

# How to Breakdown Assignments

*FCS Student Academic Support*

# Getting Started on the 8 Step Process...

You have received tips on breaking down your assignment. You have painstakingly learned how to create a proper mind map. You went to a workshop on APA. You have all the elements of a great paper, but putting these elements together proves to be trickier than you expected. We want to help break down your assignment completion experience into smaller, more manageable tasks. *Here are the steps to complete your assignment...*

# Assignment Breakdown

- **UNDERSTANDING** the assignment
- **BRAINSTORMING** and doing **PRELIMINARY RESEARCH**
- Formulating a working **THESIS STATEMENT**
- Drafting an **OUTLINE**
- Completing a **ROUGH DRAFT**
- Attending to **APA/REFERENCES**
- Peer & self-**REVIEW**
- Producing the **FINAL** copy

# Step 1: UNDERSTANDING THE ASSIGNMENT

Your first step is to get to know what the assignment entails. Use the course syllabus and/or assignment guidelines for more information. Print out a copy of the guidelines and highlight key terms (e.g. analyze, compare, reflect), instructions, and due dates. Refer to the guidelines throughout the writing process to make sure you are staying on track. You do not want to finish your rough draft and then realize that you missed the entire point of the assignment.

**KEY:** Organize your time appropriately. This process will be pointless if you leave your assignment until the night before it is due. Unfortunately, there will be no time to address each of these steps, leading to a frantic, last-minute rush to complete your work. Moral of the story: plan ahead! Get your agenda and write in your steps with an appropriate start/finish time. **Make sure you use SMARTR goals** (see our handout on The three levels of goal setting)!

## LEGO Brick Analogy

Just for the interest of clarification (and entertainment!), here is an analogy between LEGO bricks and paper writing: understanding the assignment is like looking at the LEGO instruction booklet or the picture on the packaging and getting a good idea of what you will be building. Should you just start building without looking at the manual, it is likely that your creation will not resemble the expected creation.

## Step 2: BRAINSTORMING & PRELIMINARY RESEARCH

Do some quick, preliminary research on your topic to begin your investigation. This will give you more with which to work when you start brainstorming. Try the RULA “search everything” search engine or RULA’s selection of discipline-specific databases. (You can also try other online resources, such as Google Scholar, but make sure you are looking for academic and reputable sources!). Refine your sources by selecting the “peer-reviewed” or “scholarly” options. You can also use Boolean operators to further refine your search. The most basic of these include “AND,” “OR,” “NOT,” “NEAR,” and quotation marks.

### *Some criteria for evaluating your sources:*

- Read the abstract first... is it suitable?
- Usually try to use the most recent articles, if possible.
- Look at the author’s credentials... are they reliable?
- Check for bias.
- Differentiate between *primary* and *secondary* sources.

*Check out our handout on [Researching and finding sources for more!](#)*

### **LEGO Brick Analogy (continued...)**

Brainstorming in this analogy is comparative to looking at your large pile of LEGO pieces and coming up with possible connections between them that could end up being used to build that final creation. The pieces that do seem to work are placed into a big box for safe-keeping.

Before brainstorming, make sure you fully understand your assignment’s purpose. Then use brainstorming techniques to help you start getting your ideas flowing (for example, free writing and mind mapping). *Check out our handout on [Pre-writing strategies!](#)*

**KEY:** *Keep in mind that you may want to perform preliminary research and brainstorming a couple of times, regardless of which one you do first. For example, if you have enough basic knowledge on the topic you can start brainstorming and then do research to see how well your ideas are supported by existing literature.*

## Step 3: FORMULATING A WORKING THESIS STATEMENT

Generate a thesis statement that reflects your plan for the paper. The thesis should point to the overarching argument you plan on making, as supported by your preliminary research and brainstorming ideas. Keep in mind that this is a “working” thesis: it can be changed as your ideas are further developed. It will be cemented throughout the research process as you start to support and formulate your argument. *For more, check out our handout on Formulating thesis statements!*

# Step 4: DRAFTING AN OUTLINE

Your outline is basically the framework for your paper. Imagine trying to build a house without setting up a solid framework first. You'll have a very hard time keeping the house standing. In the same way, creating a good paper without an outline is very difficult.

