



Written Assignment Style Guide

Library & Learning Services Factsheet

Written assignments at YSJ are assessed against a number of different criteria; one of these categories is **Communication**. This usually means adherence to written and/or oral conventions, and at university, this is most often academic conventions.

This guide will help you produce clear, professional, and well-organised academic work. Adhering to these rules will ensure your writing is accessible, easy to follow, and meets university standards, helping you to meet assessment expectations for your communication skills. This guide is written to align with and support the [YSJ Code of Practice for Assessment](#) which outlines the rules for assessment at YSJ.

The advice in this guide includes lots of rules for common writing conventions in academic writing and an explanation of why this would help with the clarity, consistency, and readability of your work. Your lecturers may have specific writing style expectations depending on:

- The assignment (which may, for instance: require a different tone of voice; be a different length; need specific organisation, structure or content; have a different purpose to traditional academic writing)
- Your subject area / discipline (different subjects may have specific expectations around what to include, how to write, etc.).

Your lecturers will tell you about any specific aspects of writing style that they want you to use, and this information should be in your assignment brief, a template or exemplar, or any supplementary assignment information.

If there is no specific guidance you have been given, or the guidance refers to some aspects of writing and not others, our Written Assignment Style Guide will help you make decisions about how to write your assignments and communicate your ideas with clarity, consistency, and confidence.

Employability tip: Many organisations have writing style guides to help employees write consistently, so being able to follow and use a style guide is a great employability skill to have.



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1. Formatting and layout

Font and font size

- **Rule:** Use a **sans serif font** (for example, Arial, Calibri, or Helvetica) that is appropriate to the purpose and audience of your written assignment. Font size should be **12 or 14**.
- **Why?:** [Sans serif fonts](#) are easier to read on screens and in print. Choosing a legible font and consistent size ensures your work looks professional and accessible for all readers, including those with visual and learning disabilities.

Line spacing

- **Rule:** Use **1.5 or double spacing** throughout your document.
- **Why?:** Wider spacing improves readability and provides space for your tutor to add comments and feedback.
- **How?:** Use the [Line spacing function in Word](#).

Page margins

- **Rule:** Ensure margins are at least **20mm on all sides**.
- **Why?:** This creates a clean layout and ensures that no text is lost if someone needed to print your work, and it helps with readability.
- **How?:** Use the [page margins function in Word](#).

Headers and footers

- **Optional rule:** Add relevant information to headers/footers, such as the module code and assignment title/identifier, if required by your lecturer. You should only add your name or student number in a header or footer if the assignment is not being anonymously marked – check first.
- **Why?:** Headers and footers can help identify your work.
- **How?:** Use the [Headers and Footers in Word](#).

2. Document structure

Order of sections (introductory pages)

Shorter assignments, such as essays, are likely to have limited or no sections at the start because the length of your assignment is shorter and requires a simpler structure. Your lecturer will tell you if they expect anything specific at the start, including if your assignment will be anonymously marked (use our [Anonymous marking](#) help page so you can remove personal information from documents you are working on).



Longer assignments, such as dissertations, theses, research projects, and reports, will need structure. This structure often includes sections which start your assignment. Your lecturer will tell you if there is anything specific they want you to include, but these are the most common sections you find in longer written academic work:

1. **Title Page or Cover Sheet** (if required, your lecturer will tell you what to include or provide you with a coversheet).
 2. **Acknowledgements** (optional; allows you to thank individuals who supported your work).
 3. **Abstract** (a concise summary of your work, providing an overview of key findings).
 4. **Table of Contents** (lists the main sections; excludes the title page, acknowledgements, and abstract).
 5. **List of Figures/Tables** (optional, lists the location of visual elements in your work).
 6. **List of Abbreviations** (if included, place it after the bibliography).
- **Why?:** Organising these sections ensures your document flows logically and that readers can quickly locate key parts of your work.

Main content

For shorter assignments, such as an essay:

- **Rule:** Your essay will generally always need an introduction, a main section, and a conclusion. On some courses, you may need specific sections, or your writing needs to follow a particular order; your assignment brief will tell you exactly what to include.
- **Why?:** Sections (such as an introduction, main argument, and conclusion) group your writing thematically or by purpose.

For longer assignments, such as a dissertation or research project, you are likely to have specific sections you need to include. Your assignment brief will tell you what is expected, and this will vary significantly between different subjects and courses (a humanities dissertation compared to a health sciences dissertation, for example), and the type of dissertation or research project, but could include:

1. **Introduction:** Provides background, research aims, and an outline of the document structure.
2. **Literature Review:** Summarises existing research and identifies gaps your study addresses.
3. **Methodology:** Describes the research design, data collection methods, and analysis techniques.
4. **Results/Findings:** Presents the key results of your research, often with tables, figures, or charts.
5. **Discussion:** Interprets the results, connects them to the literature, and explains their significance.
6. **Conclusion:** Summarises the key findings, discusses implications, and suggests future research.
7. **Recommendations** (optional): Provides practical advice or action points based on your findings (common in reports).



Look at your assignment brief and determine what you need to include, then set up your document with those sections so that your structure is ready.

- **Rule:** If you want to separate your dissertation into larger sections, such as chapters, begin **each chapter on a new page**.
- **Why?:** Starting chapters on new pages makes your work look professional and helps readers easily identify where new sections begin.

