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How to Start an Assignment (Complete UK Student Guide)

The step-by-step guide to going from "I have no idea where to begin" to a clear plan, a solid outline, and a confident first paragraph.

Reading time: 28–32 minutes

Featured Snippet Answer: To start an assignment, read the brief carefully and underline the command word, topic and scope; check the marking rubric to see where marks are weighted; break the question into 3–4 sub-questions; build a short research plan using your library database and Google Scholar; then create a one-page outline before you write a single sentence of the introduction.

AI Overview Summary: Starting a UK university assignment well means reading the brief properly before doing anything else. Identify the command word (e.g. "critically evaluate"), the topic, and the scope, then check the marking rubric to see how marks are distributed. Break the question into sub-questions, build a focused research plan, take structured notes, and create an outline before drafting. This turns a blank page into a manageable, step-by-step process.

Quick Answer

Starting an assignment properly takes four steps: decode the brief (command word, topic, scope), check the marking rubric to see where marks sit, plan your research around 3–4 sub-questions, and build a one-page outline before writing your introduction. Students who skip straight to writing usually end up rewriting far more than they saved.

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Why Most Students Struggle to Start Assignments

Almost every student who comes to a study skills tutor with "I don't know where to start" is stuck for one of the same handful of reasons — not because they lack ability, but because they've skipped a step without realising it.

They open a blank document before they understand the question. The instinct is to start typing something, anything, to feel like progress is happening. But writing before you understand what's being asked almost always means rewriting later, which costs far more time than planning would have.

They confuse "reading about the topic" with "planning the assignment." Hours can disappear into general reading that never gets converted into a plan, a structure, or a position. It feels productive. It rarely is.

They don't know what "good" looks like for this specific assignment. Every module, every lecturer, and every rubric is slightly different. Without checking the actual marking criteria, students often guess — and the guess is usually based on how they wrote assignments before, at school or in a different subject.

They're intimidated by the word count. A 3,000-word brief can feel like a wall. Broken into an introduction, three or four body sections and a conclusion, it's a much shorter, much more manageable set of smaller writing tasks.

International and first-year students face an added layer. UK academic conventions — command words, the expectation of critical analysis rather than description, referencing norms — are rarely intuitive on arrival, even for excellent writers in other systems. A student who was praised for descriptive, comprehensive writing in a different education system may find that the same approach earns a much lower mark under UK criteria, simply because the two systems reward different things.

They mistake motivation for a plan. Feeling ready to start and knowing what to do first are two different things. Many students wait to "feel ready" before opening the brief properly, when in fact the clarity that creates motivation usually comes *after* the first planning steps, not before them.

They underestimate how long research actually takes. Finding a source is quick; finding a genuinely relevant, credible source and understanding it well enough to use critically takes considerably longer. Without a rough time budget for this stage, it's easy to either rush it or let it expand indefinitely.

> **Expert Tip:** The fix for almost all of the above is the same: spend the first 20–30 minutes with the brief and rubric, not with a search engine. Everything else in this guide builds from that one habit.

What Your Lecturer Actually Expects

It helps to know what's actually being assessed, because it's rarely just "knowledge of the topic."

Most UK university marking criteria assess several distinct things at once: understanding of the material, structure and clarity, use of evidence, referencing accuracy, and — usually weighted most heavily at higher grade bands — critical analysis. Lecturers are trained to look for the difference between a student who has

read around a topic and a student who can evaluate it: weigh up strengths and weaknesses, compare perspectives, and reach a reasoned, evidenced position.

They are also, realistically, marking dozens or hundreds of scripts against the same criteria. A clearly signposted structure that answers the actual question asked is easier to mark fairly and consistently — and easier to award full marks to — than a well-informed but meandering answer that never quite states a position.

What Lecturers Are Really Looking For	What This Means for You
A direct answer to the specific question set	Don't write "everything you know" about the topic — answer only what was asked
Evidence of critical thinking, not just description	Explain what the evidence means, not just what it says
A clear, logical structure	Signpost your argument so the marker can follow it without effort
Accurate, consistent referencing	Every claim traceable to a credible source, in the required style
Use of your own analysis, not just quoted opinion	Sources support your argument; they don't replace it

> **Remember:** A rubric is not a formality — it is the actual document your work will be marked against. Reading it before you plan is one of the highest-value five minutes in the entire assignment process.

Understanding the Assignment Brief

Every assignment brief is built from four layers of information, and starting well means reading all four — not just the question itself.

Command words

The command word tells you *how* to approach the topic. It is often the single most misread part of a brief, because "discuss," "evaluate," and "critically evaluate" sound similar but ask for different things. None of these words have one universal fixed meaning across every subject — always check your own module handbook or ask your tutor if you're unsure how a term is being used in your discipline — but the table below reflects how they are most commonly applied across UK universities.

