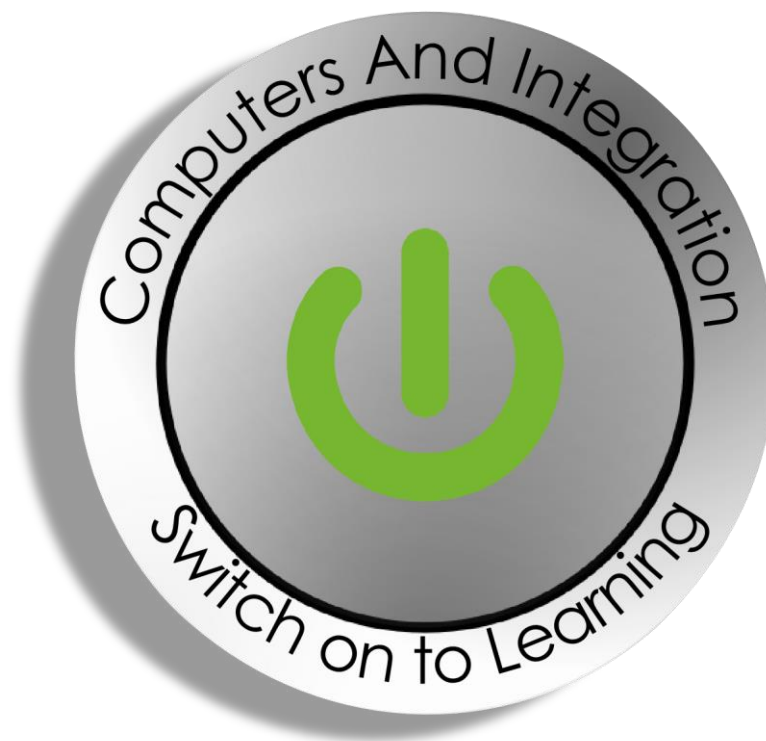How to Get Top Marks in Coursework
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Contents

Preface

Do you find completing coursework challenging? Do you find the way your work is marked baffling? If you do, don't panic. This guide tells you, in a concise and practical manner, what you need to do to get top marks in your UK University coursework.

So, in a nutshell, this guide will help you to:

Understand what you need to do to get top marks in your assessments.
Plan in a way that helps you to source relevant evidence and structure your written work.
Focus your work with objectives that are measurable and achievable.
Adopt an approach to your work that is appropriate, original and reliable.
Create reports that look and feel professional.
Write your work clearly and robustly.
Present your work in a good light.
Draw convincing conclusions and give practical solutions.
Reference reliable sources and add credibility to your work.
Use Appendices to add value to your work.
Write a persuasive research proposal and a robust dissertation.
Proofread your work to prevent mistakes and impress your readers.

Chapter 1 — Form a solid foundation

Aim to meet the set criteria - look in your course handbook for "learning outcomes".

Devise a do-able aim for your work that takes into account the learning outcomes and sets out, in general terms, what you seek to achieve.

Break down your aim into a series of specific steps (objectives) so that you can assess your progress. In doing this, set objectives that clearly spell out what you will do in every stage of your work.

Focus your objectives using action verbs that are easy to measure. For example, use terms such as: to compare, to calculate, to assess, to determine, to appraise, to verify, to describe, to explain and so on.

Sum up your understanding of the assessment brief - state your assumptions and give logical reasons for them in order to rid out ambiguity.

Draw a mind map to capture all the concepts associated with your coursework. For example, start in the middle of a blank page with your main theme and then create branches radiating out for all your ideas. Once you've done that, group your ideas into common themes in order to make it easier to source evidence and structure your written work.

Justify your work in a context relevant to your course. For instance, if you're doing a module in project management as part of your course, explain the importance of managing projects well in your course's main subject.

Seek to clarify what you don't understand with the person who set the coursework as your best guess may not be right.

Chapter 2 — Approach your assessments smartly

Aim to address all the points outlined in the assessment brief and seek to answer all questions as completely as you can.

