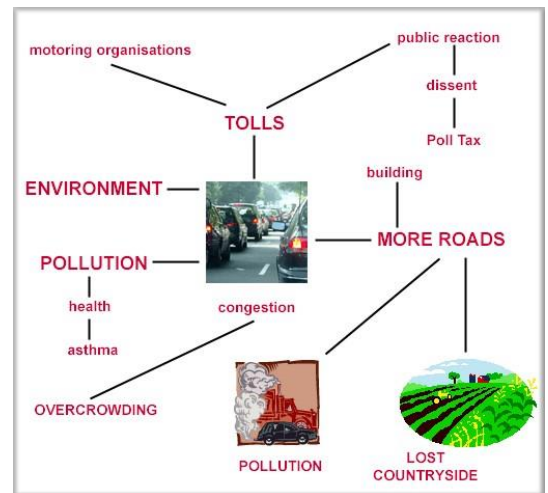
Storyboards are a platform that help you produce ideas using a sequence of illustrations.

See 'Note Making' section on LEAP Online for more information on Mind Mapping and other techniques.

Brainstorming Session

To help spark creative ideas, you may wish to produce ideas with peers in a group situation. To help you set up a Brainstorming session, here are some useful tips:

- **Set a time Limit**: When you organise a brainstorming session agree a time limit - 30 minutes to 1 hour should be sufficient
- **Choose a venue**: Decide where to hold your session. Sessions can be held online via Zoom or Teams or why not consider booking one of the library study spaces?
- **Establish objectives and rules for the session**: This could include: What you want to achieve by the end of the session, how ideas will be shared and not overheard. Ideas should not be criticised and encourage 'out of the box' thinking to spark creativity
- **Choose a facilitator**: Someone should agree to facilitate the session to ensure it remains focused, rules are maintained, and the objectives are achieved
- **Choose a recorder**: Someone should agree to become the recorder. It is their responsibility to write down all ideas where everyone can see and make their own notes
- **Organise your ideas**: To help with outlining your assignment, give your ideas a number/ letter
- **Close the session**: Once all participants have had the opportunity to express their ideas or no more ideas are forthcoming
- **Post-session work**: Prioritise your notes, sort your notes into common themes

Where to go to next

To book a library study space go to:
https://libcal.bolton.ac.uk/reserve/group-study

See the Note Making – Level 2 section on LEAP Online for more information on Pattern Notes (Mind Mapping).

Research Your Ideas

After you have brainstormed your ideas, the next step is to research those ideas. This section aims to explore how you can do this and how to discover information.

Discovering Information

Now that you understand the question, you can begin your research. If you're still unsure, go back to Step 1 and review this part of the writing process again until you fully understand the requirements of the assignment. Unless you understand the question, it will be difficult for you to discover relevant information and you will waste a lot of valuable time.

A good place to start your research is with your course material. The Module Guide will contain a reading list of sources that will be useful for this assignment. However, your Module Tutor will want to see that you have undertaken wider reading, therefore, do no limit your research to the sources on the reading list – go and discover your own information.

At the University, you should be able to find what you need in the library or using Discover@Bolton.

Google Books and Scholar can also be useful for finding source material. Also, consider expanding your search by reviewing the reference list of any source material you read for titles that appear relevant to your assignment.

For general internet searches, remember that you must discover information that is relevant to your assignment and of suitable academic quality. For instance, government websites (contain '.gov' in the URL) will have useful information on policies and university websites (contain '.ac.uk' in the URL) are also considered reliable sources.

You should always check the author of the source material is trustworthy. Sites such as Wikipedia are not generally regarded reliable, although students often choose to read this information to get a better understanding on the topic and find more source material using the reference list.

A useful tip when you find relevant source material is to reference it immediately so that you can find this information again and it will make your life easier when you come to cite and reference your assignment.

Reading source material

Discovering relevant source material for your assignment can be an extremely taxing task, which takes up a lot of your time. You may find that you end up reading several source documents before you find that useful nugget of information. Unfortunately, there is no way of knowing whether the source material is useful until you have read it. So, if your assignment requires you to write 2500 words, which refers to 15 sources, you should be prepared to read a lot more texts.

Having a clear focus, plan and brainstorming ideas for your assignment will help narrow your search. Also, to help reading text, consider using the following techniques:

1. Survey

As the name of this technique suggests, surveying a text is to look (or survey) a source document by focusing on the key aspects, rather than the finer details, to get a general understanding of the main ideas. This will help you to determine whether its relevant to your assignment.