Command Word	What It's Actually Asking You to Do
Analyse	Break a topic into its component parts and examine how they relate to one another
Discuss	Present multiple sides of an issue or debate, weighing them against each other
Evaluate	Judge the value, effectiveness or validity of something, using evidence and criteria
Critically Evaluate	Evaluate from multiple perspectives, showing why some judgements are stronger than others, and reach a reasoned overall position
Compare	Identify similarities between two or more things
Contrast	Identify differences between two or more things
Explain	Make something clear by giving reasons, causes or a step-by-step account
Identify	Point out and name specific features, factors or examples
Justify	

Command Word	What It's Actually Asking You to Do
	Give reasons and evidence to support a decision, position or recommendation
Recommend	Suggest a course of action, backed by evidence and reasoning
Review	Survey and summarise existing knowledge or research on a topic, often with some evaluation
Assess	Weigh up the importance, value or extent of something, reaching a supported judgement

Command words grouped by type of thinking required

Group	Command Words	What Unites Them
Descriptive	Identify, Outline, Describe, Summarise	Present information clearly, with limited independent judgement
Comparative	Compare, Contrast	Relate two or more things to each other, either in similarity or difference
Explanatory	Explain, Analyse	Show understanding of how or why something works or relates
Evaluative	Evaluate, Critically Evaluate, Assess, Justify, Recommend, Review	Require a reasoned judgement, position or recommended course of action

⚠ **Common Mistake:** Answering a "critically evaluate" question with the structure of a "describe" or "outline" answer. This is one of the most common —

> and most avoidable — reasons for marks being capped below a 2:1 or First, regardless of how much the student clearly knows about the topic.

Learning outcomes

Learning outcomes describe the skills and knowledge the module is designed to build, and assignments are usually built to test them directly. If a learning outcome states that students should be able to "critically evaluate leadership theories in a healthcare context," your assignment brief is very likely testing exactly that — which tells you the marker will be looking specifically for critical evaluation, not a general leadership essay.

Assessment criteria

Assessment criteria are the specific standards your work is measured against — often listed as bullet points beneath the brief itself, separate from the more detailed rubric. They typically cover things like structure, use of evidence, referencing, and critical analysis, sometimes with an indication of how much each is worth.

Grading rubric

The rubric (sometimes called a "marking grid" or "grading matrix") translates the assessment criteria into grade bands — showing what a First-class, 2:1, 2:2 or Third-class answer looks like for each criterion. We cover this in detail in the next-but-one section.

Where to find each layer in practice

In reality, these four layers aren't always neatly labelled in your brief — they're often scattered across your assignment document, module handbook and virtual learning environment (VLE) page. It's worth locating all four before you plan, rather than assuming the question text alone is the whole brief.

Layer	Where You'll Usually Find It
Command word	Within the question itself, usually the first or second word
Learning outcomes	Module handbook, or listed alongside the assignment brief
Assessment criteria	Beneath the question, or in a separate "assessment information" document
Grading rubric	VLE assignment page, module handbook appendix, or provided on request from your tutor

⚠ **Common Mistake:** Treating the assignment brief as just the question sentence, and never opening the accompanying handbook or VLE page where the rubric and full assessment criteria usually live.

Example: Brief: "Critically evaluate the effectiveness of transformational leadership in improving staff retention within NHS settings."
Command word: *critically evaluate* (judge effectiveness from multiple angles, reach a reasoned position)
Topic: *transformational leadership and staff retention*
Scope: *NHS settings specifically* — evidence from other sectors may support the argument but the focus must stay on healthcare.

Breaking Down the Question

Once you understand the four layers above, the next step is turning the actual question into something you can act on. This is best done with a highlighter (physical or digital) and about ten minutes.

The three-colour highlighting method

Use three colours (or three underline styles if working digitally) to mark:

1. **Command words** — what you're being asked to do
2. **Content/topic words** — what the assignment is about
3. **Limiting words** — the scope, context or boundaries of the question

Worked example 1 (Business)

> "Critically evaluate the impact of remote working on employee productivity in UK small and medium-sized enterprises since 2020."

- Command word: *critically evaluate*
- Topic words: *remote working, employee productivity*
- Limiting words: *UK, small and medium-sized enterprises, since 2020*

Worked example 2 (Law)

> "Discuss the extent to which the doctrine of promissory estoppel has altered the traditional rules of consideration in English contract law."

- Command word: *discuss the extent to which* (a discussion with a judgement on degree)
- Topic words: *promissory estoppel, consideration*

- Limiting words: *English contract law* (not other jurisdictions)

Worked example 3 (Nursing)

> "Using a recognised reflective model, critically analyse a clinical experience that developed your understanding of patient-centred care."

- Command word: *critically analyse*
- Topic words: *patient-centred care, clinical experience*
- Limiting words: *using a recognised reflective model* (Gibbs or Kolb, for example — this is a methodological requirement, not optional)

> **Expert Tip:** Turn your limiting words into a short checklist. If your question says "UK SMEs since 2020," anything you write about large multinational corporations or pre-2020 data needs a clear, deliberate reason for being there — otherwise, it's likely off-scope.