Practice as much as possible - go out into the real world and behave like a practitioner - don't just describe or analyse some proposed practice, or solve simple problems.

Come up with new methods and solutions of your own. Even if something is not completely new to the world, do it in a new way and make a case for your work being original.

When doing projects or problem-solving work, devise a range of appropriate solutions, and discuss their pros and cons.

Be prepared to adopt a different approach when something isn't working as intended. That said, always document the obstacles you encounter (together with their solutions).

Read widely around topics and look out for themes in your chosen works of literature.

Source a range of distinctly different views - don't just consider one point of view.

Reference reliable sources, but don't just quote other people parrot fashion - think for yourself and critically assess your sources in your own words. For example, say whether you agree with the views expressed by your sources and use your own experience to inform your judgement.

Refer to relevant frameworks in order to steer your thinking to views that are fair, balanced and unbiased.

When carrying out an evaluation, first establish a reliable point of reference or benchmark. For instance, if you're investigating the legal repercussions of doing something, you should have a look at the outcome of past court cases.

Chapter 3 — Create reports in a standard way

Create a front cover for your reports and add a descriptive title, your name and a statement saying who it's for.

Sum up the content of your reports in an "Executive Summary".

Add an "Acknowledgements" page and give the names of the people that have helped you.

Add an "Abbreviations" page and define technical terms used in your report.

Create a "Contents" for your report with all your headings listed and give page numbers.

Add a "List of Tables and Figures" - with page numbers - so that your readers can, with one glance, locate all the tables and graphics used within your report.

Introduce your work with an "Introduction" - explain the need for your report, set out what it covers and make clear what research methods are used.

For the main body of your report, use subheadings to signal new ideas, but don't use more than three levels of headings.

Add a "Results" section if the subject of your report is of a technical nature and you need to include the results of tests.

Conclude the main body of your report with a "Conclusions" section. Or, a "Concluding Remarks" section if you're not able to draw solid conclusions.

If you have any recommendations to make, add a "Recommendations" section for the solutions you propose.

Add a "References" section and refer to the sources used in the main body of your report.

Add a "Bibliography" and list all the relevant works of literature that inform your report.

Add "Appendices" to the end of your report to give readers more detail on the points mentioned in the main body of your report.

Chapter 4 — Write your work robustly

Organise (or outline) your main body of work into a logical structure before you begin.

Clearly state the purpose of your work and address the topic given.

Build a solid argument and form a point of view. In doing this, clearly articulate your thoughts and defend your work.

Give evidence, and examples, to support your main points.

Back-up all your claims with reliable sources of information.

Shore up your views with logical reasons based on facts, evidence or accepted theories.

Consider ideas rather than just describe them - persuade, with the aid of research, their value or lack of value.

Think down new avenues - express fresh ideas with breadth and depth.

Think about the relationship between the various issues within your subject area.

Reveal how the topic you've studied relates to broader, real world, issues. In other words, put your topic of study in context and consider the big picture.

Show that you understand the significance of the topic studied, including underlying issues and concerns, and where and why there is controversy.

Refer back to your objectives at every opportunity - constantly validate them.

Chapter 5 — Write clearly and to the point

Write clearly and concisely as most people are busy.

Use words that convey their exact meaning - don't send readers on a wild goose chase to decipher what you mean.

Write in plain English using words that are easy to recall and read. That said, don't dumb down your vocabulary. Express your thoughts in innovative ways and use words that are appropriate and mature.

Adopt your own unique style and write creatively with flair.

Be careful when using jargon. Err on the side of caution and include jargon words in a glossary of abbreviations at the start of your work.

Use active voice rather than passive voice since it makes sentences clearer and shorter. For instance, use "the Dean of Faculty talked to the students" instead of "the students were talked to by the Dean of Faculty". Also, use "we will discuss it" rather than "it will be discussed by us".

Use doing words (verbs) instead of naming words (nouns) as they're shorter. For instance, use "discuss" instead of "discussion" and "examine" instead of "examination". Also, use "the project failed because" rather than "the failure of the project was caused by".

Write a short introduction to every section you add so that your work makes sense to those reading it. Also, link your sentences and paragraphs so that your writing just flows.

