Transcript 1: What to write & how to write it

Watch this short video to learn about structure, purpose and language style requirements for common assignment types in the Division of EASS. Also, learn where to locate assignment information for your courses.

Title Slide: What to write and how to write it

There are many types of assignments at university, and it’s a good idea to get to know the types you are expected to write in your program of studies. I’m going to use 4 example task types to show you what you might look for. But first, I’d like you to think about what you might already know.

Slide Two: What might you already know?

What differentiates one assignment type from another? Do they look different in terms of structure and layout? Do they serve different purposes? And what language style do you think you might need to use?

Slide Three: Task types

Here are four common task types students come to see me about – essays, reports, reflections and critical reviews. In terms of structure, the typical essay is usually in paragraph form – it has an intro, a series of body paragraphs, a conclusion and a reference list. An essay usually doesn’t have headings, but be careful, as some lecturers or tutors prefer you to use headings - it always pays to check your task guidelines and to check with your tutors.

A report is also written in paragraph form, and has a reference list, but there are some differences in terms of structure and purpose. While headings and sub-headings are often not used in essays, they are used in reports. Headings and sub-headings are used in reports to divide and organise the content into clear sections and sub-sections. If writing a research report, you might be expected to include an abstract (which is a brief overview of the whole report). Sometimes you might also include an appendix if you have extra details you’d like your reader to refer to.

Reflective assignments are also written in paragraph form, and may include a reference list. Whether you include an introduction or conclusion depends on the type of reflection you are writing. For example, weekly blogs may just need to be in paragraph form, and might not need introductions and conclusions every single time. A reflective essay on the other hand is most likely presented as one document and may require an introduction and a conclusion to tie everything together. Check this by looking at your task guidelines and clarifying with your tutor.
Slide Three: Task types (continued)

Critical Reviews, sometimes called article reviews, are also quite common in some disciplines and courses in this division. They are usually written in paragraph form, and include an introduction, summary, critique and conclusion. They often include headings but as always, check your task guidelines for your lecturer’s expectations on this.

So, as you can see, all of these tasks are written in paragraph form, but other structural features such as whether to use headings or sub-headings, can vary across tasks.

Now let’s look at task purpose and language use – most academic tasks are written for a specific purpose, and the purpose can help define the language you might use. Essay topics are usually about current, debatable or controversial topics in your discipline. So, the purpose of an essay is often to present an argument, or your position, regarding a given topic. This means that you want to try and persuade your reader using clear and convincing arguments and to do so, you need to include valid support from academic articles. The language you use to present your persuasive argument will tend to be quite formal and academic, and in most cases you won’t use personal pronouns like ‘I’ or ‘my’. So instead of writing “I think XYZ”, you might write something like “It can be argued that XYZ” Sometimes your lecturers ask you to reflect on your own experiences in an essay – in this instance it might be okay to use personal pronouns, but make sure you clarify this first with your tutor.

While an essay is meant to be a persuasive piece of writing, the purpose of a report is to provide information to the reader which is based on facts or observations. Because of this, your language will be even more objective than an essay as you are not providing an opinion or argument. As it is an academic piece of writing, you still need to use evidence to support the information you present in your report.

The purpose of academic reflection is to demonstrate to your reader that you have thought deeply about your own learning or practice, and can make valid connections between your experiences and that of theories or concepts you’ve studied about in your course. As reflections tend to be from a personal perspective, it is often okay for you to use personal pronouns such as ‘I’ or ‘my’. However because it’s an academic reflection, try and keep the rest of your language formal, and use references when evaluating your experiences against theories or concepts within the literature you have read.
Slide Three: Task types (continued)
Usually, the purpose of a critical review is to demonstrate that you have understood the content of a text (such as a journal article, or a chapter from a course reading), and that you have been able to evaluate the presentation of ideas made by the authors of that text. Your analysis should be objective, and your opinion on the topic is not required. This means you are not evaluating the topic of discussion, but rather how the ideas about this topic are presented by the author. Like most academic task types, the language used in Critical Reviews is often formal and objective.

Slide Four: Task types
As you can see, there are some commonalities across different task types: most assignments are written in paragraph form and require references to support ideas. The main differences in task types are related to other structural features such as how content is organised and whether headings or sub-headings are used. Always check your task guidelines for these features.

Most assignments if not all, also have a particular purpose to serve – but the purpose will vary depending on the task type and on the expectations set by your lecturer. The purpose of the task can help determine the language you will use.

Most academic assignments are formal in style; however some are more formal than others. Check whether you are being asked to argue, inform, reflect or analyse. This will help you determine the language you will use. For example, you are more likely to use persuasive language in an essay and more objective language in a report. You can find information on academic writing style by visiting the L3 website.

Slide Five: Finding information about your assignment
So where do you usually find information about your assignment? Start with your course outline, which you can find on your Learnonline site. The course outline has information about the course, and often includes a breakdown of the assignments. You can usually access the feedback proforma for your assignments as well. This is quite useful as it lets you know what your tutor will be marking you on. Have a look through the rest of your Learnonline site to see if there are any other assignment notes – this course has extra guidelines here. Remember, Learnonline sites may look different from one course to another, so it’s a good idea to familiarise yourself with each course site that you’re enrolled in – get to know where important guidelines and instructions are kept on each site.
Slide Six: Seek clarification
If you’re still not sure about the task type, purpose and language style of an assignment, seek clarification. Look through your Learnonline site thoroughly for extra information and talk to your tutor. For more detailed information on specific task types and academic style, visit the L3 EASS website.