Constructing a work plan

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Outcomes

By the end of this chapter you should be able to:

- identify the keywords and concepts in an assignment topic
- identify the verbs (action words) in the topic
- identify the instructions and limitations in an assignment topic
- understand the meaning of verbs commonly used in assignment topics and examination questions and what they require you to do
- construct a work plan using various techniques such as mind mapping
Key concepts

**interpret**

to bring out the meaning of something

**plan**

to decide on a method of doing something

**topic**

a subject (for example, the topic of an assignment would be the subject that you are supposed to study and write about in that assignment)

**work plan**

your plan of how you will work through an information task

8.1 Introduction

Read the following scenario and then answer the questions below:

Veli liked to get her work done in time. When she got an assignment she would jump right in and start reading up on the topic and making notes. As soon as she felt she had enough information she would start to write her assignment. However, she often found that she had included irrelevant information in her notes. Another problem she sometimes had was that in spite of having taken copious notes she didn’t have enough information on one or two aspects and had to go back to the library. She was also often disappointed in the marks she received for her assignments. In spite of having worked hard and read up on the topic the lecturer would make comments such as ‘too much irrelevant information’ or ‘not enough information on various relevant aspects’.

If we look at the scenario above we can see that Veli had problems with her assignment because she wanted to start writing as soon as possible. She skipped the interpretation and planning stage and began immediately looking for information. As a result she read sources and took notes without a clear idea of what was relevant. All she had was a very general idea of the topic. Then when she sat down to write the assignment she found that some of her notes were irrelevant and she did not have enough information on some of the important aspects of the topic. She also found that her marks did not reflect the amount of work that she had put into the assignment. This could have been avoided by spending some time interpreting the topic.
• Do you take time to read and analyse an assignment question? Yes/No

• When you start working on an assignment do you have a work plan? Yes/No

• Do you identify the keywords in the assignment topic before you begin finding information? Yes/No

If you answered no to these questions then it is very important for you to study this chapter because in this chapter we will learn how to analyse an assignment topic and develop a work plan.

8.2 Why are interpreting a topic and a work plan important?

Interpreting the assignment question and compiling a work plan are important because they:

• save time

• give you a clear idea of what the assignment requires before you start gathering information so that you are sure that the information you collect is relevant and complete

• give you a chance to develop your own ideas about the topic so that the assignment is not just a regurgitation of sources.

8.3 Interpreting the assignment topic

To write a good assignment you must first have a clear understanding of what the task requires of you. Writing an assignment is similar to any other task. You are more likely to be successful if you clearly understand what you need to do and how you are going to do it. Take an everyday example such as doing the weekly grocery shopping. You are more likely to buy everything you need if you have first checked whether you are running short of anything and if you have planned what you are going to cook in the following week. Writing a shopping list will also help you to remember everything you need to buy. Similarly if you are writing an assignment you are more likely to write a good assignment if you understand exactly what is required by the assignment question. You will have a clear idea of what information you need to find and your reading and note-taking will be more efficient because you have a clear idea of what information you are looking for.

The first thing to do is therefore to interpret the assignment question because without clearly understanding what you are being asked to do you may collect
irrelevant information or miss important aspects. You analyse the question so that you are able to describe what the task is about, explain its scope and begin to plan how to answer it. To do this effectively you need to go through the following steps:

### 8.3.1 Identifying the keywords

Identifying the keywords is an important first step as it helps to clarify exactly what the topic of the information task is and what your focus should be. This sounds simple but it does require thought, especially if it is a topic you are not yet familiar with. Begin by reading the assignment topic very carefully a few times. Look up any words that you don’t understand in the dictionary. Sometimes it may be necessary to use a subject dictionary or special reference works if the word is being used in a subject specific way. It is important to consider whether the words have alternative meanings and if you fully understand the meaning of the keywords. A word or concept may seem straightforward but on closer examination you may find it is more complex than you originally realised.

For example, look at the assignment topic below:

> The concept of ’literacy’ has changed according to changing needs in society. Write an essay on the information society and discuss why information literacy is essential in an information society.

- The word ‘literacy’ may seem relatively straightforward. We all know what literacy means in everyday language, that is, to know how to read and write. But if we consider the word in relation to information literacy it may mean something different. This is something we may need to find out and think about.
- Analysing the topic helps to alert us to complex concepts that may need further analysis and thought. It can also alert us to issues that we need to take into account when we start gathering information. For example, in the topic above we will have been alerted that we need to check whether information literacy means the same as reading and writing.
- Once you are sure you understand all the words in the assignment topic you need to identify the keywords.
If you look at the example in Figure 8.1 we can see that the focus of this assignment is websites and evaluation criteria. We are being asked not only the evaluation criteria for websites but also why it is important to evaluate them.

