USING ASSIGNMENT GUIDELINES TO SAVE TIME

Learning Support
WHY REVIEW ASSIGNMENT GUIDELINES?

Carefully reviewing each requirement will significantly reduce your chances of leaving out important information or including things which are off topic.

The easiest way to lose points on any assignment is to leave out required information or place it out of order so that the professor may have difficulty locating and acknowledging your work.

Reading through your assignment guidelines once is not enough!
FIRST STEPS

Print out your assignment guidelines

- Taking notes on a physical copy is easier than on a screen
- You can refer to the instructions more frequently as you draft the paper on your computer

Closely read over your assignment guidelines multiple times. You will notice things on the second pass that you might have missed on the first.

- If you do not understand a word or phrase, do not skip it.
- Look it up online or ask a professor, classmates, or a content tutor
IDENTIFY THE PRIMARY PURPOSE

Understanding the primary purpose of the assignment is critical in order to make sure you approach the assignment the way the instructor intended you to.

The primary purpose of an assignment is its underlying focus or main goal.

The assignment guidelines often directly state the primary purpose of the assignment. Look for sentences that begin with: “The purpose of this assignment is…”

If the purpose is not directly stated, look for sentences which summarize the goal of the paper: “Students will complete an immersion report detailing…”
ACTIVITY: IDENTIFY PRIMARY PURPOSE

Consider the assignment guidelines below and identify the paper’s primary purpose. Rephrase the purpose in your own words.

SOWK 534 ASSIGNMENT 1

Assignment 1 is a research-based paper to describe and analyze the community visited during immersion. The purpose of this assignment is to analyze, assess, and understand the community that you visited. This is neither a travelogue nor a journal of your walk-about: rather, it is a research paper about the community based on specific data, evidence, details, and examples, including both your observations, and your separate research. The assignment is broken into the sections below that will guide you in sharing a professional perspective regarding the community.
ACTIVITY – IDENTIFY PRIMARY PURPOSE
Consider the assignment guidelines below and identify the paper’s primary purpose. Rephrase the purpose in your own words.

Guidelines for Theoretical Analysis of Case Vignette

In this assignment you are asked to prepare a written theoretical analysis of the attached vignette.

Your paper should address the following:

1) Describe the major biological (including neurobiological), psychological, social, and developmental factors that should be considered in an assessment of the case.

2) Apply at least 3 dynamic systems theory concepts/terms that are helpful in assessing the case. Place each concept in bold-face type.

3) Apply at least 3 concepts/terms from the ecological perspective that are helpful in assessing the case. Place each concept in bold-face type.
DETERMINE YOUR SECTIONS/SUBSECTIONS

Many assignment guidelines will list requirements as bullet points. You can often (although not always) assume that each of these bullet points will be its own section or subsection in your paper. Consider these guidelines:

Your paper should address the following:

1) Describe the major biological (including neurobiological), psychological, social, and developmental factors that should be considered in an assessment of the case.

2) Apply at least 3 dynamic systems theory concepts/terms that are helpful in assessing the case. Place each concept in bold-face type.

3) Apply at least 3 concepts/terms from the ecological perspective that are helpful in assessing the case. Place each concept in bold-face type.

4) Discuss at least 1 strength and 1 limitation of each of the theories (ie, dynamic systems and ecological) for understanding this particular case. Avoid a general discussion of strengths and weaknesses.
IDENTIFYING SECTIONS/SUBSECTIONS

If your guidelines come with a list of required topics in a specific order, cover each of those topics—in that same order—in your paper.

Even if your assignment guidelines do not mention an introduction that ends in a thesis or a conclusion, APA guidelines require both. Therefore, you may want to check with your professor to verify whether or not her or she wants you to include those sections.

Knowing how many sections/subsections the paper should have allows you to create a basic outline to help you plan your pre-writing and writing.

Consider the assignment guidelines on the following slides and decide how many sections the final paper should have.
FORMAT: the paper should adhere to the following format, using the subtitles below to divide each section:

I. Introduction

- Briefly discuss why understanding communities is important to social workers. Reviewing the Netting textbook, chapters 5 and 6, will help you maximize the quality of this section.

II. Community Demographics

- Identify the name, general location, and any major landmarks of the community. Include a map if it would help the reader “picture” the location.

III. Community Characteristics

- Identify and describe the major community strengths, and also the major community challenges. Limit the strengths and challenges to no more than three each.
IV. Community Structure and Decision-making

- Who are the community leaders, both formal (i.e. elected, business leaders, large organizations, etc.) and informal (i.e. un-elected, community-based, activists, etc.)? Be specific, name names and/or groups. How do they impact the way this community functions as a whole?

- How is local government and/or the community organized? In other words, who makes community-wide decisions for the people / employers / agencies that exist there? For example, is it city council, or business, or community activists, etc. that seem to hold decision-making powers?

- Does the local government seem to serve the community? If not, who seems to be the beneficiary of local government decisions? What issues do local government and/or the community generally focus upon? Is there an example?

V. Reflection and Conclusion

- Share any surprising aspects of what you discovered about this community.
IDENTIFY BASIC CONTENT REQUIREMENTS

Once you have determined the structure of your paper using the sections you have identified in the assignment, you can begin to identify important content you are required to cover. For example:

- Course concepts
- Theories
- Interventions
- Issues

Read closely through your guidelines to get a general sense of which and how many concepts and ideas you will be expected to address overall, before starting to write.
To save time, do all of your research at once. Do **not** research and write for a section without considering the length and content of upcoming topics as well!