Understanding the Marking Rubric

UK universities use **criterion-referenced marking** — your work is judged against a published set of standards for that assignment, not ranked against your classmates. Understanding this changes how you should read a rubric: it's not abstract guidance, it's the actual scoring instrument.

How a typical rubric is structured

Rubrics are usually laid out as a grid: criteria down one side (e.g. structure, critical analysis, referencing, use of evidence) and grade bands across the top (e.g. First, 2:1, 2:2, Third, Fail), with a short descriptor in each cell explaining what that standard of work looks like.

Criterion	Typical Weighting	First-Class Descriptor (example)	Lower Grade Descriptor (example)
Critical analysis	25–35%	Judges evidence from multiple perspectives; reaches a well-reasoned original position	Mostly describes sources with little independent evaluation
Structure & argument	15–20%	Clear, logical progression; every paragraph builds the argument	Disorganised or repetitive; unclear connection between sections
Use of evidence	15–20%	Wide range of current, credible, relevant sources, used purposefully	Limited, dated, or low-quality sources; evidence not linked to argument
Referencing accuracy	10–15%	Fully accurate and consistent in the required style	Frequent errors or inconsistent style
Answering the question	Underpins all criteria	Directly and fully addresses the specific question set	Generic answer; drifts from the set question

Remember: Different rubrics weight things differently — some assignments reward critical analysis very heavily; others (particularly reports and reflective

pieces) weight structure and application more evenly. Always check your specific rubric rather than assuming this table applies exactly to your module.

Applying the rubric to your own plan

The most useful thing you can do with a rubric before you start writing is turn it into a set of questions for your own plan, rather than treating it as something you only check at the end.

If critical analysis carries 30% of your marks, ask at the outline stage: does each section have room to evaluate evidence, not just present it? If structure carries 20%, ask: does your outline show a clear line of argument running from introduction to conclusion, or is it a list of loosely related points? Doing this before you draft means you are building towards the rubric from the very first outline, rather than trying to retrofit critical analysis into a descriptive draft during editing — which is a far harder and less reliable fix.

Example: A rubric weighting critical analysis at 30% and structure at 20% tells you, in practical terms, to spend noticeably more outlining time deciding how you'll evaluate and compare evidence than deciding what order your sections go in. Both matter, but one is worth considerably more of your effort.

Planning Before Writing

Planning isn't a "nice to have" stage before the real work starts — it is the real work. Most of the thinking that actually earns marks happens during planning, not during typing.

Backwards planning

Backwards planning starts from your deadline and works backwards, rather than starting from today and hoping there's enough time left. Write your submission date at the top of a page, then work backwards through proofreading, editing, drafting, outlining, and research, assigning a realistic date to each.

For example, if your assignment is due on a Friday, working backwards might look like: Thursday for a final rubric check and submission itself, Wednesday for proofreading, Monday–Tuesday for editing, the previous Thursday–Sunday for drafting, and everything before that for research and planning. Seeing the plan laid out this way, from the deadline backwards, tends to make time pressure visible much earlier than planning forwards from today does — which is exactly the point.

Deadline planning

For a standard 2,000–3,000 word assignment, a realistic minimum planning horizon is **two full weeks**. Less than this is workable but leaves very little room for setbacks — illness, unexpected coursework clashes, or a source that turns out to be less useful than it looked.

Weekly planning

Break your available time into weekly chunks with one clear goal per week, rather than a single vague goal ("write the essay") for the whole period. A goal like "finish research and have a full outline by Sunday" is far easier to act on than "make progress on the essay."

Research planning

Research planning means deciding *before* you start searching what you're looking for — which sub-questions need evidence, roughly how many sources you need, and

where you'll look first — rather than searching broadly and hoping relevant material appears.

A sample two-week timeline

Day	Task
Day 1–2	Decode the brief, check the rubric, break down the question
Day 3–5	Research: search, skim, and shortlist sources
Day 6–7	Read shortlisted sources in depth; take structured notes
Day 8	Build your outline
Day 9–11	Write the first full draft
Day 12	Edit for structure, argument and flow
Day 13	Proofread for grammar, spelling and referencing accuracy
Day 14	Final check against the rubric and submission requirements; submit early if possible

> **Suggested visual:** A horizontal timeline graphic showing the 14-day plan above as a Gantt-style bar chart, colour-coded by stage (research / writing / editing), works well as a shareable infographic on this section.

> ⚠ **Common Mistake:** Treating "research" as an open-ended activity with no deadline of its own. Give research a hard stop date — otherwise it quietly expands to fill all the time you had for writing.

Creating a Research Plan

A good research plan answers three questions before you open a single database: what am I looking for, where am I most likely to find it, and how will I know when I have enough?

