WRITING AT UNIVERSITY

Understanding assignment directions and instructor expectations
University Assignments

1. What should you expect?
   • Similar types of assignments, e.g. lab reports, essays, etc.

2. What’s the difference between high school and university assignments?
   • Higher expectations!
Getting good results

• Be familiar with the syllabus and BLS site
• Give yourself enough time
• Read the assignment instructions
What else can you do?

• Ensure that you understand the assignments

• What can you do if you don’t understand?
  • Contact your professor or TA
Example English assignment

“The truth was Punch had noticed that Quoyle, who spoke little himself, inspired talkers. His only skill in the game of life. His attentive posture, his flattering nods urged waterfalls of opinion, reminiscence, recollection, theorizing, guesstimating, exposition, synopsis and explication, juiced the life stories out of strangers.” (p. 9)

• Comment on how and why Quoyle’s one skill—as a listener, as an inspirer of talkers—is crucial to the success of his efforts to establish himself in Newfoundland. Provide specific examples to support your argument.
What does the prof expect from this assignment?

• In general the prof will look for:
  • *good communication skills*,
  • *ability* to close read and discuss work without resorting to mere summary,
  • *ability* to write definite *thesis* statements with good supporting *evidence* from the novel.

• Specifically he or she will look for:
  • *evidence* that you have read the work and reflected on it,
  • *insight* about both the character development of Quoyle, and
  • *insight* about how writers write novels (plot, character development)
How can we figure out what they want?

• Find information on particular disciplines, documents, topics, etc.

• Sign up or take advantage of any tutorials or help sessions. (The libraries, Writing Centre, Study Skills and many other groups offer short sessions on helpful topics.)

• Read. Read. Read.
How to read assignment directions

• Don’t just assume that you know what to do: read the directions.

• Look for key words in the directions.
Verbs – critical indicators

• Look at the verb usage in the directions.

• Verbs indicate what kind(s) of information is required.

• Verbs also tell you what kind of writing you’ll be doing.

• Go to http://www.sass.uottawa.ca/writing/kit/stage1-assignment.php for more detailed information on verbs used in assignments.
Getting a good grade

• Understand marks and marking in each course

• Ask for help to understand how to improve your grades

• Make sure that you do what is asked.

• Exceptional work gets exceptional grades.
Learning to assess your own work – before passing it in

• Look at the assignment directions again. Have you done at least what was asked?

• Show a draft to your professor or TA if this is an option.

• Have a peer-review group – don’t expect students to edit and proofread (not acceptable behaviour here), but give them direction.
Formal assessment

What does it all mean?

- The marks
- The comments within the document
- Terminal notes
Understanding assessment comments

• This might be the opening paragraph of your very short paper on healthy living:

  Advertising, songs, television and other factors, make people think they need to look like a star or a model to be accepted. When a person decides they want to be as slim and attractive as a movie star, they do radical things. One thing they do is go on a diet. Losing weight is more complex; however, than just starving yourself. The process is difficult and requires commitment.

• The marker may have drawn your attention to several points:

  (1) Structural issues
  (2) Content issues
  (3) Grammar, mechanics, and punctuation issues
Structural issues

• The introduction doesn’t tell the reader what will be discussed.

• There is no firm thesis statement. The last line sounds like a thesis, but reading further reveals that other ideas are included.

• This topic doesn’t reflect the assignment guidelines.
Content Issues

While the opening reflects a fairly typical high school approach to writing (pattern of general to specific), it doesn’t meet the expectations at university.

Here the student should have -
• Stayed with the assignment’s “healthy living” topic and
• Backed up comments with material from sources.

For example, how does this student know that dieting is complex or that starving is not a good option to weight loss?
Grammar, punctuation, and mechanics

• These surface issues matter.
• Professional work (in a bank, law firm, hospital, engineering firm, marketing firm, etc.) is judged on communication quality.
• Improving your writing by improving your expression and grammar is well worth the effort!

Figure out – by reading the comments and discussing them with the marker – what you did correctly and what you need to work on!
What to do for future assignments

- Assess your own work after the formal assessment.

- If you notice that you are having difficulty with particular skills sets (e.g. Calculus, analyzing poetry, thinking on a more analytical basis), find opportunities to strengthen these skills.

- Ask questions! Get the most out of your classes and learning supports.
Last words...

- Remember the following about university academics:
  - The work may seem difficult, but you can do it.
  - To do well, you have to work diligently.
  - You are not alone. There are people here to help.
  - See your professors and teaching assistants.
  - Use the Writing Centre and talk to the librarians.
  - Discuss opportunities with an academic advisor and career counsellor.
  - Find a mentor. Have some fun – both in class and outside.
  - University is an important part of your life journey. Make the most of it!