Aim for a Flesch Reading Ease score of 60-70 for your academic work. Note that Microsoft Word can automatically check the reading ease of your work after you run a Spell Check, assuming you've turned on the feature.

To find out how to turn on readability checking in Microsoft Word:
Press the "F1" key to launch the "Word Help" screen, then search for the term "readability".

Chapter 6 — Present your work in a good light

Choose a font that's easy to read, such as Arial or Verdana.

Set the size of your text to 12 point in order to prevent reader eyestrain.

Use wide headings, footers and margins as plenty of white space makes reading easier.

Keep your sentences short – aim for 15-20 words per sentence.

Aim for 6-8 sentences per paragraph. As a general rule of thumb, use a different paragraph for each new idea you introduce.

Break up your paragraphs with line spacing in order to allow your readers to have a rest every so often.

Keep lines left justified and use double or one-and-a-half line spacing for reader comfort.

Limit line length to between 60-70 letters per line so that those reading your work don't have to move their eyes too much.

Highlight important text by either making it bold or by putting it in a box. Don't underline text or make it italic because doing so can make your words appear to run together.

Write the bulk of your academic work in third person form using objective language. Don't use 'I' or 'We', except in conclusions.

Use uppercase words sparingly since they are harder to read.

Always put headings and page numbers in the same place so that your readers know where to find them.

Chapter 7 — Sum up logically and learn lessons

Sum up your main points.

Draw logical conclusions that follow-on from your main points.

Back-up your conclusions with clear, sound reasons, and link them to your objectives.

Tease out your most significant conclusions and clearly set them apart from minor ones.

Discuss the evidence on which you've based your conclusions in a balanced way.

Argue and form a point of view.

Clearly spell out the likely consequences of your conclusions.

Refer back to your sources and make clear how your conclusions contribute to resolving uncertainties or debates. Also, explain any questions raised as a result of your work.

Highlight controversial issues and leave your reader with something to think about.

Revisit your aim and make sure you've met it.

Show enthusiasm for continued excellence - be critical of your own work and learn lessons from your mistakes.

Define what excellence means to you and show, with the aid of evidence, how you've worked towards achieving it.

Reflect on your work and say what you would do differently in the future. For example, a good sound bite to use is **"Upon reflection, if I was to do the [task] again"**.

Chapter 8 — Give practical solutions

Put into practice your conclusions.

Give clear-cut and practical solutions.

Make sure that all your solutions are relevant and backed-up by arguments made in the main body of your report.

Give solutions with built-in checks so that they can be monitored over time.

Say how important your solutions are - prioritise them - and give good reasons for your chosen order.

Give each solution its own paragraph.

Group your solutions in order to make it easier for managers to put them into practice. For example, use headings such as 'urgent', 'long term', 'tactical' and 'operational'.

Only recommend solutions that are substantiated in the main body of your report.

Recommend all your solutions at the end of your report, even if you've discussed them in the main body of your report.

Chapter 9 — Reference your sources to add credibility

Create a "References" section and list all the sources you've mentioned in the main body of your report in order to add credibility to your work.

Group your sources by themes and sort them alphabetically by author.

Insert your list of "References" after your recommendations.

Make sure your style of referencing is the same throughout your work. Use either the Harvard or Vancouver style of referencing since they are the most common.

In the Harvard system of referencing, reference books, articles and web pages as follows:

For books, state:
Author, (date of publication), book title, edition, place of publication and publisher.
For example:
Glatthorn, A. and Joyner, R. (2005) Writing the winning thesis or dissertation: a step by step guide. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

For articles, state:
Author, (date of publication), title of article, title of journal, edition and page numbers.
For example:
Mitchell, T. R. & Michel, A. E. (1999) The meaning of money: an individual difference perspective. Academy of Management Review. 24 (3), pp. 568-581.

For web pages, state:
Author or company, (date of publication), title of publication, publisher and web address.
For example:
Strunk Jr., William. (1918) The Elements of Style. New York: W.P. Humphrey.
Available from: http://www.bartleby.com/141/ [Accessed 27 October 2012]

Chapter 10 — Show your influences with a Bibliography

List all the relevant works of literature you've read while writing your report and show the sources that have influenced you.