Where to look, and what each source type is best for

Source Type	Best Used For	Notes
Google Scholar	Broad initial searches, finding widely-cited papers, tracking citation counts	Good starting point, but always verify access through your university library where possible
Library databases (e.g. EBSCO, JSTOR, ScienceDirect, Summon/ Discovery)	Peer-reviewed journal articles, full-text access	Usually the most reliable route to credible academic sources
Government reports (gov.uk, ONS, NICE)	UK statistics, policy documents, official guidance	Strong for factual, current UK-specific data
Journal articles	Core theoretical and empirical evidence	Prioritise recent, peer-reviewed articles from reputable journals
Books / academic textbooks	Foundational theory, historical or conceptual context	Useful for establishing background before moving to more current journal evidence

Source Type	Best Used For	Notes
Professional organisations (e.g. CIPD, Royal Colleges, professional bodies)	Industry standards, practice guidelines, current sector context	Valuable for applied, practice-based assignments (Nursing, Business, Law)

A simple research plan template

1. Assignment question (copied in full)
2. Sub-questions the assignment implies (3–5)
3. Source types to prioritise for each sub-question
4. Target number of sources per sub-question (a rough guide, not a rigid rule)
5. Research deadline (the date research stops and writing begins)

> **Expert Tip:** Search using your sub-questions, not your whole essay title. "Does remote working affect SME productivity" returns far more useful, specific results than searching your entire assignment brief as one long phrase.

How much research is actually enough?

There's no single correct number of sources, and chasing a specific count can distract from the real question, which is whether each sub-question is properly supported. As a working guide, a 2,000-word undergraduate essay is often built on somewhere in the region of 8–15 quality academic sources, while a longer report, dissertation chapter or literature review will typically draw on considerably more. What matters more than the total is distribution: if four of your five sub-questions are well supported and one has no evidence at all, that gap will be visible in your final argument regardless of how many sources you've gathered overall.

A reasonable signal that you have enough to start outlining is this: for each sub-question, you can already summarise, in a sentence or two and in your own words, what the evidence broadly says — including where sources agree and where they disagree. If you can't do that yet for a sub-question, that's usually a sign to keep

searching specifically for that gap, rather than to keep reading broadly around the topic as a whole.

> ⚠ **Common Mistake:** Continuing to search and read well past the point of diminishing returns, because it feels safer than moving on to writing. If you can already summarise the evidence for a sub-question, additional sources saying the same thing add little further value.

Evaluating Sources

Not every source that turns up in a search is worth your time, and using weak sources is one of the fastest ways to undermine an otherwise well-argued assignment.

What to check before you rely on a source

- **Peer review** — has the work been reviewed by other experts in the field before publication? Peer-reviewed journal articles carry more academic weight than non-reviewed material.
- **DOI (Digital Object Identifier)** — a unique reference number assigned to most academic articles, functioning rather like a permanent web address that won't break even if the article moves between databases or platforms. Its presence is a reasonable (though not absolute) signal that a source is part of the formal, indexed academic record, and it also makes a source much easier to locate again later or include accurately in a reference list.
- **Authority** — who wrote it, and what are their credentials or institutional affiliation?
- **Publication date** — is it recent enough to be relevant to a fast-moving topic, or does it represent foundational, still-relevant theory?

- **Bias** — does the author, funder, or publisher have an interest in a particular conclusion?
- **Credibility of the publisher** — is it a recognised academic journal, university press, or reputable institution, rather than an unreviewed blog or opinion site?

Source credibility comparison

Source	Peer-Reviewed?	Typical Credibility	Best Use
Academic journal article	Usually yes	Very high	Core evidence
Academic book / textbook	Editorially reviewed, not peer-reviewed in the same sense	High	Theory and context
Government report (gov.uk, ONS)	No, but officially verified	High	UK statistics and policy
Professional body report	Varies	Medium–high	Applied/industry context
Reputable news article	No	Medium	Recent events, real-world examples
Wikipedia	No	Low (starting point only)	Background orientation, not citation
Personal blog/ unverified website	No	Very low	Avoid citing in academic work

⚠ **Common Mistake:** Assuming that anything returned by a general internet search is appropriate to cite. A source appearing on the first page of Google says nothing about its academic credibility.

Note-Taking Strategies

How you take notes at the research stage directly affects how easy — or difficult — writing your first draft will be. Messy, copied-and-pasted notes are also one of the most common causes of accidental plagiarism.

Choosing a note-taking method

Method	Best Stage to Use It	Main Strength
Cornell Method	Reading individual sources in depth	Forces condensation and reflection as you go
Mind Mapping	Early, exploratory research	Reveals connections between themes and sources
Digital Notes	Throughout, especially longer projects	Searchable and easy to tag by sub-question
Research Matrix	Comparing evidence across multiple sources	Shows at a glance where evidence is strong or thin

Cornell Method

Divide your page into three sections: a narrow left column for keywords or questions, a wider right column for notes, and a strip at the bottom for a short summary. This

structure forces you to condense and reflect on material as you go, rather than transcribing it passively.

