

# 4

## Academic Work

“I haven’t had to write a paper since school!

I had to take the access course and although it really gave me a lot, I was still really intimidated by the kinds of assignments I had to do in the nursing course. I worked really hard on them, and did well – a lot better than I thought I would do. I’ve just finished my course and I’m starting my community nurse job. My advice to a new student? Don’t put things off, and get support from your tutors. You’ll do just fine. ”

*Jane (who was 34 when she started her nursing course)*

### In this chapter

- Referencing
- Plagiarism
- Writing an assignment
- Confidentiality and privacy
- Basic IT skills
- References
- Assignment work sheet and submission check list

This will be a dull, boring chapter. It is filled with little details that, although useful, are not very inspiring. But I can promise you that they will help you get better grades. Trust me.

First, please keep in mind that the topic of this chapter is ‘academic work’. I am introducing a couple of key concepts first, but this is because these concepts are so fundamental. If you don’t reference properly, or if you plagiarize, then no matter how well the paper is written it won’t matter because you will fail.

In any circumstance where the advice I give you or the advice you find conflicts with the uni, unless you can prove absolutely that the uni is *wrong*, go with what the uni tells you . . . they are assessing you and they know what they want as proof from you. It's small consolation to be right if the uni doesn't agree.

## REFERENCING

An excellent paper, which would have been worthy of an A if not so poorly referenced.

*Feedback on a paper graded 'C'*

Referencing properly does a number of things for your work. It shows:

- how widely you have read
- how critically you have looked at ideas and concepts
- that you can follow directions
- that you give credit properly to others for their ideas and work.

Students often find that poor referencing is an easy way to lose grades. You will work really hard, finding sources, making them work together... then lose a mark because references weren't written out just the way the university wants them! Some hints:

- You will find yourself using the same sources over and over in many different modules, so keep your reference lists from all your assignments. Make sure your references are accurate and complete.
- Get – and keep – a copy of your university's referencing guidelines.
- Whenever possible, use references your instructor refers to in lectures and gives you in handouts. When they use them in their lectures, they are telling you that they value them and the information in them. How much more of a hint could that be? One thing though – they probably know those references inside out.

### What doesn't need to be referenced?

There are some things that don't need to be referenced:

- common knowledge, e.g. grass is green
- undisputed facts, e.g. David Beckham was captain of the England team that played in the 2002 world cup, or Frank Skinner is a Baggies fan.

### What does need to be referenced?

Things that *do* need to be referenced are:

- a quote, or ideas summarized or paraphrased and taken from another text or source, such as an internet page
- statistics, figures, diagrams or other visuals taken from any other work. Those generated as a result of the work you have done yourself in your paper don't need to be referenced
- things that could be challenged, e.g. 'inflation decreased last year'. A reference gives proof that your information is accurately reported (Don't take it for granted that just because it was published it is correct. A reference tells the reader you are being accurate: your arguments in the paper tell them you are right!).

Your university or nursing programme will tell you about the type of referencing it expects you to use. If you need more information, you can check on the internet by searching for 'how to reference' or for the specific reference style, e.g. 'Harvard referencing' on a search engine ([www.yahoo.com](http://www.yahoo.com) is an easy one). You can also get a study guide. There is a list of suggested sources in the Useful Books, Journals and Other Resources chapter at the end of this book.

## PLAGIARISM

Due to cheating by plagiarism, the university has no choice but to exclude you from your course. This action will be reported to the Student Grants Unit and to (Nursing and Midwifery Council) . . .

*From a letter to a student who submitted  
an essay purchased on the internet*

Your credibility is on the line when you write a paper. You must make sure you are being fair and honest – dishonesty can cost you, not just in grades, but possibly even your place in your course and your nursing career.

*The word 'plagiarism' comes from the Latin word 'plagium', which means 'kidnapper' (Pickett et al 2000).*

If I had made the above statement without a citation, you might say 'How does she know that?' You would have a right to ask! Finding out I don't speak Latin, you would wonder:

- is that the truth or did she just make it up?
- did she look it up, but isn't saying she did because she wants me to think she knows a lot?
- was she too lazy to write down where it came from?