Include all the relevant sources you've read, even if you haven't mentioned them in the main body of your report.

Group your sources by themes and sort them alphabetically by author.

Insert your Bibliography after your list of references.

Chapter 11 — Use Appendices to give more details

Use Appendices to give more details on the points outlined in the main body of your report.

Use Appendices as a way of providing greater meaning to data.

Put detailed documents relating to your conclusions in an Appendix.

Put items such as surveys, interview questions and project plans in an Appendix.

Make sure you link to your Appendices at the points in your report where they are discussed and deemed most appropriate.

Add all Appendices to the end of your report.

Chapter 12 — Briefly introduce your reports

When you're nearing the end of a report, write an introduction to it.

Clearly explain the need for the report and give background details.

State the main purpose of it and set out the areas that it covers.

Briefly explain the research methods used. For this, briefly pinpoint the range of sources used and state what fieldwork you've done. For example, say if you've put out a self-completion survey or conducted face-to-face interviews. Also, make clear the scale and scope of your research sample, including its limitations.

Chapter 13 — Sum up reports in an Executive Summary

When you finish writing a report, sum it up on a single side of A4 paper so that busy readers can get the gist of it from your summary.

Briefly state the purpose of it and set out what's included in it.

Make clear what research methods have been used.

Give details of the main points that have led to your conclusions.

Set out your key findings and explain how you arrived at them.

Finally, place your stand-alone summary before the Contents page of your report.

Chapter 14 – Write a persuasive research proposal

14.1 State your research problem or issue

Set out the problem, or issue, you want to solve and explain your personal motivation for wanting to solve it.

Set your study apart from previous studies. Say what your study will do that previous studies have failed to do. Also, highlight any gaps in knowledge that exist.

Give a brief outline of the general subject area that surrounds your topic and place your study in context.

Set out the various angles that you plan to investigate in more detail and give sound reasons for doing so. Also, back-up your reasons with evidence you've already gathered.

Clearly sketch out one or two research-based aims for your study and underpin them with a series of steps (objectives) that are focussed and achievable.

14.2 Conduct a Literature Review and justify your study

Make a case for your proposed study and give sound reasons for your approach.

Read widely around your topic and reference material related to the key themes and methods of your study.

With the aid of relevant sources, explain the background to your proposed study and stress the importance of it. Also, say why your study is timely to do.

Relate your proposed study (in your own words) to relevant research, theory and practice. For example, look out for accepted theories that fit the key themes of your study, as well as for other studies that complement your one.

Critically review, in a balanced way, the sources that form the basis of your study. For example, discuss the pros and cons of your sources, and consider where your chosen authors get their credibility from.

Seek out the ideas that are most relevant to your study and form a conceptual framework based on sound reasons. Also, look out for sources that you can use as a reliable point of reference or benchmark.

Finally, set out how your study will fit in with other, related, studies and the wider world. For example, explain the likely impact your study will have on society and mention those that will benefit from it.

14.3 Broadly explain your approach

Devise a range of different methods, or approaches, for your study, and discuss their pros and cons. For example, discuss the pros and cons of using a self-completion survey to gather information from respondents versus the use of face-to-face interviews.

Back-up your choice of methods with reasons that are either based on facts, evidence or accepted theories.

Make clear the scale and scope of your research sample, including its limitations.

Explain any special procedures that you plan to use in the course of your study.

Create a project plan, such as a Gantt chart, that shows the tasks that make up your proposed study plotted against a timeline.

14.4 Set out how you will collect data

Set out what information you wish to obtain and why. For example, list the questions you want to ask, or in the case of interviews, note down the themes that you want to cover.

Give details of the techniques that you'll use to collect data. For example, if you're going to send out a survey, say whether you'll use questions with a set answer (quantitative) or without a set answer (qualitative).

Explain how you'll manage the process of collecting data, and the vast quantity of data collected as a result.