Mind Mapping

Useful at the early, exploratory stage of research — start with your assignment question in the centre and branch outward into themes, sub-questions and sources. Mind maps are particularly good for spotting connections between ideas that a linear list of notes can hide.

Digital notes

Tools like OneNote, Notion or a simple structured document let you tag notes by theme or sub-question, making it far easier to pull relevant material together later when you build your outline. The main advantage over paper notes is searchability: when you reach the drafting stage and need every source that touched on a particular sub-theme, a tagged digital system surfaces them in seconds, whereas flicking back through handwritten pages of notes can cost real time exactly when you can least afford it.

Whichever digital tool you use, keep the same discipline as any other method: record the full source reference alongside the note itself, not in a separate list you intend to reconcile later. Reconciling a list of ideas with a list of sources after the fact is one of the more common ways referencing errors creep into an otherwise well-researched assignment.

Research matrix

A table with your sub-questions as rows and your sources as columns (or vice versa) is one of the most useful formats for longer assignments and literature reviews, because it visually shows you where you have strong evidence and where the gaps are.

Source	Sub-question 1	Sub-question 2	Sub-question 3
Smith (2021)	Strong evidence	—	Some relevance

Source	Sub-question 1	Sub-question 2	Sub-question 3
Jones (2022)	—	Strong evidence	—
ONS (2023)	Supporting statistic	Supporting statistic	—

> ⚠ **Common Mistake:** Copying a sentence directly into your notes "to paraphrase later" without quotation marks. It is very easy to forget which parts of your notes were copied and which were your own words — always mark direct quotes clearly the moment you write them down.

Creating an Assignment Outline

An outline turns your research into a usable structure before you commit to full sentences — and it is the single step most likely to be skipped under time pressure, despite being one of the most time-saving.

A complete outline example (2,000-word essay)

Working thesis: Situational leadership offers a more reliable framework than transformational leadership for improving staff retention on NHS wards.

1. **Introduction (~200 words)** — context on NHS retention challenges; thesis statement; roadmap of the argument
2. **Section 1 (~450 words)** — evidence for transformational leadership's strengths; key theory and studies
3. **Section 2 (~450 words)** — evidence for its limitations in ward-level, high-pressure contexts

4. **Section 3 (~450 words)** — case for situational leadership as a more context-sensitive alternative
5. **Counter-argument (~300 words)** — acknowledge situations where transformational leadership performs well; explain why this doesn't undermine the overall thesis
6. **Conclusion (~150 words)** — restate the thesis in light of the evidence; final judgement; no new evidence introduced

A complete outline example (report)

1. **Executive Summary** — one paragraph, written last
2. **Introduction** — purpose, scope, methodology
3. **Findings, Section A** — organised by theme, with headings
4. **Findings, Section B** — organised by theme, with headings
5. **Discussion** — what the findings mean collectively
6. **Recommendations** — specific, evidence-based, actionable
7. **Reference List**

A complete outline example (reflective piece using Gibbs' Reflective Cycle)

1. **Description** — what happened, factually and briefly
2. **Feelings** — your thoughts and feelings at the time
3. **Evaluation** — what was good and bad about the experience
4. **Analysis** — what sense can be made of the situation, linked to theory and literature
5. **Conclusion** — what else could have been done; what you learned
6. **Action Plan** — what you would do differently next time, specifically

> **Expert Tip:** Write each outline point as a full sentence stating what that section argues, not just a topic label. "Section 2: limitations of transformational leadership

in high-pressure ward settings" is far more useful at the drafting stage than simply "Section 2: limitations."

Suggested visual: An assignment roadmap infographic — a single horizontal flowchart running Brief → Rubric → Sub-questions → Research → Notes → Outline → First Draft → Editing → Proofreading → Submission — makes an effective shareable summary of this entire guide and works well placed near the top of the published page.

Writing Your First Sentence

The first sentence causes disproportionate anxiety relative to how much it actually matters — it will very likely be rewritten once the rest of the introduction exists, so treat it as a starting point, not a final performance.

Practical methods that work

Start with context, not a definition. Avoid opening with "In today's society..." or a dictionary definition of your topic — both read as filler and rarely earn marks. Instead, open with a specific, relevant piece of context: a statistic, a real development in the field, or a clearly stated debate.

State the tension your assignment addresses. Many strong introductions open by identifying a genuine question or disagreement in the field, which naturally leads into your thesis.

Write the introduction last. It is often far easier to introduce an argument accurately once you already know exactly what you argued in the body. Write a placeholder line, draft the body first, then come back.

Try freewriting if you're genuinely stuck. Set a timer for five minutes and write everything you already know or think about your topic and thesis, without stopping to edit or worry about phrasing. Most of it won't survive into the final draft, but freewriting reliably breaks the freeze of an empty page, and it often surfaces a usable sentence or angle you hadn't consciously identified yet.