For instance, focus on the following aspects:

1. **The author**: Who is the author? Are they a reliable/ trustworthy source of information?
2. **The date**: When was the source material written? If you're being asked to consider present day methods in your area of study, are historical source documents relevant to your assignment? If not, perhaps consider reading an alternative text
3. **The title**: Does the title contain key words relevant to the learning objective?
4. The abstract: For example, Journal articles will contain an abstract, which is a short summary of the research paper. This will be a good place to start to establish whether that paper is worth reading
5. **The introduction**: Provides the reader with contextual information on that paper. Reading the introduction will provide you with a rich insight into the text and key arguments
6. **Organisational Features**: Subheadings and images (e.g., graphs) are an effective way to quickly establish whether the paper is relevant and worth reading

2. Scanning

As the name of this technique suggests, scanning involves reading the text quickly to find specific information. Without knowing it, you probably use this technique in everyday life, for instance when you search for a person's name in your mobile phone's contact list or on social media.

The following techniques can be used to scan read text:

1. Consider how the text has been arranged. For instance, if you search for a person's name on your mobile phone's contact list, you will be aware that the list is arranged alphabetically. Therefore, in academic writing, look at whether the author has structured the text into sections with subheadings and check the contents page (if there is one) to quickly find specific information
2. Look for key words and phrases. If you are using a digital source document, consider completing a search using 'Find', Ctrl+F (Command+F on a Mac)

3. If you are unable to complete a search, scan the text by reading from top to bottom, in a zig-zag pattern, using your finger to keep track of your progress. For digital source documents, assistive technology, such as 'Immersive Reader' built into Microsoft Edge browser and Office 365 applications and 'Read Aloud' can also help with this process. Both technologies can be found within Microsoft Office applications and the MS Edge web browser.

3. Skimming

Unlike scanning, skim reading aims to find general information, not specific information. This is also known as reading for gist. When you skim read text you should look for areas of the text that are likely to contain the main ideas, such as:

1. The title
2. The abstract
3. Organisational features, such as subheadings
4. The introduction
5. Key words and phrases
6. Paragraphs. As considered in the paraphrasing section of this module, paragraphs often begin with a topic sentence and end with a concluding sentence before transitioning onto the next point. Therefore, skim over the first and last sentences of each paragraph to see if it contains useful information. If it does, it might be worth reading the whole text
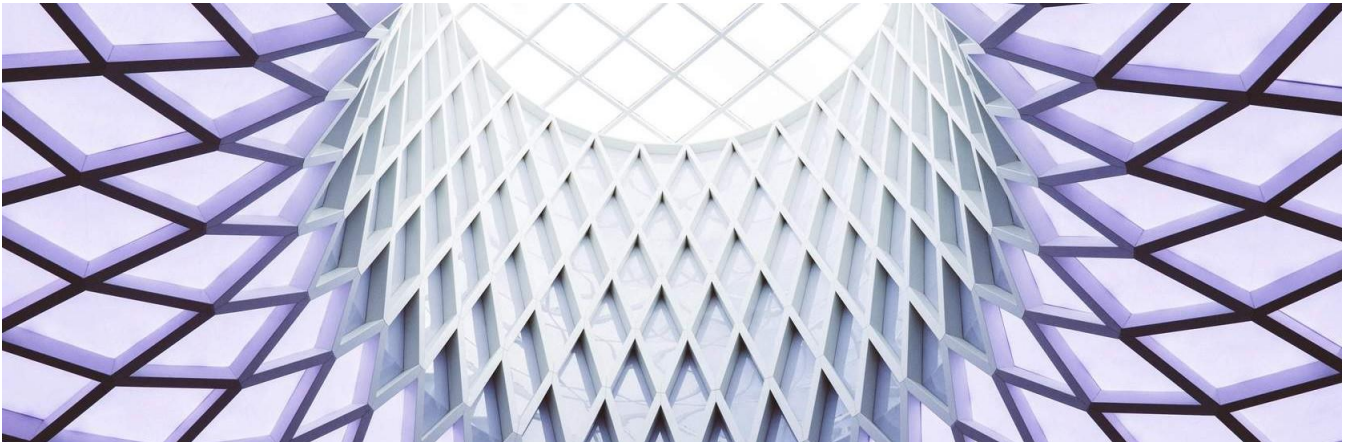
Where to go to next

For more information, complete 'Discovering Information' Levels 1 to 3 on LEAP Online and earn your digital badges.

Also, check out the following LEAP Online sections for more information:

- Academic Sources
- Using the Internet for Research

Outlining Your Ideas

What is outlining?

According to Leki (1998) outlining your ideas is a useful technique that will help you to explore and organise your ideas before you begin to write your assignment. Outlining will help you to:

- Identify the structure and organisation for your assignment. This can be useful if your assignment has a high word count, such as Dissertation or research project and you have a wealth of information you need to include
- Create Cohesion. Outlining will help you to create a logical sequencing of information
- Create Unity. This will make sure all of your ideas relate to the main theme
- Create division. Dividing the assignment, especially for tasks with high word counts, into manageable tasks will help make the writing process much easier

How to outline?