Discuss, in an unbiased manner, a range of ways in which you'll be able to thoroughly examine, or analyse, the data collected.

Say how you'll make clear, or interpret, what the data collected means.

Make sure that you choose the most appropriate techniques and give sound reasons for your choices.

14.5 State what you'll need

Discuss the resources that you'll need in order to carry out your study.

Make a note of the places you'll need to visit and the people you'll need to speak to.

Work out what equipment you'll need and how long you'll need it for.

Assess how much money you'll need and highlight sources of funding. Note that if you're applying for funding, add another section that states your qualifications and experience.

Seek prior permission from organisations that will take part in your study.

Think about the ethical issues that are likely to emerge from your study and consider ways to mitigate them.

14.6 Present your proposal in a good light

Add an "Introduction" as standard and state your research problem or issue. Also, place your study in context and set out the purpose of your proposal.

Add a "Methodology" and broadly discuss your proposed methods.

Discuss your "Techniques for Collecting Data" in detail.

Mention the "Resources" that you'll need in order to carry out your study.

Add a "Conclusion" and briefly sum up the main points of your proposal, adding any extra relevant information.

Add all the usual extras that normally go with a standard report. For example, include a "References" section and a "Bibliography" as standard. Also, put items such as surveys in an Appendix.

Create a "Contents" page for your proposal and include all its main sections.

Sum up your proposal on a single-side of A4 paper using an Abstract. For help on how to write an Abstract, see section "15.7 – Sum up your entire dissertation using an Abstract".

Place your Abstract before the Contents page of your proposal.

Add a front cover to your proposal and give it a provisional title that represents the state of your study as it stands.

Chapter 15 — Write a robust and convincing dissertation

15.1 Introduce your study

Write an "Introduction" to your study, and bear in mind that you won't be able to complete your introduction until near the end of your study.

Justify your research problem, or issue, and place your study in a wider context. For help with this, see "Chapter 14 — Write a persuasive research proposal".

Set out what your study seeks to do and why. For this, briefly explain your investigative approach and present your key findings.

Briefly give an indication of the sources that inform your study and state what fieldwork you've done. For example, say if you've put out a self-completion survey or conducted face-to-face interviews. Also, make clear the scale and scope of your research sample, including its limitations.

Clearly state your research-based aims and underpin them with clear-cut objectives. For help with setting aims and objectives, see "Chapter 1 — Form a solid foundation".

15.2 Conduct a Literature Review

Make a comprehensive case for your study and be persuasive.

Read widely around your topic and reference material related to the key themes and methods of your study.

Be perceptive and research those historical events that are most significant to your study.

Relate your proposed study (in your own words) to relevant research, theory and practice.

Critically review, in a balanced way, the sources that form the basis of your study. For example, discuss the pros and cons of your main sources, and consider where your chosen authors get their credibility from.

Look out for studies that complement your one, and discuss the relevance of their findings in relation to your own study. In doing this, make sure that you mention the scope and breadth of previous studies.

Look out for omissions and contradictions in previous studies. Also, when doing comparison work, first establish a reliable point of reference or benchmark.

Show that you have a comprehensive knowledge of your study's subject matter and be masterful in your approach.

Underpin your study with a coherent and fully justified conceptual framework.

Apply your conceptual framework to your study in a practical way. For example, appraise a website or service using your conceptual framework as a guide.

15.3 Explain your methods

Set out your goals for data collection and give reasons that are related to your objectives.

Discuss a range of suitable methods, or approaches, for your study, and show a full understanding of the value and limits of each.

Select and put into practice entirely appropriate data collection methods for your study. For this, make sure that your choices are fully justified and weaknesses are revealed.

Explain your research process and give sound reasons for your choices.

Fully justify your research sample. Discuss the strengths and limitations of your sample, and explain any parameters that are likely to vary.

If time permits, do a pilot study before you carry out your research for real in order to test your data collection methods, and make sure you mention any adjustments made to your data collection tools. Also, make clear the results of your pilot study so that you can compare them with the results of your actual study and spot trends.

State your assumptions and be upfront about your mistakes.