Write to your outline, one section at a time. Once you have a full-sentence outline, the "first sentence" problem effectively shrinks to writing one sentence for one section — which is a far smaller task than "starting the whole essay."

Weak vs strong first sentence

Weak Opening	Strong Opening
"In today's fast-paced world, leadership is more important than ever."	"NHS staff turnover has reached record levels in recent years, placing renewed pressure on ward-level leadership to retain experienced nurses."
"This essay will discuss remote working."	"Since 2020, remote working has shifted from an occasional accommodation to a default expectation across UK small and medium-sized enterprises — with mixed effects on measured productivity."

> **Example:** If your assignment is on promissory estoppel, a strong opening line might be: "The doctrine of promissory estoppel has long sat uneasily alongside the traditional requirement for consideration in English contract law, raising the question of how far equity can be permitted to modify a common law rule."

Common Mistakes Students Make

#	Mistake	Why It Hurts Your Mark
1	Starting to write before reading the brief properly	Leads to answering the wrong question
2	Ignoring the marking rubric	Missing exactly where the marks are weighted
3	Misreading the command word	Descriptive answer to a critical/ evaluative question
4	Research with no clear sub-questions	Reading becomes unfocused and inefficient
5	Relying only on general web searches	Low-credibility sources weaken your evidence base
6	Skipping the outline stage	Disorganised structure, repetition, weak flow
7	Writing the introduction first and never revisiting it	Introduction promises an argument the essay doesn't deliver
8	Treating notes as a copy-paste exercise	Increases plagiarism risk significantly
9	Describing sources instead of analysing them	Caps marks below higher grade bands
10	No clear thesis or position	Reads as a list of facts, not an argument
11	Ignoring word count allocation per section	Introduction or one section absorbs too much of the word count
12	Leaving referencing until the very end	Rushed, inconsistent, error-prone reference list
13	Overusing direct quotations	

#	Mistake	Why It Hurts Your Mark
		Suggests limited independent understanding
14	Not addressing counter-arguments	Argument looks one-sided and less credible
15	Editing and proofreading in a single pass	Misses both structural issues and surface errors
16	Leaving the whole assignment until the final days	No time for meaningful editing or proofreading
17	Not checking which referencing style is required	Inconsistent or wrong-style referencing across the document
18	Forgetting to re-check the question after finishing the draft	Essay may have drifted from the original brief by the end
19	Assuming all sources carry equal weight	Weak evidence undermines otherwise strong analysis
20	Not using headings correctly for reports vs essays	Formatting mismatched to assignment type
21	Failing to link each paragraph back to the question	Reader has to work out relevance themselves
22	Submitting without a final rubric check	Missed criteria that were easy to fix

⚠ **Common Mistake:** Perhaps the most common of all — treating planning as optional "extra" time rather than a core part of the assignment. Every mistake in the table above becomes significantly less likely with a proper plan in place first.

Expert Tips from Academic Tutors

- **Read the brief twice, on two different days.** A second read, even 24 hours later, often reveals a nuance in the question you missed the first time.
- **Write your thesis statement before you finish researching.** A working position — even one you later refine — gives your research direction rather than letting it sprawl.
- **Keep a running reference list from day one.** Add each source the moment you decide to use it, in full required format, rather than reconstructing your reading list at the end.
- **Use the rubric as a self-marking tool before submission.** Go through each criterion and honestly assess whether your draft meets it.
- **Don't confuse a long draft with a good draft.** A tightly argued 90% of the word count that directly answers the question outperforms a padded 100% that drifts.
- **Separate "research time" from "writing time" on your calendar.** Trying to do both in the same sitting usually means neither happens well.
- **Ask for feedback on your plan, not just your final draft.** Catching a structural or scope issue at the outline stage is far cheaper than catching it after a full draft is written.
- **Treat your first attempt at an outline as a draft, too.** It's normal to reorganise your sections once you see them laid out together — that's the outline doing its job, not a sign you planned badly the first time.
- **Protect your research deadline the same way you protect your submission deadline.** Students rarely miss the final deadline outright; they much more often lose so much time to open-ended research that drafting, editing and proofreading get compressed into a rushed final day or two.
- **Re-read the question after finishing your first draft, not just before you start.** Arguments often drift slightly over the course of writing; a final check against the original brief catches this before it costs you marks.

Need feedback before submission? Our UK academic tutors can review your assignment structure, research, referencing, and academic writing to help you improve your work before submission.