**FIGURE 8.1: EXAMPLE OF IDENTIFYING KEYWORDS**

- **ASSIGNMENT TOPIC**
  Discuss why it is important to evaluate websites and describe various evaluation criteria that should be used.

- **KEYWORDS AND CONCEPTS**
  Evaluate websites
  Evaluation criteria

**ACTIVITY 8.1**

Identify keywords in the following assignment topics:

1. The concept of 'literacy' has changed according to changing needs in society. Write an essay on the information society and discuss why information literacy is essential in an information society.

2. Explain what Boolean operators are and briefly discuss each of the operators. Give examples of how and when you would use each of them.

3. Define and describe three of the following information sources and clearly indicate how their purpose differs. Give examples of when you would use them:
   - dictionaries
   - atlases
   - handbooks
   - encyclopaedias

4. Compare the Internet search engines Google and Yahoo
8.3.2 Identifying the action words
The next step once you have identified the keywords is to identify the action words or verbs. If we look at the assignment topic 3 in Activity 8.1 above you will see that you are being asked to define and describe. It is very important to take note of what you are being asked to do. For example, assignment topic 4 requires you to compare the search engines Google and Yahoo and this is very different to a topic that asks you to discuss the search engines Google and Yahoo. To answer the first topic you would need to state in what ways the two search engines differ but also in what ways they are the same whereas the second topic would require you to indicate the characteristics of each of the search engines. It is extremely important to make sure that you know what you have been asked to do before you begin looking for information.

Figure 8.2 includes the verbs commonly used in academic assignments and an indication of what is required.

**ACTIVITY 8.2**
Identify the verbs (action words) in the assignment topics in Activity 8.1.

8.3.3 Identifying instructions, limitations and format
At this stage we have identified the keywords and action words. We have made sure that we understand what the keywords mean and what the action words require us to do. The next step is to check if there are any limitations or other instructions and what format the assignment answer must be in.

Assignment questions usually specify a length. It is important to take note of this as it is an indication of how much information we will need. For example, an essay of 2 000 words on a topic will require much more information than a paragraph of 500 words. It is also important to note the format. You will write a very different answer if it must be a presentation to the class to one that must be in essay form. This will affect your preparation and it is important to keep this in mind when you begin.

8.3.4 Interpreting the topic
Once we have identified the keywords, action words, limitations or instructions it is a good idea to write down our own interpretation of the topic, that is, to put the topic in our own words. This will help to clearly identify what we need to do. Again this need not take more than a few minutes.
Identify the action verbs in Activity 8.1 above. You will find very important assignments using these verbs. For example, a Google search for "examine the limitations or restrictions of the study" will provide you with many resources to help you understand the limitations of the study. You will need to take note of these limitations and consider how they might affect your research.

### Figure 8.2: Verbs Commonly Used in Academic Assignments

Verbs are the 'action words' commonly used in academic assignments. Here is an indication of what is required when these words are used:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verb</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>analyse</td>
<td>break down the premise and tell about the parts, show how the parts relate to each other and the whole</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>compare</td>
<td>explain how things are different from each other and how they are similar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>contrast</td>
<td>discuss differences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>define</td>
<td>give an accurate meaning of the term or concept with enough detail to show you really understand it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>describe</td>
<td>tell how something looks or happened, including how, who, where and why; give the characteristics of something</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>discuss</td>
<td>include important characteristics and main points; give various opinions or explanations of the topic, show how these agree or differ and evaluate the various opinions or explanations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>distinguish</td>
<td>indicate differences and similarities which makes a thing different from other things</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>enumerate</td>
<td>mention individual items or points. No detailed discussion is required.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>evaluate</td>
<td>assess the value, significance, worth or relative importance of something. This involves having criteria or standards against which you will measure something. It should include your own opinion about the issue. An evaluation should always be supported by reasons.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>explain</td>
<td>write about the topic in such a way that the reader gets a better understanding of the important aspects and how they are connected to each other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>illustrate</td>
<td>explain using examples that demonstrate or clarify a point or idea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>indicate</td>
<td>state briefly or give a broad outline without detail in order to give the reader the main ideas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>outline</td>
<td>give the main points and relevant supporting details or examples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>summarise</td>
<td>state briefly in a condensed form</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### FIGURE 8.3: EXAMPLE OF THE INTERPRETATION OF AN ASSIGNMENT TOPIC

