



# How to Fail Your Written Assessments

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There are numerous opportunities to throw away one's grades and many students seize them enthusiastically with little or no instruction. On the basis that most of us will require some form of teaching in this skill area, I present the following guidelines on how to fail. Every student should be aware that failure is made to happen – it is emphatically not a matter of luck!

## Scope

Please note that, whilst only a sample of available strategies is presented, each one virtually guarantees outright failure. There are broadly two ways in which students fail, the first being during the preparation of an assignment and the second in the actual writing of the assignment.

## Preparing the Assignment

1. A student can simply avoid any kind of preparation at all. There are two ways of doing this: cheerfully carrying on a life of accustomed idleness or miserably sitting at home worrying about not working.
2. A more popular method of failing is to pretend to oneself and others that one is preparing by sitting in front of a heap of books and notes and trying to soak it all up like a sponge for hours on end. It is, of course, a total waste of time and guarantees failure.

## Writing the Assignment

1. The first principle is quite easy: totally ignore any advice given by your tutor over the last year.
2. When approaching an assignment, plunge straight in without reading through the question. Make no attempt to consider what it means, make a plan or jot down the key points you want to make. Next, work strictly on the assumption that the wording of the question is utterly immaterial; all questions simply mean 'write all you know about...' whatever word first comes into your mind.
3. The student really intent on failure should concentrate on two things. First, avoid all signs of thought about the set question or indeed about anything else. Second, exclude as far as possible any factual knowledge. At the very least get the basic facts wrong. On no account mention anything to do with children with speech and language difficulties.



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4. Adopt only one viewpoint – rigorously exclude any alternative opinion. Advance your own with passionate intensity but on no account support it with evidence (facts seriously weaken your failure chances). If you must use facts, make them as inaccurate as possible. When using specialist terms do not explain them, or if you do make sure your definition is wholly idiosyncratic. At all costs avoid explanation of fundamental principles.
5. An introduction is always good for grades so avoid it at all costs. If possible, end your assignment abruptly. If you do include a conclusion make sure it flatly contradicts the whole argument of your assignment. If you do unfortunately present such a paragraph make it as stilted, badly spelt and ungrammatical as possible. It should, of course, have no relevance to the rest of the assignment and consist of a few disjointed facts (preferably wrong).
6. To improve your chances of failure, it is important to maximize the marker's irritation level. Therefore, spatter your assignment with grammatical errors. Style should be as convoluted as possible (no sentence should ever be clear at first reading). Misspell all common words. Invent as many abbreviations as possible: the less obvious their meaning the better.
7. Boredom should be induced as far as possible, so repeat yourself, preferably word for word, as much as you can. On no account display originality of thought or information.
8. Avoid quotations but if you do use them make sure you never acknowledge that they are quotations. Better simply to misquote. Large chunks of poorly paraphrased (out of date) books should be inserted at random intervals throughout the assignment. It should always be written down for its own sake and never be used to support an argument. It is important to convey a general impression of naivety and lack of knowledge. For example, in an assignment on Chomsky it should be implied that he was the King of Prussia.

Conscientious application of the foregoing advice will guarantee failure. Every student should be aware that failure is made to happen – it is emphatically not a matter of luck!

[Adapted from a Teesside Polytechnic student handout that was originally taken from A.J. Boyd (1991)]

**Good  
luck!**