Is that how you want your markers to be looking at your work and exams? I expect you would rather let them know that you are intelligent and that you are fair and honest; plagiarism is theft. In most universities, plagiarism will get you thrown off the course on the first occurrence; it is an extremely serious academic offence. No matter how stressed you are, no matter how appealing 'www.buy-your-assignment-here.com' looks, it is not worth the risk to take a temporarily appealing, but completely dishonest and unprofessional, shortcut. It's **cheating**. People who cheat are not trustworthy. The Code of Conduct says nurses should always be trustworthy. Catch my drift?

Many people who plagiarize do it unintentionally:

- They might think that they only need to cite something if they quote it directly
- They might lose information about a source and include the information anyway (but is that titbit of information worth failing your entire assignment or exam?)
- They might have worked closely with another student and shared information and ideas (you must show that you did your work independently!).

In any case, there will be no excuse if you are found to have plagiarized something. I represented a student recently at a disciplinary hearing.

She had worked with her university roommate on a particularly difficult paper. Only her roommate had gone for a tutorial and had shared her notes with her friend who had missed the class. The tutor who read both papers noticed right away that they were similar: the same references, the same concepts and the same topic. Although the students openly admitted they had worked together, each claimed that she had written her own paper. The university disagreed, and both students failed the module. They were given written warnings and had to repeat the assessment. What seemed like a good work-saver cost them the chance for a first class honours degree; it could have cost them their careers in nursing.

If you are unsure of what needs to be cited and what doesn't, ask your tutor or someone in your university's academic resource centre or library. Personally, I have cited things that I didn't really need to just to give extra weight to my argument and to be certain that there was no chance I could be accused of cheating.

Once you have the right question, you need to frame the paper in an outline: this is a skeleton on which you hang the paper to give it form and structure.

## WRITING AN ASSIGNMENT

I keep telling myself, get it done, get it done – but I always find myself in a panic the weekend before it is due trying to write a huge assignment. This is hell! Why do I keep doing this to myself?

*Excerpt from a student nurse's reflective diary*

In my experience, most students fail assignments because of one of three things:

1. They submit a beautifully written, well thought out essay that unfortunately doesn't answer the question the assignment brief asked!
2. They have rushed to do the assignment at the last minute and haven't had time to proofread it and polish it up.
3. They don't know how to structure an assignment.

When you get your initial module guide for a given module, it will usually include an assignment brief, although sometimes the assignment brief will come later.

An assignment brief should include:

- the title of the assignment
- a list of suggested topics (usually)
- a description of the purpose of the paper
- the word limit
- the deadline and submission information
- learning outcomes
- a marking matrix (sometimes, but not always).

Make sure you understand the question. I know a nursing student who wrote an assignment on incontinence for a module called 'Care of the chronically ill'. She had beautiful graphs and charts, discussed different care products, discussed an incontinence assessment, outlined the complications of incontinence, the causes of incontinence, looked at the patient holistically, had good references and presented the assignment flawlessly. She failed. The problem? The assignment brief listed 'will discuss the nursing management of a group of patients with this need' and 'will reflect upon the work of the nursing team in improving patient outcomes.' Her paper talked a lot about the problem, but didn't touch on those learning outcomes. When you finish your paper, read it through and check off elements that meet the learning outcomes. Make sure you have them all covered.

Some modules may give you a marking matrix. This should tell you all the elements that are expected to be included in the assignment and how heavily they will be weighted.

You should also consider the level at which you are doing the assignment. Common foundation work is usually assessed at a lower standard than branch, and work at bachelor's degree is higher than work at diploma. The higher the academic level, the more you will be expected to challenge and be critical (questioning) about what you see and learn.

### Answering the question

The first part of every paper is the question: this is the topic you will discuss, investigate, examine, contrast and compare until you are so sick of it that you never want to look at that topic again. It is the thing

that you take through the paper and come out with at the end, neatly wrapped and ready for consumption by your tutor.

Getting the topic right is the only way to pass and it's not as easy as it may sound. There are two ways to get the right topic:

1. It is assigned to you
2. You choose it.

If it's assigned to you, it's pretty easy really. You just do what it tells you. But sometimes, there is a topic you are really interested in that isn't one of the suggested topics. You may want to ask your marker if you can do this topic instead of one of those listed. There are pros and cons for doing this.