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic: 'Plagiarism is not only a financial issue but also an ethical issue.' Discuss this statement in an essay of approximately 1 000 words.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Keywords:</strong> plagiarism financial issue ethical issue <strong>Verb:</strong> discuss <strong>Instructions:</strong> 1 000 words <strong>Format:</strong> essay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I will need to <strong>define</strong> the word plagiarism because it is a central concept in the question. I may also need to define ethical within this context.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I will need to clearly <strong>differentiate</strong> between (1) ethical issues and (2) financial issues in regard to plagiarism.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I will need to <strong>substantiate</strong> my arguments as to why plagiarism is an ethical issue as well as a financial issue.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As I am being asked to <strong>discuss</strong> the topic, I will need to give various <strong>opinions or explanations</strong> of the topic and show how these <strong>agree</strong> or <strong>differ</strong>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The various opinions or explanations will have to be <strong>evaluated</strong>, that is I will have to decide which opinions I agree with and give my reasons.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I do not have to discuss the topic in a lot of detail because the <strong>specified extent</strong> of 1 000 words is not very long.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structured composition with an introduction, a discussion and a conclusion.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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### 8.4 Workplan

**ACTIVITY 8.2**

Without using previous work:

1. Work out how 1, 2.
2. Work out all 1, 2 and 3.
3. Work out all 1, 2, 3 and 4.

If you look at Question 2 is it reasonable for people to answer the question.

As you can see several items mentally. It is advisable to you organise the.

Once you have what you are really can start compile. We will describe what suits you. You cards or to type compile some.

To make a bullet keywords. Spreads down your thought ask yourself but may not know the information.

Help you answer stimulate your that you know the assignment
8.4 Work plan

**ACTIVITY 8.3**
Without using pen and paper do the following:

1. Work out how many combinations you can make with the numbers 1, 2.
2. Work out all the combinations you can be made with the numbers 1, 2 and 3.
3. Work out all the combinations that can be made with the numbers 1, 2, 3 and 4.

If you look at question 1 there are two possible combinations (12 and 21). Question 2 is more difficult but there are 6 combinations possible (123, 321, 132, 312, 213, and 231). The last question is very difficult and only a very few people are able to do it mentally but there are 24 possible combinations.

As you can see from the above activity it is difficult to keep track of complex items mentally. The complexity of what you are going to write in an assignment is much greater than the complexity of combining 1, 2, 3 and 4 so it is advisable to write down your thoughts and ideas in a work plan to help you organise them and ensure nothing important is forgotten.

Once you have identified the topic (or topics) of the assignment, checked what you are required to do and noted instructions, length and format, you can start compiling a work plan. There are a number of ways we can do this. We will describe only one technique that you can use, but you need to find what suits you best as we are all different. You may prefer to use a mind map, cards or to type directly onto your computer. The important thing is that you compile some sort of work plan. The form it takes does not really matter.

To make a work plan start with a blank piece of paper and write down the keywords. Spread your keywords over a whole page so you have room to write down your thoughts. Jot these down as they occur to you. As you are writing ask yourself questions such as What? Why? When? How? Where? Who? You may not know the answers to these questions but they help you to identify the information that you will need to answer the assignment question. If you know the answers to the questions or know where to find information that will help you answer the question, jot this down on your page. All this helps to stimulate your thoughts and to focus on the topic. You will also probably find that you know a lot more about the topic than you realised when you first read the assignment question.
Making notes spread all over a page below relevant headings enables you to record relevant thoughts. The next step is to organise them into a plan or an outline. This helps you to identify the aspects that you need to find information on. Remember this is a rough work plan and does not need to be too long or detailed. It is a working tool and how you construct it is entirely up to you, for example, if just a word or phrase is sufficient to remind you of an idea then there is no need to write a full sentence. But you should try to organise this rough plan in some way such as grouping ideas under headings or keywords or compiling a mind map as you go along.

On the rough plan it is also a good idea to note down what information you need and to start thinking where you will find it. It is important to think more widely than just your textbook and notes. If you are planning to use the Internet or the library catalogue to find information then start thinking of key terms or subject terms that you will use to search for information. It is also a good idea to note this on your plan.

This rough work plan helps you to find out what you know and equally important what you don’t know about the topic.

