

A Guide to Assessment - transcript

Assessment in programmes at CeFIMS takes two forms, assignments and examinations.

The first form of assessment you will encounter are assignments. These are an important aspect of each course and require careful planning so we'll talk about these in more detail now.

The two assignments count for nearly one third of your final course grade. Assignments must be submitted in order to gain credit for the course, and we regard them as important for two reasons:

- They consolidate your understanding of the ideas taught in the course.
- and
- They are a means to keep you working within your course schedule.

One of the best ways to ensure that you understand an idea is to work with it, to argue for yourself how it applies in different circumstances, and to analyse in your own words its strong points and weaknesses. The assignments make sure that you have to do this. They also have submission dates to ensure that you keep up-to-date with your coursework. While we can make arrangements to accommodate illness or other serious disruptions to your work so long as you let us know what the problem is, it is still important, as far as possible, to keep within the study schedule in order to give yourself revision time for the exam at the end of the year.

The most usual form that assignments take is the essay question – for that you'll be asked a question related to some of the issues taught in the course, and you'll be expected to write an essay of about 2,500 words as an answer. Occasionally, you'll be asked a multi-part question and you'll be given advice about how much of your answer to devote to each section. For quantitative courses, you'll be asked to solve problems or discuss proposed solutions.

In an essay you'd normally be expected to produce an argument in favour and against a certain proposition. For example you may be asked to compare the adequacy of competing theories.

As you probably know, but may not have thought about it in these terms – an essay is a structured piece of writing with a beginning, middle and an ending. The beginning should take the form of an introduction. Your introduction should outline what the question has asked you to do and the direction that the essay is going to take. Be explicit about what your essay is doing and indicate how you will go about doing it. You might, for instance, identify the authors whose work you'll refer to because it is relevant to the question; you could specify the schools of thought whose arguments impinge on the question, and you could also indicate that you will look at the strengths and weaknesses of various theoretical standpoints related to the question. The introduction should be a clear signpost to the direction that the essay will take.

The middle section is, of course, the main part – containing the central argument – of the essay. There you will actually attempt to answer the question and justify your reasons for that answer. You should cite relevant authors and ideas and

explain why and how they are relevant. You may also refer to the course material itself and include short quotations from authors where their own expression of their ideas is exceptional in some way or where it is controversial.

Short quotations is the operative term here. You should not reproduce large chunks of either the course material or any other published work as it is a waste of valuable words. You will get higher marks if you discuss authors' ideas in your own words and provide some analysis of their views, rather than just quoting them directly.

It is critical that any quotations you do use and indeed any authors' ideas or theories that you refer to, even in your own words, are referenced using the Harvard system (with the author of the work, date of publication, title and publisher information). There is a useful section on how to properly reference your work in the User Guides and Handbooks section on the Online Study Centre.

There are three reasons why we insist that all of your work is referenced in this way.

- To avoid plagiarism;
- To show your tutor that you've understood the text;
- To prove to yourself your grasp of the material learned.

The first is perhaps the most important.

The copying of others work or referring to authors' ideas without acknowledgement means that you are claiming someone else's work or ideas as your own. Even if this is not your intention, it is considered plagiarism and is always taken extremely seriously. The first time a tutor or staff member detects copying without acknowledgement – either from printed texts, websites or from a fellow student – points will be deducted from the assignment grade. In extreme cases of plagiarism, that is a deliberate intent to pass off someone else's work as your own, if proven, will result in a nil grade.

The other two reasons for not copying other people's work are pedagogical.

Remember that one of the reasons for requiring assignments from you is to consolidate your learning. In order for you to do that, you must express the ideas you have learnt in your own words. If you just repeat the words as they are written in the text, you haven't shown that you understand them and there is no way for you to check your grasp of the material either if you don't restate them and use the ideas on your own.

Let's return to our discussion about the structure of your essay. After the central section of the work, where your answer is argued and justified, comes the ending, where you should pull together any loose strands in your argument and state, concisely, your conclusion. This is not the place to bring in any new material or ideas, but to round off and summarise the nature of your answer and your reasons for it.

One final piece of advice about your essay writing concerns the level at which you should aim it. Don't suppose that because your tutor knows a great deal about the subject you can leave assumptions undefined or refer to relevant arguments without specifying what they are. You can certainly assume that your reader is intelligent and interested in the subject but you still need to write in a

transparently clear style, stating precisely the purpose of your essay, spelling out all underlying assumptions, identifying the authors of any arguments cited or the school of thinking from which they originated, and leading your reader, step by careful step, through your analysis of the question posed.

If you've written many essays in the past, all this will be second nature to you. If you haven't done so, you'll find that this is good practice not only for the course itself (and for the final exams, which nearly all have an essay question format), but also for report writing or any piece of written work which must be understood by others. The ability to write clearly and in a structured manner is a valuable asset.

Chapter 8 of Talbot's book has a section on essay writing which you will find useful. It provides helpful advice not just on structuring your essay but also on how to plan and make notes to prepare for it.

Turning now to examinations. Since the exams count for 70% of your final assessment, they are clearly important. Most of the courses will devote part of the final unit to a summary of the main concepts and issues to help you focus your revision. A specimen exam is also available for each course. But the specimen exam will be similar to the final exam in terms of the structure, number of questions provided and the number that you need to answer, the questions are never exactly the same. The questions on the final exam could cover a similar issue but may ask for an analysis of a different aspect of it or they may cover different aspects of the course. However, examiners do aim to set questions on the central ideas and issues raised in the courses.

Rest assured there are no 'trick' questions put into examinations. The aim is to enable you to show what you have learned, never to trip you up. The specimen exam and the course revision notes should help you decide how to focus your preparation; they will enable you to identify the central issues and the main theories related to them. If you know these well, you should be able to answer any question about them.

Even with a good working knowledge of the course, you may well feel nervous and worried before the exam. This is normal and natural, and it can even be helpful – an increase in adrenalin can help focus your thinking wonderfully.

However, anxiety can sometimes be destructive and it's not easy to give advice on how to prevent this.

The usual advice is to breathe deeply, several times, and try to relax before beginning to write. It's certainly something worth trying.

Try also to keep the experience in proportion – even if you fail the exam, it's not the end of the world – you will have a second chance to take it.

Thirdly, remember that examiners are on your side: they want you to succeed and so will reward any evidence they can find that you have studied the courses and understand the ideas taught there.

Finally, if you are confident that you have studied and understood the course materials, there is no good reason for you to be nervous. Nothing allays nerves like a little self-assurance, and if your assignments have received good marks and you've been able to answer the specimen exam questions and you have

understood and enjoyed the development of the ideas presented in the course, then you should have no problem succeeding.

Section 8.2 and 8.3 of Talbot's book provide guidance on revising for and sitting exams and it is worth reading these sections as you prepare to revise.

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Finally we wish you every success and we hope that this talk has been useful.

Enjoy your first course!