

Educational and Career Counseling Center

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Creating a Study Plan: How to Break Assignments into Workable Pieces

At the University level, grades are usually determined by test/exam grades and one or two major assignments. Assignments could take the form of essays, literature reviews, and lab reports, to name a few. A presentation to the class may or may not accompany the assignment.

Assignments are usually assigned well in advance of the due date. This is because university assignments typically take a long time to complete well. The expectation is that you will develop a higher level of reasoning, research and explanation than any of your high school papers. You should be aware of due dates by reading the syllabus that comes with each of your courses. As soon as you know the due date and you have the assignment in hand, **start immediately** so that you have time to spend on each task, without having to neglect the workload from other courses.

Creating a Time Line

Regardless of the type of assignment, it is important to take the time to break it down into smaller steps and assign yourself a completion date for each step. Write down each step in your planner. Allow yourself enough time to complete each step fully and completely, keeping in mind the other work (reading, studying, other assignments) that must be done for other classes.

The following is an example of an essay assignment that has been broken down into 8 steps. Information and suggestions are included with each step, as well as a date to have that step completed by.

Essay Assignment Handed Out: Friday October 19 Due: Friday November 30

Step One: Understand the Assignment Done by: October 20

As soon as possible, read over the assignment carefully and determine what you need to do. You need to know what the assignment requires even before you get started or else you won't know what it is you're supposed to be doing. Ask yourself the following questions:

- What format does this essay require?
- What are the technical details – length, reference style?
- Do you have a choice of topics?

If you are not **completely clear on any aspect of the assignment**, ask the professor for clarification. You do not want to spend hours and hours doing an assignment, only to find out that you misunderstood what you were to do.

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Step Two: Choose Topic Done by: October 23

The next step is to choose a topic. Depending on the assignment, you may have a great deal of freedom, as in “choose any topic covered in your textbook”, or you may have to choose from a list of assigned topics.

If you have a great deal of choice, make sure you choose a **specific** topic. Many students make a mistake of choosing a topic that is far too broad. For example, saying that the play “Romeo and Juliet” is your topic is far too broad. A more specific choice would be “The use of foreshadowing in Romeo and Juliet”. Regardless of the amount of choice you have, choose a topic that interests you and you grasp well already. This will make your life much easier!

Step Three: Decide on Thesis Done by: October 26

Because this is an essay assignment, a thesis is needed. One may already have been provided but in many cases you need to develop your own. A thesis should be specific and it usually proves something (an argumentative essay), which becomes the focus for the rest of the paper.

You cannot write a good paper without coming up with a solid thesis first. If you have any questions or doubts about your thesis, do not hesitate to run it by your professor first or by the Writing Center (231) 591-2534, ASC 1017.

Step Four: Research Done by: November 6

This is the most time consuming step of any assignment. Good research takes a great deal of time because you have to “weed through” many books, articles, etc, to find the relevant information that directly correlates to your thesis. Plan at least a week to complete the research portion of the assignment.

Just an FYI – at the university level, the Internet is usually not considered a valid source for research. This is a very important point, while the Internet has a lot of useful information it isn’t necessarily good information. One way to learn how to use FLITE and its various databases is to complete the PILOT program offered through their website. It will help you to become very familiar with the library and how to access databases and save you a lot of time for figuring things out on your own.

Step Five: Create Outline Done by: November 15

An outline is a graphic scheme of the organization of your paper. It is used to identify the main arguments of the essay (based on the thesis) and the supporting evidence that will be used. Preparing an outline will help you think over your notes, consider them from different perspectives, and devise/revise an organizational plan appropriate to your topic, audience, and assignment.

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A good outline should support the thesis, establish the order and relationship of the main points and clarify the relationship between the major and minor points.

Step Six: Write Rough Draft Done by: November 23

Now it is time to start writing! Following your outline should make writing go fairly smoothly. Don't worry about mistakes and getting just the write wording at this point – just get the ideas down on paper. The editing and polishing will come later.

Your rough draft needs to be done fairly early. You may find that you need to expand on your ideas to increase the length or take out some information to shorten it. Always keep in mind the guidelines for length and try to fall within those parameters.

Step Seven: Edit Done by: November 27

After the rough draft is complete, leave the paper for a day and then return to it for editing. It is a great idea to have someone else edit it for you. The Writing Center offers editing free to Ferris students. You can contact the Writing Center at (231) 591-2534, or stop by ASC 1017. They may pick up on things that you didn't notice. Read it out loud. Ask yourself the following questions while you listen to yourself reading it:

- Does it make sense?
- Are those the words you want to use?
- Did you prove your point?
- Is it free of spelling and grammatical errors?
- Is everything referenced that needs to be?

Step Eight: Final Copy Done by: November 29

Make all the changes you need to. Print out the final copy and make sure that you have followed the correct referencing style to format your essay and included a list of references (or works cited). It should be double spaced, using size 12 font and regular sized margins. Do not wait until the hour before class to print your final copy. Sometimes there are technical glitches and you want to make sure you have the time to take care of things.

**For additional ways to set up a study plan for other courses
Check out this great website – the University of Minnesota
Assignment Calculator:**

<http://www.lib.umn.edu/help/calculator/>