The essential component of the working plan will be headings and subheadings related to the information task. These headings you select yourself to indicate the subject coverage of the task and the problems which need to be addressed in the task. In addition to these headings, there will be various other components of the plan, such as written notes to yourself, mind maps, and references to sources with relevant information.

### Figure 8.4: Example of a Work Plan

**Assignment topic:**
‘Define an Internet search engine and compare the Internet search engines Google and Yahoo. Indicate how you will evaluate a website.’

The assignment should be approximately 2000 words.

**Keywords:**
Internet search engine; Google, Yahoo; website

**Action words:**
Define; compare; evaluate
Instructions:
2000 words so not too much detail on each section

Interpretation:
- I need to define Internet search engines
- In order to define them I will need to find out their characteristics.
- I also have to compare Google and Yahoo so I will need to find out how they are similar and how they differ.
- I have to describe how I would evaluate a website so I will need to identify evaluation criteria.
- May be good idea to include an example to show that I understand how to evaluate a website.

Internet search engine definition:
- I will need at least 2–3 definitions of a search engine so I can write my own definition.
- Check textbook; see other sources in the library, keyword for search: Internet search engine or web search engine or search engine

Google
- Find out characteristics
- Can Boolean operators be used on it?
- What search options are there that can be used with this search engine?

Yahoo
- Find out characteristics
- Can Boolean operators be used on it?
- What search options are there that can be used with this search engine?

Comparison of Google and Yahoo
- How are they similar?
- How do they differ?

Evaluation of a website
- Criteria to be used in evaluating a website
  - Author
  - Date
  - References
  - What other criteria are there? Check.
ACTIVITY 8.4
Compile a work plan for any of the topics given in Activity 8.1. You should not spend more than 30 minutes on making the work plan.

8.5 Review
In this chapter we have discussed how to analyse an assignment topic to help you to identify what you need to do when writing an assignment answer. We have also shown how to write an interpretation of the assignment topic and most importantly how to do a work plan. In the beginning of the chapter we...
described a scenario where a student jumped into the task without spending the
time to analyse it and work out what was required. Taking time to analyse your
assignment topic beforehand will help you to answer the question properly
and ensure that you include only relevant information. It is worthwhile to
spend an initial hour or two in preparation to ensure a task is well done and
obtain higher marks as a result.

Answers to activities

**ACTIVITY 8.1**

Keywords:

1. Literacy; society; information
   society; information literacy
2. Boolean operators; how; when
3. Dictionaries; atlases; handbooks;
   encyclopaedias
4. Internet search engines, Google;
   Yahoo.

**ACTIVITY 8.2**

The action words in the assignment
topics in Activity 8.1 are:

1. Write, discuss
2. Explain, discuss
3. Define, describe, indicate
4. Compare

**ACTIVITY 8.4**

**WORK PLAN**

**Keywords:** subject dictionaries; atlases; handbooks; general
encyclopaedias

**Action words:** define; describe

**Instructions:** need only do three, how when I would use them

**Extent:** 2 000 words (approximately 700 words on each so not too much
detail)

**Interpretation:**

- I need to define and describe subject dictionaries; general
  encyclopaedias and handbooks.
- In order to define them I will need to find out their characteristics.
- I also have to describe each of these information sources.
- I have to describe how I would use each source.
- I have to state when I would use each source so I have to know their function/purpose.
- May be good idea to include an example for each to show that I understand how they are used and what is unique about each of them.

**Subject dictionaries:**
- Definition
- Description
- Some examples
- Are they all organised alphabetically?
- Check textbook; see other sources in the library, keyword for search subject in subject dictionary
- How would I use it?
- Layout (alphabetical)
- When?
- Look up meaning of subject specific words.
- Need to check other uses.

**General encyclopaedia:**
- Definition
- Description
- Some examples
- Are they all organised alphabetically? What other methods are used?
- Check textbook; see other sources in the library, keyword for search general encyclopaedia).
- What about electronic format? Wikipedia good example of a free one available on the internet. Evaluation may be an issue.
- Are there any others available on the internet?
- Cost?
- How would I use it?
% Layout (alphabetical).
% Electronic – need keyword search?
% Subscription?
% When?
% Look up general information.
% Need to check other uses.
% If the University has subscribed can I access it at home via the internet?

**Handbooks:**

- Definition
- Description
- Some examples
- Check textbook; see other sources in the library, keyword for search handbook
- How would I use it?
- Index
- Table of contents
- Not sure need to check it out
- When?
- How does a handbook differ from a textbook?