Pros:

- Doing a unique topic can sometimes show you are innovative and creative
- A marker who has just read 60 essays on one topic might be relieved to find that essay 61 is unique
- It's always more fun to do something that you are interested in.

Cons:

- The marker may be looking for proof that you have achieved certain outcomes and your topic might not show the right kind of proof
- The marker may have a bias towards a particular perspective or approach to topics
- The marker may feel that you haven't followed the assignment brief
- Something that was interesting might fade a bit after writing a comprehensive assignment about it.

How do you get around the cons? First, always discuss the choice of topics with the tutor. If you negotiate for an original topic, get it in writing!

The information you are given in class will also guide you to what is expected from the assignment. If you are being given information about certain models, theories or concepts, the marker will probably expect to see them in your assignment.

There are other hints as well. For example, if the learning outcomes are:

- student can express how psychological and physical health are interrelated
- student can appreciate how culture affects care decisions,

then will a paper on choice of diet do you any good? Probably, but you have to frame it properly. What would you talk about: how the dietician was involved, or why people choose the food they do?

One of the best ways to be sure you are answering the right question in the right way is to ask for a tutorial, provided tutorials are available. Tutors may not appreciate hundreds of requests for individual tutorials, but, personally, if a tutor is going to mark your paper, I think you have a right to talk to them individually about the paper. Especially if you aren't sure what you need to do to give *them* the proof they need to know that *you* know what you are talking about. I love helping students prepare for a paper I've asked them to do – it's so much easier than hashing my way through a poorly written paper.

Always book an appointment for tutorial help. Dropping in might look easier, but neither you nor the tutor is really ready and it won't be the best use of anyone's time. Don't wait – book your tutorial early to make sure you get one. If the module tutor isn't available, go to your personal tutor. But no matter who you go to, if the tutor is going to give up valuable time to help you, you should be respectful and not waste a moment of that time. Show up on time, ask them how much time you have and don't chit-chat: get to the point and ask what you need to ask. It won't do you any good to have a tutorial before you have an idea of what you will be writing about. Bring a basic outline with you and always write down ideas. As soon as you walk out of the office you will forget most of what was said – write it down! If you go in with a number of different ideas, get your tutors feedback on what they like. When you qualify, you can write whatever you want. When you are a student, like it or not, the goal is to give back to your tutor what they want. This is because they have to prove you met the criteria to pass the course and that's what's most important to you too, isn't it?



### Structuring your assignment

Every assignment you write should have four main parts:

1. **The introduction:** you use this section to tell the reader what is coming. Using your module guide, assignment guide and marking matrix, map out what you are going to talk about. Try to have a logical flow from one area of discussion to another.
2. **The body:** in this part, you follow the pattern set in the introduction. Link paragraphs logically and watch your continuity.
3. **The conclusion:** this is where you summarize everything else, and reaffirm that you have covered what you promised to cover.
4. **The reference list:** the sources you cited in the paper.

A mistake many students make is not organizing their information properly. Don't worry if you aren't a great writer – having good flow and good writing styles will get you good grades, but you don't need to be Charlotte Brontë to pass. In a minute I will give you some ideas about how to outline your paper. A good outline will make your paper easier to write.

A mistake many students make is writing in the wrong 'voice'. Some of the reference papers you read as background will be in an academic style, which means that instead of saying (for example) 'I agree . . .', the author must say 'this student agrees ...' or 'the author agrees . . .'. Informal writing or narrative writing allows the author to 'speak' in first tense. This book is written in narrative style – as though I am talking to you. Make sure you know what 'voice' your tutor wants for the paper. Usually, reflections can be done in a narrative voice, but everything else needs to be in academic voice.

You are now aware of the right voice, and you are sure you have the right topic, now you need to prepare a skeleton called an outline. You can use this to organize your paper, to structure it and make sure it has a clear, orderly and complete presentation.

Let's use the 'choice of diet' idea.

My assignment brief says I need to write a paper of 1500 words that will discuss how the choices a patient is given in the clinical area affects their health, how their health is not only physical, and highlights how the nurse needs to promote good health. Looking at the learning outcomes, I know I also have to include something about physical and psychological health, and I need to look at how culture affects decisions.