15.4 Discuss your findings

Include a "Discussion" chapter and discuss the results, and/or findings, that have emerged from your study.

Clearly present the data retrieved from your study and discuss its limitations. For example, report quantitative data in a clear manner using either tables or graphs.

Give a documented account of the obstacles you encountered in the course of your study. Also, explain your solutions and workarounds.

Thoroughly examine the data collected as part of your study using a wide range of appropriate techniques. Also, justify your choice of statistical techniques.

Discuss what your study has found out in relation to your research problem or issue. For this, make sure that your results, and/or findings, are fully justified and mainly based on research you've gathered yourself.

Look out for both patterns and anomalies in your study's data set.

Relate the data your study has gathered to literature. For example, bring together the data you've retrieved with existing knowledge and show an ability to evaluate.

Integrate your results, and/or findings, with issues raised in existing works of literature. For example, use the data from your own study to test, or question, both existing knowledge and the work (or thoughts) of other people.

Be critical of your study's findings and assess their practical use in the real world.

Show an ability to discover, understand and think for yourself.

15.5 Conclude your study

Draw clear, logical and convincing conclusions that follow-on from your discussion. For help in forming conclusions, see "Chapter 7 - Sum up logically and learn lessons".

Reflect on your research and be critical - admit your mistakes and say how robust your findings are.

Be bold - say what your study has demonstrated or proven.

Revisit your aim and make sure that you've fully addressed it. Don't be afraid to change your aim to better suit the content of your dissertation.

Form a personal position on your research that flows from your conclusions. In doing this, link and merge the key elements of your study.

Say how your study adds to the sum of human knowledge and discuss the impact it's likely to have on society.

Reflect on your study and make clear what scope there is for further research.

Reflect on the processes adopted as part of your study and say what you would do differently in the future.

If you have any recommendations to make, add a "Recommendations" section with the solutions you propose. For help in making recommendations, see "Chapter 8 – Recommend practical solutions".

15.6 Prepare to hand in your dissertation

Add a "References" section and refer to all the sources used in the main body of your work. For help in doing this, see "Chapter 9 – Reference your sources to add credibility".

Add a "Bibliography" and list all the relevant works of literature you've read. For help in doing this, see "Chapter 10 – Show your influences with a Bibliography".

Add "Appendices" to the end of your dissertation to give readers more detail on the points raised as part of your study.

Create a "Contents" page with all your headings listed and give page numbers.

Add a "List of Tables and Figures" - with page numbers - so that your readers can, with one glance, locate all the tables and graphics used within your dissertation.

Add an "Acknowledgements" page and give the names of the people that have helped you.

Add an "Abbreviations" page and define all the technical terms used in your dissertation.

Sum up your entire dissertation on a single side of A4 paper using an Abstract. For help on how to write an Abstract, see the next section of this guide.

Create a front cover for your dissertation. For this, add a descriptive title for your study, your name and a statement saying why you did it.

15.7 Sum up your entire dissertation using an "Abstract"

When you finish writing a dissertation, sum it up on a single side of A4 paper so that busy readers can get the gist of it from your summary.

Briefly state the problem, or issue, your research seeks to solve and explain your personal motivation for wanting to solve it.

Set your study apart from previous studies. Say what your study has done that previous studies failed to do. Also, explain any gaps in knowledge that existed prior to your study.

Briefly state what you've done in the course of your study and sum up your approach. In doing this, make sure you mention your methods of research.

Link what you've done to the aim of your study in order to reinforce the view that you've done what you set out to do.

Broadly sum up the results of your study.

Say what your study has achieved - mention the impact it's likely to have on society.

State the key conclusions of your study, together with their likely consequences.

Revisit your aim and reveal how your work adds to the sum of human knowledge.

Finally, place your stand-alone summary before the Contents page of your dissertation.

Chapter 16 — Proofread to prevent mistakes and impress

Proofread your work for spelling, grammar and punctuation mistakes before you hand it in.

Take extra care when proofreading your work and look out for words that are spelt correctly but used in the wrong context. For example, the use of 'here' instead of 'hear'.