The key to success in written assignments is to understand what the aim is. If you don’t understand what the person marking your work is looking for, you do not have much chance of giving it to them.

This section provides a few tips to help you understand why universities set essays and dissertations.

A Collection of Skills

Writing for university is not intended to be easy. It is intended to extend your skills and develop your intellect.

You are not expected to know the answer when you are assigned an assignment. In fact, it is assumed (and hoped) that you do not know the answer. Working out what your answer will be is as important as actually writing it down.

Essays are not assigned to assess your knowledge. They are assigned so you can teach yourself how to do research and write up the results.

There is never a single correct answer to the essay question. Your conclusions do not have to agree with your lecturer’s or tutor’s, they merely have to be clear, sensible and backed by good reasons. You will not be marked for “getting it right.” You will be marked for “doing it properly.” You “do it properly” by showing you have researched the topic, thought about what you found long enough to develop your own conclusions, and then made a coherent, logical argument to support your conclusions.

Here are the questions to ask:

1. RESEARCH: Can you do good research? Can you find material which is relevant to your topic? Can you filter out stuff which is irrelevant? Can you find and compare differing opinions on the same issue?
2. THINK: Can you think for yourself? Can you follow the logic of a research paper? Can you see the flaws in it? Can you assess whether someone’s conclusions are justified by their evidence? Can you think about the implications? Can you put it into the bigger picture (whatever that bigger picture may be)?
3. ARGUE: Can you present your own conclusions in a manner people can understand? Can you provide good reasons for those conclusions? Can you anticipate objections others could make to your conclusions and deal with them in advance?
4. WRITE: Can you put all this into words people can understand?

How is your work marked?

The people marking your work are looking for evidence you worked on the assignment at the standard expected for your level in the university. The standard expected will get higher each year. It is not enough to do good work. Your writing must demonstrate that you did good work to the person marking it.

Assessing your research:

You need to demonstrate you have done quality research. No matter what year you are in, you are expected to find relevant research and ignore irrelevant material. The more advanced you are, the more sources you are expected to find and use. The range and quality of your research will be assessed by the sources you cite. No one will know, or care, about material you read but do not use.

Good sources are those which are acknowledged in your field as important, or which are highly relevant, or which are unusual and show creative thinking about the topic. For example, if writing about trade in the ancient world, it would be considered a creative and thoughtful approach to discuss the way in which seasonal wind patterns affected the cost of transport by ship. The reason this would be considered creative is that it not a topic which is commonly discussed in this area. The reason it would be considered thoughtful is that it can be highly relevant.

If sources are offered to you when the assignment is set, make sure you read them, and try to use them. They will be valuable and relevant. If your essay is very good, you might get away without using them. If your essay is average, or poor, those marking your essay will assume your work is suffering for not using recommended sources, and you will be assessed as having done poor research. If the person setting the assignment lists their
own work as sources, you really need to show you’ve read it, and use it in some way. Lecturers are human and are pleased when others use their work. It never does any harm to please the person marking your assignment and increases your chance they will be positive if they have to make a judgement call on some aspect of your work.

It is important to demonstrate you can cross-reference multiple sources. This involves showing how several sources support and reinforce each other. In the sciences, try to show that the theories you use have empirical evidence supporting them. In the arts, try to find sources which build upon and extend the work of your main sources. It is also important to demonstrate that you understand how “solid” a source is within its field. To be “solid” a source needs to be considered a mainstream part of the discipline. Is the source generally accepted or is it radical fringe material? You will not be marked down for using fringe material – all new theories start that way. However, you are expected to demonstrate that you understand whether a theory is generally accepted or considered radical.

Assessing your thinking

Your writing must demonstrate you can think for yourself, and that you do so all the time. You need to demonstrate you thought about your research while you did it. It is very important not to confine your research to those who agree with each other. You must find sources which disagree. The ideal is to discuss one source, then discuss a source which disagrees with it, then conclude with your own judgement of debate between them. Finding sources which disagree demonstrates you are thinking while you research, not just mindlessly absorbing whatever you find.

The most important thing to demonstrate is that you can critically assess your sources. You do this by using them at the right time, to support the point you want to make. However, it is just as important to show you can see the good and bad aspects of major sources. You will often cite a source for a single fact, so there is not much opportunity to discuss it. However, you will also use some sources extensively, and may found your entire work on one or two major sources. Your assignment may even be about one particular source. Here it is essential to show you can consider the good and the bad. Even if you totally agree with everything it says, you need to show you have considered what could be wrong with it. If you agree with it completely, find another source which disagrees with it, and show how they are wrong. If you can’t find an opposing source, work out for yourself how someone could criticise it, then show why this criticism doesn’t apply. Never be totally positive, or totally negative, about any source. Always try to demonstrate you have considered it from both sides.

Assessing your argument

‘Argument’ is the academic term for the chain of thought which your essay follows. An argument consists of a series of points which lead to a conclusion. Every essay, thesis and dissertation is an argument. You should be able to summarise your conclusion in a few sentences. You should understand what points you need to make to convince someone your conclusion is correct.

Answer the question. An essay which does not address the topic cannot get good marks. You can include explanatory or background material – if it is necessary. However, always ensure the bulk of your essay addresses the question.  

Your argument is the most important aspect of the assessment, so it has a dedicated section below.

Assessing your writing

You do not have to be the best writer in the world, but people need to be able to understand you. Academic writing has its own style, which is more formal than you will find elsewhere. Each discipline will also have its own stylistic conventions. You need to learn to write like the sources in your field. This includes mastering the jargon. Try to use formal terms as much as possible. If there are numbers associated with something, use them. For example, don’t say “it was a long way” if you can say “the distance was 120km.”

You will be assessed for your command of grammar and punctuation. Never guess. If you are not sure, look it up.

Most people have standard ways of saying something. If you find yourself using the same phrase over and over, look for ways of saying the same thing in different ways. This demonstrates you have thought about what you wrote, instead of just dumping onto paper whatever came to mind while your brain sat in neutral.

You do not have to make your essay interesting. Don’t include flowery introductions designed to hook the reader’s interest. Don’t puff the material up with fancy quotes and interesting, but irrelevant, comments. Get the reader interested with real content – innovative ideas, clever arguments, good use of sources. Academics are
always under pressure over their reading. Many have to read two or three books every week just to keep up with their field. Remember that the person marking your work may have to mark dozens of essays on the same topic. Don’t waste their time with irrelevant material, no matter how wonderful you think it is. The person marking your work can’t give you marks for it because it’s irrelevant. To them, reading it is just a waste of their time. Furthermore, it is space you could have used for material which earned you marks. Stick to the topic and make interesting points instead.