Outlining can take up different forms. Perhaps the quickest and simplest method of outlining is using a number or letter system, using a similar format to linear notes. For example, if this method is used to outline the above bullet points on outlining, it would show as:

Planning Your Assignment

1. Identify the structure and organisation for your assignment

     a. This can be useful if your assignment has a high word count

     b. Useful for different genres of academic writing, such as Dissertation or research project

     c. Useful if there is a lot of information to include

2. Create Cohesion

     a. Helps to create a logical sequencing of information.

3. Create Unity

     a. Helps to ensure your ideas relate back to the main theme.

4. Create division

     a. Dividing the assignment will help to create manageable tasks

     b. Will help to make the writing process much easier

As you can see from the above outline, a topic sentence (identified using numbers 1 to 4) has been used, followed by supporting comments (identified using letters a, b and c). It's important to note that each topic sentence should have the same form - do not mix numbers and letters; this will get too confusing. Furthermore, they should all have equal significance. For instance, point 1 is of equal importance to the remaining points. Similarly, your supporting comments are also equal in significance.
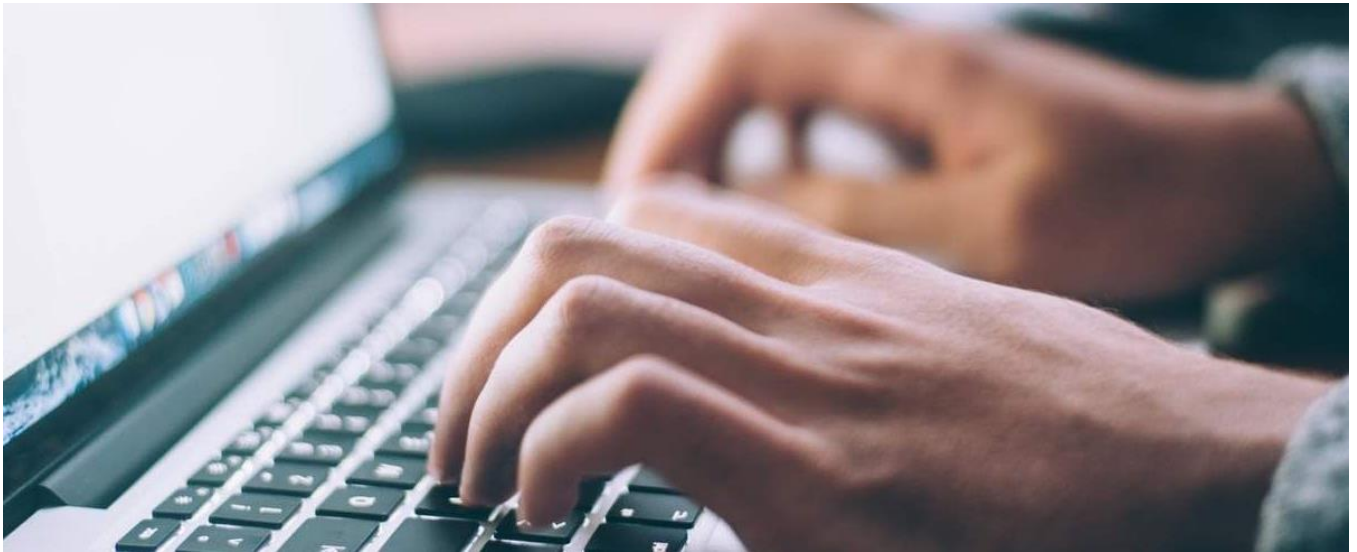
You will recall from the Brainstorming section, it's important to give numbers and letters to your ideas. By doing so you can sequence your ideas, based on the number / letter you attributed to your idea, in a logical order.

Where to go to next

For more information on Note Making, including linear notes, see the 'Note Making – Level 2' section on LEAP Online.

Summary

This tutorial considered the importance of deconstructing the question and planning a response. To ensure this is done effectively, you should consider the following steps:

- Analyse the Question. This can be achieved using the deconstruction techniques in this tutorial.
- Produce ideas. This can be achieved by brainstorming your ideas.
- Research your ideas. Discover and research source material using the 3S' technique.
- Outline your ideas. Explore and organise your ideas before you begin to write your assignment.

By following these similar steps, you will create a solid foundation from which you can begin to write your assignment.

Where to go to next

Before you leave, select the button below to complete a short assessment and earn your LEAP Online digital badge.

Once you have completed the assessment, close the tab, return to the 'Academic Writing - Level 2' LEAP Online section and begin the next tutorial.

Digital Badge

Before you leave, select the button below to complete a short assessment and earn your LEAP Online digital badge.

Academic Writing: Planning Your Assignment

[Moodle assessment](#)

> For more support on this topic, consider attending a free workshop at [LEAP Live](#).

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