**KEY:** *start on the body paragraphs first (whether you are just working on the outline or already starting your rough draft). Identify and refine the content of your body paragraphs using your working thesis and then head back to complete your introduction and conclusion.*

**Your outline should look something like this:**

- **Introduction:** hook, thesis, summary
- **Body paragraphs:** main arguments, content ideas, supporting research
- **Conclusion:** wrap up and review, restate thesis, food for thought

**Quick Tips:**

- Jot down simple bullet point notes for each section. Make sure to check each point against your working thesis before putting it into your outline.
- You need a reference list at this point; keep track of all the sources, you put into your outline, on a separate page. This way you will not have to worry about tracking down those references later. Note down some identifying information, such as the article's title, author, and publishing year.
- *For more, check out our handouts on [How to create an outline and Organizing your essay!](#)*

**LEGO Brick Analogy (continued...)**

Creating your outline is like taking that big box of pieces that you previously prepared and going through them. You take three (or however many supporting arguments you happen to have/need) smaller boxes and start to sort through the bigger box.

*"Hmmm, this piece would really support the first part of the creation (i.e. your first point). I'll put it into the first box."*

*"This piece doesn't seem to fit into any of my arguments... Back into the pile it goes."*

*"This box doesn't seem to have as many pieces as I will need. I should go back to the pile and find a couple more"*

...and so forth until you have all your boxes filled with the pieces you will need!

**Note:** *you haven't actually assembled any of the pieces, BUT all the pieces you need are already there. In the same way, an outline already has all the content and support you will need for your paper.*

## Step 5: COMPLETING A ROUGH DRAFT

At this point you have already sorted out your content and supporting evidence in your outline and you will refine your APA at a later point. So right now, all you need to focus on is the writing (i.e. the grammar, the syntax, the flow of ideas, and so forth). Some students attempt to go straight from reading the assignment prompt to writing their final copy. Being able to juggle all the tasks of finding supporting evidence, coming up with ideas, formatting APA, and organizing the paper at one time is a very rare ability. Make sure that you write in an appropriate tone and direct your writing towards your target audience.

***Note:** when you do cite a resource in your rough draft, you should identify which resource you used. Complete APA is not necessary, but leave an indicator so you know who to cite when you go back to revise your APA. Also, format your paper to general APA standards prior to writing (for example, using the font Times New Romans in size 12 and double-spacing); the rationale behind this is to help you keep in mind where you are in regards to your page limit. If you write your whole paper single-spaced and it ends exactly at page 5, fitting perfectly in your page limit, but then you have to double-space, it's very likely that it will not stay within that 5-page limit!*

### **LEGO Brick Analogy** **(continued...)**

Now you go ahead and start assembling the LEGO pieces, starting with the first box and working your way to the last box. You are focusing only on making sure the pieces fit together properly and that they look akin to what you planned.



## Step 6: ATTENDING TO APA/REFERENCES

Now that you have your rough draft ready, you can go ahead and perfect your APA. This includes general formatting (some of which has been mentioned above, but also includes page numbers, amongst other elements), in-text citations, a title page, an abstract, and a reference list.

*APA can be quite meticulous based on the type of paper you write; take a look at our handouts on APA format (General, In-text citations, and Reference list) or check out a 6<sup>th</sup> Edition APA Manual for more detailed information.*

### **LEGO Brick Analogy (continued...)**

You've finished your creation and you could not be prouder. Just to be safe, you get a friend to take a look at it and make sure you did not forget any pieces or add one too many. Once you pass this step, you have reassurance on how great your LEGO creation is!

## Step 7: PEER/SELF EDITING AND PROOFREADING

Print your paper and go through it using a pen/highlighter to note changes that should be made or errors that you find. Try reading your paper out loud, as you may notice language or ideas that do not flow or just do not sound quite right. Ask a peer or family member (that you deem appropriate!) to read it over and scan for errors. Pay attention to voice, word choice, and related elements.

*Use our Self-editing checklist to help you or your recruited editor to thoroughly proofread your work!*

## Step 8: FINAL COPY

*Yay!* You have reached the finish line. Almost. All you need to do is add your last touch-ups and you have a polished version ready to be submitted. Take extra care to submit the paper according to your professor's specifications. Do they want a physical or electronic submission? Do they want you to submit copies of your supporting articles as well? What is the exact time and date that you can submit it? And please, please, please, **DO NOT** submit the wrong file electronically! *Way to go!*