How culture affects decisions? . . . Is that my decision as the nurse or the patient's decision? I think I will add that in the paper. Now, I need to prepare that outline:

## *Introduction*

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This part is the body of my paper:

- 2 Case study: my patient
  - 2.1 Mention confidentiality
  - 2.2 Give an outline of my patient's general health
  - 2.3 Talk about culture
- 3 Psychological and physiological aspects of diet
  - 3.1 Talk about culture and diet
  - 3.2 Talk about how choices differ from availability
- 4 The nurse's role in promoting diet and health choices
  - 4.1 Talk about reflection and why the nurse has to recognize her own culture and its influence
  - 4.2 Talk about health promotion
- 5 Summary (this is the last part of the body of my paper)
- 6 Conclusion
- 7 References

If I bring this to my tutor, she might like it, or might not. I will make notes about what she says, and then ask her to sign off my notes so I know I have evidence that she told me to write it that way. She might say I shouldn't use a case study.

Just a thought here – if I choose a real patient to use, do I need to ask their permission? If I change their name, do they need to know they are in my paper? Yes, they do – you need to ask the patient if you can study them for a paper. Most patients will say yes, but that doesn't mean you can get away without asking.

Back to the outline: as I gather information, I can put 4.1 or 2.1 on it, depending on where it fits in the outline, to help me organize. I can make sure that every time I talk about culture and diet, it's in the same place so I don't skip around.

When I write the paper, I can then allocate the number of words I have to each section, to help me keep it balanced.

I will schedule at least two more tutorials – the very first, I made sure I had the right topic. The next, I make sure that I am moving in

the right direction – this is about three to four weeks before the paper is due. The final tutorial, if everything has basically been going well, is two weeks before the paper is due. At this point, the paper should be very nearly written and I can go over it in depth with my tutor. I will watch their body language and their facial expressions, and I will take good notes, adding in and changing anything they tell me.

Never send your paper to anyone other than a course or personal tutor who has specifically requested it for review and help:

- Tutors won't read papers they haven't requested
- Colleagues might nick it and submit it as their own.

### Timing it right

You need to plan a time frame for your paper. Use your diary or a calendar to plan out deadlines for the different stages of your assignment. The last page of this chapter is a photocopiable outline for each paper. The same form is also downloadable from the Evolve website for this book, <http://evolve.elsevier.com/siviter/studentnurse/>.

My suggestion is that you:

- write in your diary the date the paper is due. Then, back-track one week and write it in again as due. Try to get it done by the earlier date
- make deadlines for yourself: when the first draft will be done, when your tutorial will be, etc. Stick to them
- save all your work on *two* disks as well as on your computer. Floppy disks can fail. Don't save anything on a university or shared computer. One way to back-up is to e-mail yourself your assignment!

### Preparing for your assignment

There is a lot you must do to prepare for your academic assignment:

- **Know what is expected of you:** what the question is that the assignment is answering and the format expected of the completed work

### Research your sources:

Have a referencing guide to make sure your references are done properly

Have a study guide book to help you map out, plan and complete your assignments

- **Leave enough time to do your work.** Although assignments done at the last minute can be successful, they are hell on your spirit, your sense of humour and the bags under your eyes. Get it done sooner and be lounging about with a pint in the student union bar while your friends are panicking.



If you leave it until the night before to type up your assignment, I can guarantee that some of the following will happen:

- Your computer will crash, eating all but eight words of your 3000-word assignment on wound care, just as a burglar breaks into your house and steals your only back-up copy.
- You will run out of paper, ink, electricity and/or brain cells.
- You will oversleep and pass the assignment in four minutes after the deadline.
- Your sister will break up with her fiancée and spend all evening sitting in your room, eating chocolate chunk ice cream and crying all over you.

- You will meet the perfect partner and have to choose between writing about the joys of leg ulcer care or jetting off to a holiday in Crete.
- Your two best friends from the course will have done the same thing and be on the phone to you in a panic begging to work together.
- Your friend who did her work early will be gloating at you from her seat in the student union bar.

### When you get your assignment back . . .

- look at the feedback and look through the paper for any notes or comments. Use the feedback to guide the way you write other papers. If you disagree strongly with any of the comments, bring them to the marker's attention.
- keep the assignment. It has information in it that has already been critiqued. It could be useful for other work!