Appendices and references

- **Rule:** Follow the referencing style specified by your subject. At York St John University, there are 5 referencing styles in use – which style you use will depend on the course you're studying. The style you will be using should be clearly stated by your course so check your programme and module documentation.
- **Why?:** Proper referencing avoids plagiarism and demonstrates academic integrity. Consistency across citations enhances the professionalism of your work.
- **How?:** Use [YSJ's Referencing Guides page](#)
- **Rule:** Place **appendices after the reference list**, and number or letter them clearly (for example, Appendix 1, 2, 3 or Appendix A, B, C).
- **Why?:** Appendices are supplementary materials. Placing them after the reference list keeps them separate from the main argument of your work, ensuring clarity.

3. Headings and layout control

Heading styles

- **Rule:**
 - Use **Heading 1** for chapter or section titles.
 - Use **Heading 2** (and Heading 3, if needed) for subheadings.
- **Why?:** Consistent use of heading styles helps structure your work and allows readers (or software) to navigate your document easily.
- **How?:** Use the [Heading styles functions in Word](#)

Page/Section breaks

- **Rule:** Use page breaks to separate chapters, and section breaks for layout control.
- **Why?:** This prevents layout issues (for example, text being pushed to the wrong page) and keeps the document visually tidy.
- **How?:** Use the [Breaks functions in Word](#)



Figures, tables, and captions

- **Rule:**
 - Place **captions below figures (images, graphs or diagrams)** and **above tables**.
 - Use smaller fonts (for example, size 10) and single spacing for tables.
 - Captions should give the item a logical number (for example Figure 1, Figure 2, Table 1, Table 2), briefly describe what the Figure or table is, and include a citation if you have taken it from another source. Some subjects/disciplines may have specific expectations about how captions should be formatted — your lecturer will tell you if this is the case.
- **Why?:** This consistent placement makes it clear what the caption refers to. Smaller fonts for tables save space and improve layout while keeping tables readable.
- **How?:** Use the [captions functions in Word](#)

4. Page numbers

- **Rule:**
 - **No page number** on the title page.
 - Use **Roman numerals** (i, ii, iii...) for introductory pages.
 - Switch to **Arabic numerals** (1, 2, 3...) for the main content.
- **Why?:** This practice reflects common academic and professional writing conventions and ensures that page numbering is clear and logical for both introductory and main sections.
- **How?:** Use the [page numbers functions in Word](#)

5. Word count guidelines

What is included in the word count?

Where a word count is specified for written work:

- **Included:** Main text and in-text citations.
- **Excluded:** Titles (usually, but check with your lecturer), abstract, table of contents, reference list, appendices, and the words within tables/figures (but these should not be long pieces of text).
- **Why?:** Word count limits are specified for some assessed work to maintain equity between all students doing the same assessment — this means you are being marked fairly for the same amount of work produced. Some parts of your work are excluded from the word count so that you can focus the word count on your critical thinking and argumentation, not supplementary material. However, always check with your lecturer and assignment brief for any exceptions.
- You must add a word count to every piece of written work you submit. You can add this to the end of your work, such as: “Word Count: 1500”



- More information: Please see Section 32 Agreed Sanctions of [YSJ Code of Practice for Assessment](#).

6. Style rules

Variety of English

- **Rule:**
 - Write using British English spelling
- **Why?:** This is standard academic style in the UK and reflects the target audience in UK Higher Education.

Numbers

- **Rule:**
 - Write out numbers **one to ten** in full.
 - Use numerals for numbers **11 and above**.
 - Always write out numbers at the start of a sentence.
- **Why?:** This is standard academic style, improving clarity and readability. Numbers at the start of a sentence written in words are less abrupt.

Percentages

- **Rule:** Use % instead of writing "percent."
- **Why?:** The % symbol is concise and widely understood in academic writing.

Abbreviations

- **Rule:** Introduce abbreviations the first time you use them, for example "World Health Organization (WHO)", "Department for Education (DfE)", then use the abbreviation consistently.
- **Why?:** This avoids confusion and ensures clarity for readers unfamiliar with the abbreviation.
- **Rule:** Avoid using e.g. or i.e. Instead, use a phrase which means the same, such as 'for example', 'for instance', or 'such as' instead of e.g., or 'that is', 'in other words' or 'specifically' instead of i.e.
- **Why?:** This avoids confusion and ensures clarity for readers unfamiliar with the abbreviation.

Contractions

- **Rule:** Avoid using contractions (for example, *don't*, *can't*, *it's*) in formal academic writing. Instead, use the full form of the words (for example, *do not*, *cannot*, *it is*).



- **Why?:** Contractions are considered informal and can make your writing appear too casual for an academic audience. Using the full form maintains a professional tone and ensures clarity, especially for non-native English readers who may not be familiar with certain contractions.

Example:

- Informal: *The study doesn't provide enough evidence.*
- Formal: *The study does not provide enough evidence.*

7. Appendices

- **Rule:** Use appendices for supplementary material (for example raw data, questionnaires).
 - Reference them in the main text, and place them **after the reference list**.
- **Why?:** Keeping appendices separate ensures the main argument remains focused while providing additional information for readers who need it.

8. General advice

Consistency is key

- Whatever formatting, style, or referencing approach you use, ensure you apply it consistently throughout your work.
- **Why?:** Inconsistent formatting distracts readers and can create confusion, detracting from the quality of your work.

Anonymous marking

- If your assignment brief states that your work will be anonymously marked, use our [Anonymous marking](#) help page so you can remove personal information from documents you are working on.

Consult your Module Tutor

- If you are ever in doubt about specific formatting, word count, or referencing rules, ask your Module Tutor