Assignment Starter Checklist

Assignment Starter Checklist

- ☐ I have read the full brief, not just the question line
- ☐ I have identified the command word and know what it's asking me to do
- ☐ I have identified the topic words and limiting words/scope
- ☐ I have read the marking rubric and noted where marks are weighted
- ☐ I have checked the required referencing style
- ☐ I have broken the question into 3–5 sub-questions
- ☐ I have set a research deadline, separate from my writing deadline
- ☐ I have identified where I'll search first (library database, Google Scholar, etc.)
- ☐ I have a note-taking system set up before I start reading sources
- ☐ I have built a one-page outline before starting my first full draft

Assignment Planning Template

Printable Assignment Planning Template

- ☐ Assignment question (copied in full): _____
- ☐ Command word and what it requires: _____
- ☐ Topic words: _____
- ☐ Limiting words / scope: _____
- ☐ Referencing style required: _____
- ☐ Working thesis / position: _____
- ☐ Sub-question 1: _____
- ☐ Sub-question 2: _____
- ☐ Sub-question 3: _____
- ☐ Target word count per section: _____
- ☐ Research deadline: _____
- ☐ Draft deadline: _____
- ☐ Editing deadline: _____
- ☐ Proofreading deadline: _____

Assignment Timeline Template

Weekly Assignment Timeline Template

- ☐ Week 1, Days 1–2: Decode the brief, check the rubric, break down the question
- ☐ Week 1, Days 3–5: Research — search, skim, and shortlist sources
- ☐ Week 1, Days 6–7: Read shortlisted sources in depth; take structured notes
- ☐ Week 2, Day 1: Build the outline
- ☐ Week 2, Days 2–4: Write the first full draft
- ☐ Week 2, Day 5: Edit for structure, argument and flow
- ☐ Week 2, Day 6: Proofread for grammar, spelling and referencing accuracy
- ☐ Week 2, Day 7: Final rubric check and submission, ideally ahead of the deadline

Suggested visual: Render this as a two-week wall-planner-style grid graphic, with each day as a box and a small icon (magnifying glass for research, pencil for drafting, checkmark for editing/proofreading) for quick visual scanning.

Frequently Asked Questions

1. How do I start an assignment when I don't understand the question? Re-read the brief slowly, underline the command word, topic words and limiting words separately, and if it's still unclear, ask your tutor or module leader directly — this is a normal, expected question, not a sign you're behind.

2. What is the very first thing I should do when I receive an assignment? Read the full brief and the marking rubric before doing anything else, including research. Understanding what's being asked and how it's graded shapes every decision that follows.

3. How long should I spend planning before I start writing? For a standard 2,000–3,000 word assignment, allowing roughly a third of your total available time for understanding the brief, researching and outlining is a reasonable guide, though this varies by assignment type and personal working style.

4. What does "critically evaluate" actually mean? It means judging something from multiple perspectives, showing why some judgements are stronger than others, and reaching your own reasoned, evidenced position — not simply describing what different sources say.

5. How many sources do I need to start writing? There's no fixed universal number, but having enough evidence to answer each of your 3–5 sub-questions with at least one or two credible sources is a reasonable starting point before you begin outlining.

6. Should I write the introduction first? Not necessarily. Many strong writers draft a placeholder introduction, write the body first, and return to the introduction once they know precisely what argument they've made.

7. What's the difference between a command word and a topic word? The command word tells you how to approach the question (e.g. "evaluate"); the topic word tells you what the question is about (e.g. "remote working"). Both need to be addressed for a complete answer.

8. How do I know which referencing style to use? Check your assignment brief or module handbook — it's usually specified there, and if not, your tutor can confirm it directly.

9. What should I do if my research isn't finding useful sources? Try rephrasing your search around your specific sub-questions rather than the whole assignment title, and search your university library database directly rather than relying solely on general web search.

10. How do I avoid going off-topic once I start writing? Keep your list of limiting words and sub-questions visible while you draft, and check each paragraph against them before moving to the next.

11. What is a marking rubric, in simple terms? It's the specific document your assignment will actually be graded against, usually laid out as a grid showing what different grade bands look like for each assessed criterion.

12. Is it normal to feel stuck before starting an assignment? Yes — it's one of the most common experiences students report, and it usually reflects a missing step (usually planning or understanding the brief) rather than a lack of ability.

13. How detailed should my outline be before I start writing? Detailed enough that each section states, in a full sentence, what it will argue — a list of single-word topic labels is usually not detailed enough to write from efficiently.

14. What's the best way to take notes from journal articles? A structured method such as the Cornell method or a research matrix, recording the source, the key point in your own words, and any direct quotes separately and clearly.

15. How do I write a strong thesis statement? State your specific position on the question in one sentence, not just the topic area — a thesis makes a claim that could, in principle, be argued against.

16. Can I change my thesis after I've started researching? Yes, and this is completely normal — a working thesis is meant to evolve as your evidence develops; just make sure your introduction reflects your final position, not your original one.

17. What if my assignment brief doesn't include a rubric? Ask your module leader whether one exists, or check your course handbook or virtual learning environment (VLE) page — most UK universities publish one somewhere, even if it isn't attached directly to the brief.

18. How do I know if a source is credible enough to use? Check whether it's peer-reviewed, who the author is, how recent it is, and whether the publisher is a recognised academic or official source rather than an unreviewed website.

