

Study Skills

Managing workload

A useful study skills guide, with advice on how to manage workload, prepare for assignments, and exams is available at:

<http://www.strath.ac.uk/jhlibrary/publications/studyskills/>

Undertaking, structuring, researching, and writing assignments

The exact nature of assignments will vary from class to class and may involve individual work, group exercises or practical work with, for instance, software packages. Assignments are an important part of your course, and to do them properly, you should be aware of the need to follow certain conventions. There are a number of standard questions you should ask yourself in order to give yourself the greatest opportunity to produce an effective assignment:

- What am I being asked to do?
- What criteria are being used to assess me?
- What weighting is placed on the various elements of the assignment?
- How will I structure the assignment?
- What research will I have to do?
- Does this look and read like a professional piece of work?
- What source material did I use for the assignment?
- What deadlines have been set and what deadlines should I set myself?

The first three questions will be answered by the assignment outline. It is important that you understand the assignment brief and that you focus on what the lecturer has asked you to do (sounds obvious but you would be surprised how often this simple piece of advice is overlooked!). If you have any doubts about the assignment brief or have difficulty interpreting the requirements then raise them with the lecturer who has set the assignment. Assignments are set to allow you to demonstrate your understanding of the topics covered in the course and we want you to have the best opportunity to record results which truly reflect your capabilities. However, you will not get credit for material which is not related to the topic so ensure that your assignment is focused on what has been requested.

Your assignment will be marked according to a number of criteria, each of which will carry a percentage of the total marks attributed to the assignment. These are designed to help you decide on the balance of material, which should be contained in your assignment. Again it is important that you understand the criteria that are being used and the weight that is placed on them: clearly there is little point concentrating your assignment on one criterion which only carries 15% of the marks and giving only superficial treatment to one that carries 50% of the marks.

It is always a good idea to work out a structure for your assignments in advance, and to decide what parts of your explanations and arguments are going into each section, before filling in the detail. For longer assignments, and for reports, it is helpful both to you and to the reader if you provide headings for each of the main sections.

For any assignment the lecturer would expect to see an introductory section, in which you describe the scope of the assignment, and a final section in which you summarise your conclusions. Between these two points, your ideas, and any information, should be presented in a logical order. Bibliographies and/or lists of references should be given at the end of the assignment. You should also incorporate page numbers. For a report, you would normally number the sections and sub-sections and provide a table of contents with associated page numbers.

Assignments will have an appropriate word length specified and you should keep to this length +/- 10% and include a word count at the end of the assignment. The word count should exclude preliminaries, such as title page, table of contents, and any references and/or bibliography at the end of the assignment.

You should follow English grammar and usage, and it is always worthwhile double-checking your spelling (use the spellchecker on your word processor if you have one). Note, however, that a spellchecker will not highlight where you have used the wrong word (from vs. form; their vs. there) and you should also proofread your assignments before handing them to capture any legitimate words which have been used in the wrong context.

Do not use a style, which is too informal and chatty. These are postgraduate courses and you are expected to write in a professional style. Always use the expanded form of an acronym before employing the shorthand version using the following convention "...will find that Asymmetric Digital Subscriber Lines (ADSL) provide a higher throughput...".

As an academic work, an assignment or project should give the reader the opportunity to make up his or her own mind that what is being said is true. Do not, therefore, simply make assertions and generalisations of fact, unless that fact is something about which there can be no doubt and which the reader can be expected to know. For example, it is unlikely that anyone will argue if you assert that information technology is having a major impact on organisations and society. If, however, you state that the introduction of IT has led to the loss of 25,000 jobs in the Canadian insurance industry, you should cite the evidence which supports this claim.

You may not always know what can be taken as common knowledge, especially if the subject is new to you. In that case, it will be a good idea to err on the side of caution - if in doubt, cite your source!

Remember, extensive referencing guidelines and examples are contained with the Postgraduate Course Handbook.

Making use of lecture notes, reading lists, and electronic library services

When completing assessments, you should normally cite a representative selection of readings to provide some theoretical background, supporting evidence and possibly counter-examples (demonstrating independent research through the identification of relevant source materials which have not been provided in class or in reading lists by the lecturer).

