Transcript 3: How do I start my assignment?

Watch this short video to learn how to analyse tasks, identify what you have to do, select relevant readings and plan your writing.

Title Slide: How do I start my assignment?
There is more to ‘starting’ your assignment than simply writing it. I will be using an essay task to show you the process of approaching an assignment, however these steps can apply to most if not all of your assignments at university.

Slide Two: Understand the task
First you need to identify the key words. The task word lets you know what approach you need to take. The task word in this example is ‘discuss’. This means that you need to give an interpretation or evaluation of the issue. This includes providing your judgement of the value of arguments for and against this issue as based on the literature you have read. For more examples of task words commonly used in academic assignment tasks, download the printable version of this slideshow and click on the PDF image on this slide.

You need to also identify the content words or phrases in the task. In this example, the content phrases are ‘video gaming’, ‘negative impacts’ and ‘behavioural development’. Note that I’m analysing these as phrases rather than individual words. ‘Video’ on its own has a different meaning to ‘video gaming’, so it’s important that you clarify the meaning of key content rather than individual words. Once you have highlighted these content words, make sure you have a clear understanding of what they mean to you, and what they might mean within the broader context of your course or discipline.

Slide Three: Understand the task
Now that you know the key words and phrases, the next step is to identify what the assignment question is. The essay topic in this example is ‘Video gaming has negative impacts on behavioural development. Discuss.’ To understand how to approach the task, turn the topic into an actual question. That way you will know what it is you need to answer. The main question you need to answer here is: ‘Does video gaming have negative impacts on behavioural development?’ Your answer to this could be yes, no, or to some extent. This will be your position or main argument throughout the essay. You will need to develop and support your answer in the body paragraphs. Ask yourself questions like ‘how do I know this?’, ‘what evidence is there to support this claim?’, ‘what are the different arguments?’ Once you have identified the essay question, write it down and keep it nearby while you research, read and plan. This will help you to stay on track.
Slide Four: Think about your approach

Sometimes there are too many points you could focus on in your assignment, so you need to identify what approach it is you want to take, so that you can stay within the set word limit. In the example essay you would be discussing whether or not video gaming has negative impacts on behavioural development. So you would have to decide on what type of ‘behavioural development’ you might focus on. Would you be focusing on cognition, motor-skills, or social behaviour for example? You would also need to consider ‘behavioural development’ and what it means from a discipline-specific perspective – a psychology student might focus on this statement differently to a social work or education student for example. And what about the context? Would you be focusing on the school, home, office, clinic or social context? It’s a good idea to also clarify what ‘negative impacts’ and ‘video gaming’ might mean to you. You might need to do a bit of reading to come up with a clear definition of video gaming, and an understanding of what the literature says about the types of impacts video games may have on different types of behaviour. Finally, you may also find it useful to identify who you will focus on – children, teenagers, or adults for example.

So, to sum up, ask yourself lots of questions regarding your focus on[sic] in the assignment. This will help you develop a logical and clear focus, and it will help you stick to the word limit. Ask yourself questions before you start researching and while you’re researching in relation to the boundaries of your argument. Ask who, what, where, how, and why to identify what your approach might be.

Slide Five: Read with purpose

Once you know what the main question is, and your possible focus and approach, it will be much easier to identify relevant readings. If you are looking at a journal article, firstly look at the title, abstract and key words to see if the content is relevant to the assignment question. If not relevant, don’t waste your time - get rid of it and move on to the next reading. If it is relevant, continue looking at the article for more clues. Next you would look at the key parts of the reading. This includes the introduction, conclusion, headings or sub-headings, topic sentences (which are the first sentences of each paragraph) and any visuals. The intro and conclusion will outline the main arguments or purpose of that source. The heading, the sub-headings, as well as topic sentences and visuals will let you know what to expect in the body of the article, including the methods that were used, results that were founds and any analysis of the findings. By looking at the headings, sub-headings and topic sentences you can identify which parts of the reading are most relevant to your argument. These are the bits that you will read in more detail.
Slide Six: Take notes with purpose
It’s recommended that you highlight or take notes of the main ideas in the readings AND note down how you might actually use them in your assignment. How do they relate to the task question and your argument? Here are some examples of how you could take notes – work with a technique which actually suits your learning style. For example, you may prefer to use post-it notes and colours if you are a visual learner. Remember to note the source details for referencing purposes. You will need to include in-text references and a reference list of all the sources you use as support.

Slide Seven: What are the next steps?
So as you can see, it’s important to unpack and understand the task before you actually start writing:

• Identify all the key words (including task words and content words)
• Identify the task question (know what it is that you need to answer)
• Think about how you could possibly approach the task (ask yourself who, what, where, when, why, and how)
• Read efficiently and with purpose: identify relevant readings to support your arguments
• Think again about your approach, once you’ve done a bit of reading
• And then you can start planning what you might write and how – this process is cyclical, so you will probably need to return to your plan and redraft a few times before you reach your final version of the assignment.

Slide Eight: Planning your writing: the roadmap
Having a clear plan will ensure that you stay on track and that you answer the question – this is your ultimate goal. Take notes of what you will include in the introduction, body paragraphs and conclusion. Here is an example of a plan for this example essay:

• Think of your introduction as though it were a funnel where you start broadly and end narrow.
• Your body paragraphs should focus on one point at a time. Think of them as individual hamburgers, each with a top bun, their own special filling and bottom bun to hold the filling within the burger (or in the paragraph).
• Your conclusion is like the introduction, but the funnel is the other way around – you start your conclusion narrow and end on a broader note.

Like I said, a plan will keep you on track so it’s an important step in the assignment process...the assignment writing process. For more detailed tips on paragraph writing, watch the short videos in the ‘Writing Tips for EASS’ section.