19. Should international students approach starting an assignment differently? The core process is the same, but it's worth deliberately checking UK-specific expectations around critical analysis and referencing conventions, which can differ from academic norms in other countries.

20. How do I balance multiple assignments with different deadlines? Use backwards planning for each assignment separately, then merge the resulting task lists into a single weekly calendar so you can see clashes early.

21. What's the difference between editing and proofreading at the planning stage? At the planning stage, the relevant point is simply to schedule them as two separate, later tasks — editing checks structure and argument, proofreading checks grammar, spelling and formatting.

22. How do I stop procrastinating once I understand the brief? Break the very next action down to something small and concrete — for example, "find three sources for sub-question one" rather than "do research," which has no clear starting point.

23. What should my outline include besides section headings? A one-sentence summary of what each section argues, an approximate word count per section, and a note of which sources you plan to use where.

24. Is it acceptable to ask my lecturer for guidance before I start? Yes — clarifying the brief, the scope, or the expected structure with your tutor before you begin is a normal and encouraged part of good academic practice, not a sign of weakness.

25. How do I know when I've done enough planning and should start writing? When you have a clear thesis, a full outline with a sentence for each section, and enough sources identified to support each sub-question — further planning beyond this point often becomes a form of procrastination.

26. What's the single biggest factor in starting an assignment well? Genuinely understanding the question and the rubric before doing anything else — nearly every other mistake in this guide traces back to skipping that step.

27. How do I start an assignment for a subject I find genuinely difficult? The process doesn't change, but it's worth being more generous with your research time budget and asking clarifying questions earlier — struggling with the subject matter is a separate issue from struggling with the process, and this guide addresses the latter.

28. Should I start writing before I've finished all my research? It's usually better to complete the core research for each sub-question and build your outline first, though it's normal and expected to add a further source or two during drafting if a genuine gap becomes apparent.

29. What's a realistic first goal for day one of a new assignment? A completed brief breakdown (command word, topic words, limiting words) and a first read of the marking rubric — nothing more. Treating this as a full day's achievement, rather than a five-minute afterthought, sets a much stronger foundation for everything that follows.

Key Takeaways

- Read the brief and marking rubric fully before doing any research or writing.
- Identify the command word, topic words and limiting words separately — they each do a different job.
- Understand that UK marking is criterion-referenced: your work is judged against a published standard, not against your classmates.
- Break your question into 3–5 sub-questions to make research focused and efficient.
- Evaluate every source for credibility — peer review, authority, currency and bias — before relying on it.

- Take structured notes (Cornell, mind map, research matrix) to prevent both disorganisation and accidental plagiarism.
- Build a full-sentence outline before you write a single paragraph of your draft.
- Treat your first sentence as a draft, not a final performance — introductions are often best revised last.
- Use the checklist, planning template and timeline in this guide before every new assignment.

Conclusion

Starting an assignment rarely feels difficult because the topic is too hard — it feels difficult because the first few steps are invisible until someone shows you what they are. Reading the brief properly, understanding the rubric, breaking the question down, planning your research, and outlining before you draft aren't extra work bolted onto "the real writing." They are the real work, and they're what turns a blank page and a deadline into a clear, manageable process.

Use the checklist and templates in this guide every time you receive a new assignment, and the "where do I even start" feeling should get smaller with practice — not because the assignments get easier, but because you'll already know exactly what to do first.

> **Need feedback before submission?** Our UK academic tutors can review your assignment structure, research, referencing, and academic writing to help you improve your work before submission.

People Also Ask

Where do I start when I have no idea what my assignment is asking? Start with the command word — it tells you the type of thinking expected (description, comparison, evaluation) — before worrying about content at all.

What should I do in the first hour after receiving an assignment? Read the brief twice, locate the rubric, and write down the command word, topic words and limiting words on a separate page.

How do I turn a big assignment question into something manageable? Break it into 3–5 smaller sub-questions, and treat each one as a mini research task with its own shortlist of sources.

What's the difference between starting an essay and starting a report? The early steps (brief, rubric, sub-questions, research) are identical; the difference appears at the outline stage, where reports use numbered, headed sections and essays generally use continuous prose.

How do UK universities expect assignments to begin, structurally? With a clearly stated position or purpose in the introduction, rather than a broad, unfocused overview of the general topic area.

Related Searches

Starting an essay UK university · assignment brief meaning · how to read a marking rubric · command words in assignments · assignment planning template UK · how to write a research plan for an essay · first week of an assignment · assignment procrastination student · how to outline an essay UK · Gibbs reflective cycle outline.

Topical authority note: This guide sits within AssignPro Solution's wider academic skills library, alongside dedicated guides on assignment structure, referencing systems, and critical analysis — together forming a complete resource for UK academic writing skills from first brief to final submission.

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External Sources Referenced

- [University of Portsmouth – Essays: Task Words](https://myport.port.ac.uk/study-skills/written-assignments/essays-task-wor