You will normally be supplied with lecture notes, which will form the foundation for background reading. You are however, expected to read outside of these notes and lecturers will provide indicative reading lists. While you are not obliged to buy books on the reading lists, you may wish to acquire a representative selection of the literature as library books have an annoying habit of being out on loan when they are

most needed. John Smith and Son Ltd have a bookshop on campus, in the Curran Building.

From the University Library home page (<http://www.lib.strath.ac.uk/>) you can find a range of resources, including the library catalogue and electronic databases. The page for new library users is available at: <http://www.lib.strath.ac.uk/newusers.htm>.

You should also make extensive use of the ejournals and ebooks available via the University electronic library services. A full list of these services is available at <http://www.lib.strath.ac.uk/els.htm>. The majority of individual journal and database files are also listed on the library's catalogue. The Library also holds and networks a number of CD-ROMs. You will receive a basic introduction to the library and its services in the early weeks of the first semester. Note that several of the Library's electronic service providers require authentication using an Athens username/password. These are only available to registered students and members of staff of the University. Please note, not all service providers allow remote access to their databases. Distance learning students with no access to a University machine and no University VPN access should contact the Library. All other users should create their own personal account.

The following indicative text discusses how to approach researching a topic:

Rumsey, Sally (2008) *How to find information: a guide for researchers*. 2nd ed. Open University Press. [Available as an electronic book via the library catalogue: <http://suprimo.lib.strath.ac.uk>]

Avoiding poor academic scholarship

Assignments and dissertations are not intended to be an exercise in copying material from books and articles or from fellow students, but should always be your own work. Omitting acknowledgements and the clear identification of quotations and other material from original sources constitutes plagiarism and is not consistent with the aim of demonstrating understanding. When you take material from a book, an article or web site, you should consider it and fashion it in order to support your argument, or to criticise it. You may use quotations, facts, ideas, etc. but they must be related to your work and must be attributed. If significant portions of material are copied with only minor alterations, this also counts as plagiarism.

Plagiarism must also be avoided in practical work such as individual computer-based projects. It is not acceptable to copy the work of other students in such projects, with only minor amendments (e.g. simply changing function or variable names), and then to submit it as your own work. When you submit an assignment, you will be required to sign a declaration that it embodies your own work, that it has been composed by yourself, and that you have made due acknowledgement to the works of others. Plagiarised work will be discounted and may lead to disciplinary action.

Improving academic English

The English Language Teaching Division (ELTD) offers In-sessional English language Support Classes and further higher level classes for students who wish to improve their academic English. Several of these classes are available for free. Further information can be found at:

<http://www.strath.ac.uk/eltd/>

The following text is useful for students for whom English is not the first language. It gives tips on how to plan writing an assignment, how to structure an argument, and how different assignment types should be approached:

Improving IT skills and making use of laboratory facilities

If you require to further develop your IT skills, University Learning Services provide a range of training courses for postgraduate students. Information is available at: <http://www.strath.ac.uk/ittraining/postgraduateittraining/>

The Department operates a number of laboratories for its own students. At present, there are three large teaching laboratories, one on each of the tenth, eleventh and twelfth floors of the Livingstone Tower, and two smaller laboratories (for postgraduate and final year students) on the thirteenth floor. There are at least two printers in each main laboratory: a mix of colour and black & white. Note that the laboratory in L13.14A and the accompanying study is available for you. It is shared with final year undergraduates. It is likely that these facilities will again be updated before the start of the next academic year. Lab opening times are contained within our handbook.

Remote use is also made of machines operated by Information Technology Services, which is adjacent to the University Library in the Curran Building (St. James' Road). In particular, some classes make use of the campus-wide network of over a hundred Unix workstations provided for general teaching purposes, and for research.

Bailey, Stephen (2006) *Academic writing: a handbook for international students*. 2nd ed. Routledge. [Available as an electronic book via the library catalogue:
<http://suprimo.lib.strath.ac.uk>]