If you do particularly poorly on an assignment, make an appointment to speak to the tutor. Ask to review the marked copy of the paper. Make a note of the points raised so you can do better next time.

If you struggle to write assignments, get a tutorial from your university's student support services, ask the student union if they have workshops on assignment writing, ask another student for help, approach a tutor and ask for help, or look at one of the books listed in the Useful Books, Journals and Other Resources chapter at the end of this book.

Some final points: don't leave your assignments lying around; don't leave them on the 'generic desktop' of uni computers; don't give them to other people (who may copy them). You are working really hard; don't let someone steal your hard work. If two people hand in similar assignments, it will be noticed and both parties could be called before a Cheating Board. Make your life simple: keep your assignments to yourself.

## CONFIDENTIALITY AND PRIVACY

I was in the lift talking about my patient to my friend on the course. I didn't say his name or anything, so I thought it was OK. Later, a lady who had been in the lift with us came to visit my patient. The look on the visitor's face said it all when she saw me. I felt dreadful.

*First-year nursing student*

As a student nurse, and continuing as a nurse, you will have access to sensitive and personal information about patients and their families. They may be your friends, your neighbours, well-known people or people who are in particularly delicate circumstances. You have an obligation to keep that information private. If you fail to maintain confidentiality, your patients could suffer and so will your grades. You could even find yourself excluded from the course.

Always blank-out the name of hospitals and wards on documents you put into any written assignment – you should never refer to any trust or facility by name. Instead of 'Clipper one, the Gynaecology Ward at Smythfields NHS Trust' you should put 'on a gynaecology ward of a local trust'. Community hospitals serve people who live and work locally. It wouldn't be hard for someone to (correctly or incorrectly) work out that their 42-year-old neighbour who was recently in the hospital could be the 42-year-old man suffering from alcohol withdrawal who was discussed in your paper, especially if he lives in the same area as the hospital you mentioned. Again, it's not just ethics at risk here, it's your grades. You will lose marks if you don't handle information sensitively and professionally.

You also have to be careful about the manner in which you refer to patients. Being judgemental makes you look unprofessional. How would you feel about each of the following statements?

The patient was abusive and rude, and staff had to force him to wash. His smell offended other patients, probably because he slept rough. He was a filthy mess but his skin was OK.

or

The patient had a long history of alcoholism and had been homeless for some time. He appeared distressed and upset. His hygiene was poor, so staff assisted him in bathing. Skin and nutritional assessments were done.

Those two paragraphs say the same thing about the patient – but different things about the nurses who wrote them. Being unprofessional will cost you marks. It also shows your lack of fitness to be a nurse.

There are some important points that you must remember about patient privacy and written assignments:

- You must ask permission from patients if you are using them as a case study or will be referring to them in your paper or documentation for your university.
- You must change identifying information about them so no one can tell who they are by your description.
- Note in your paper that you are using a pseudonym (cite it – show you know the rules!).
- Never identify the ward, trust or area in which you cared for the patient except in general terms.
- You must be professional in your descriptions and observations, never judgemental or biased.

Also, never refer to classmates or work colleagues by name in your papers. It is an issue of privacy for them, too. How would you feel if one of your classmates referred to you by name? Always keep details of everyone – the trust, the staff, the patients – confidential.

## BASIC IT SKILLS

### Which are you?

- A. I remember when calculators first came out. They were big, bulky and expensive. I still use a slide rule. I hated technology then and I hate it now. I write my assignments in pencil.
- B. I have a computer. I don't know what kind, but it has Office on it.
- C. My computer is a Pentium 26z with 4096 gig of RAM, a CD-RW, a DVD player, surround-sound speakers, a built-in microwave, seating for 10 and a panoramic webview of the Edgbaston cricket ground. Oh, and the voice-activated software has been trained to call in my pizza order by remote control.

Whichever you are, you will probably need to use a computer during your nurse education:

- to write assignments
- to research information on the internet and in the library
- to use study materials found on CD
- to play games when you are so stressed you want to run away from home
- to e-mail family and friends who are not on your course to tell them that, although they haven't seen or heard from you in weeks, you are still alive, just working on an assignment
- on placements for patient details and records.

Most universities have tutorials on computer usage. If you are:

- person A: go; don't be afraid. Computers are (usually) pretty easy to use and, with the right support, you will be able to build skills and confidence
- person B: go; you will build confidence and learn easier ways to do things you already know how to do
- person C: go; you will be a support to your friends and classmates. Don't be tempted to do all their work online for them – you won't have time to get your own done if your friends all look to you as the resident net guru.

If your university or nursing programme does *not* have IT tutorials, find out why! It should be preparing you to use computers as part of your eventual work as a nurse. Look into getting the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL) – it is easy, can be free and gives you all the skills you need. In this day and age, you cannot afford to be computer shy. Although many people reading this may think, 'Hey, everyone knows computers!'; remember that there are generations of people still young enough to be in nurse education who are old enough to remember when a hard drive was the bank holiday journey to Devon, completed in the pouring rain accompanied by a five-hour chorus of 'are we there yet?'. Be patient with us!



If you don't have a computer or internet access, your university should have a computer room with access. Remember to take your disks or USB pen to save information on and don't forget that in peak times (when assignments are due) it could be very difficult to access a computer. Plan ahead.

Some unis have a loan service for laptops, if so, they will go quickly so look into it right away.

Floppies are falling out of use: get yourself re-writable disks, but for real ease, get as large a USB pen as you can afford, with security features to prevent theft of your work – and make sure it has your name on it! Put a file called 'IF THIS IS FOUND' as a document, on the 'insecure' part of the pen. And, don't forget to run virus scanning on anything you use to connect to the internet or a public computer.

There are some great books that can help you with using different computer programs – I love the . . . *For Dummies* books. Even as an experienced computer user (yes, sadly I am person 'C'), I find them useful.

Other resources can be found in your library. Useful search engines, such as Ovid and the British Nursing Index (BNI), catalogue periodicals. Some online resources and databases that you can access from home or university require you to have an 'Athens' password. They are free to students who have registered through their university. Speak to the librarian or IT helpdesk to find out how to get access to Ovid, the BNI, CINAHL and how to get an Athens password.

See if there is information on 'how to search'. It may sound simple, but knowing how to search properly is a very valuable skill. Some learning resource centres run short courses to help you gain confidence in searching. It's a good investment. Although there is a little about literature searches in Chapter nine, it is too vast a skill for me to teach you here. Your learning resource centre/university library is the best place to start if you need to learn to search for sources and information. A short list of resource books appears in the Useful Books, Journals and Other Resources chapter at the end of this book.

## REFERENCES

Pickett J 2000 *The American heritage dictionary of the English language*, 4th edn. Houghton Mifflin, Boston

Assignment Information sheet (you can download a copy from the Evolve website <http://evolve.elsevier.com/siviter/studentnurse/>.)

Submission check list:

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Spelling checked                         | <input type="checkbox"/> Paper is formatted according to University guidance             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> References double checked                | <input type="checkbox"/> Have cover sheet with module name, number and assignment name   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Correct voice and tense used throughout  | <input type="checkbox"/> Have hidden all identifying marks on any documents included     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Counted words correct                    | <input type="checkbox"/> Have attested to patient confidentiality                        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Went over advice from all tutorials      | <input type="checkbox"/> Have used and referenced Code of Professional Conduct           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Reference list properly formatted        | <input type="checkbox"/> Paper clearly meets the learning outcomes and goals from module |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Printing left no marks or smudges        |  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Have the right folder to submit it in    |  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> All pages except first have page numbers |  |

**Module Number:**

**Module Leader:**

**Voice:**

Module Name:

Number of Words:

Due Date:

Topic Chosen:

Dates due: Outline: \_\_\_\_\_

First draft: \_\_\_\_\_

Second draft if needed: \_\_\_\_\_

Final draft: \_\_\_\_\_

Paper completed by: \_\_\_\_\_

**Tutorials: list date and overview of items discussed**

First Tutorial Date

Second Tutorial Date

Final Tutorial Date

Topic Chosen

Outline Done

Final Draft

Date:

Date:

Date:

Date Submitted:

Date Returned:

Grade Received:

What I learned that I need to apply to other papers

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