**Consider:**
- Section one of a paper may require one diagnosis.
- Section two may require two additional diagnoses.

Researching all three diagnoses together would be faster than researching one, pausing to write, and then stopping to research again.

Knowing the basic content requirements can **speed up your research and brainstorming processes**—and prevent you from including extra material that is not required.
CHECK BASIC TECHINCAL REQUIREMENTS

The last few paragraphs of your assignment guidelines typically focus on technical requirements for the paper:
- Minimum/maximum page length
- The required number of scholarly sources
- Specific adjustments to standard APA format

The due date of the paper is often listed near the bottom as well; however, you should always confirm due dates with your professors, as they may change.
ACTIVITY: IDENTIFY BASIC REQUIREMENTS
Consider the assignment guidelines below and identify the expected page length, and expected number of sources.

Academic Paper Guidelines
The paper should be APA formatted, 5-7 pages in length (not including the title page or reference list), double-spaced, with 12-point font and 1-inch margins on all sides. Use subheadings to organize your paper. Throughout the paper, provide scholarly evidence to support your arguments, referencing a minimum of 5 academic and/or professional works, at least 2 of which must be outside sources that are not on the course syllabus (place outside references in bold-face type). The course texts will count as one source each, regardless of the number of chapters you cite. Please do not cite the asynchronous material, lecture notes, etc. Instead, rely upon original sources of scholarly information. Please also minimize the use of direct quotes from source material. Editorial and referencing styles specified in the APA Publication Manual 6th Edition can be found at: http://apastyle.apa.org/.
You should **never** be below the minimum required page length for an assignment for any reason.

- Each assignment is designed to be covered by a specific amount of writing.
- Consider whether your topic may be too narrow, too general, or you need either more evidence/research or analysis/application.
- If you are struggling, you may work with a content tutor on foundation-level coursework.

You may exceed the maximum page limit **only** when your professor has given you permission.
USING PAGE LIMITS - SECTIONS

You can use the maximum page limit to estimate how long each of the sections of your paper should be before you begin writing.

For example: if you have four different sections to cover, and you have 12 pages to fill, you could budget slightly less than three pages per section, leaving room for an introduction and conclusion.

12 pages ÷ 4 sections = roughly 3 pages per section

When estimating section length in papers, some sections will always be a bit more important than others, and will therefore take up more space in your paper.
However, if one section is allowed to dominate the paper, it may appear as if you focused all your efforts on that one idea.

Underdeveloped sections can look like afterthoughts, or your professor might feel you did not provide enough research and analysis.

Always begin by dividing your sections equally, then make adjustments. If you have four main sections to cover, assign them all the same length at first.

Do not forget to leave room for your introduction and conclusion (required by APA format), unless the paper guidelines or your professor directly states that you do not need these.
USING PAGE LIMITS—SECTIONS

While planning for your paper, make adjustments to your estimated section lengths with the idea of balance in mind.

Example: Your paper requires you to provide a case study and then apply two theories and an intervention to your client. In order to make space for a longer intervention section...

- **Do not:** Take two pages away from one of the two theory section only, causing that section to become very short.

- **Do:** Shorten *each* of the other sections in the paper a little to give yourself the two pages you need in the intervention section.
USING PAGE LIMITS WHEN PLANNING

Estimating page lengths for each of your sections ahead of time:

- **Makes the writing process less intimidating** by helping you to break large sections down into much smaller parts: nine pages of theory sounds difficult, but three pages for each theory sounds a lot more doable.

- **Gives you a better sense of how much research you need to complete.** You will need to research much more for a six page article analysis than a ½ page article analysis.

- **Allows you to better judge how your writing time and attention should be divided in your paper.** Do not spend three hours on a ½ page section and a ½ hour on a three page section!
ACTIVITY: ESTIMATE SECTION LENGTHS

Consider the assignment guidelines below and suggest possible lengths for each section, adding up to the recommended page limit for the assignment.

**Guidelines for Theoretical Analysis of Case Vignette**

In this assignment you are asked to prepare a written theoretical analysis of the attached vignette.

Your paper should address the following:

1) Describe the major biological (including neurobiological), psychological, social, and developmental factors that should be considered in an assessment of the case.

2) Apply at least 3 dynamic systems theory concepts/terms that are helpful in assessing the case. Place each concept in **bold-face** type.

3) Apply at least 3 concepts/terms from the ecological perspective that are helpful in assessing the case. Place each concept in **bold-face** type.

4) Discuss at least 1 strength and 1 limitation of each of the theories (i.e., dynamic systems and ecological) for understanding this particular case. Avoid a general discussion of strengths and weaknesses.

**Academic Paper Guidelines**

The paper should be APA formatted, 5-7 pages in length (not including the title page or reference list), double-spaced, with 12-point font and 1-inch margins on all sides. Use subheadings to organize your paper. Throughout the paper,
BRINGING IT TOGETHER

By the time you have finished reviewing your assignment guidelines, you should have an approximation of:

- The **activities and readings, and research** you must complete before writing your paper and tackling each section.
- The **number of sections** your paper should include (and what they should be about)
- The **expected content requirements** (number of theories, number of interventions, number of articles to assess, etc.)
- The **minimum and maximum amount you may write** for the paper as a whole, each section, and required components within each section.
- The **exact due date** of your paper
- **Any special instructions** – such as special formatting that is not standard to APA.
BRINGING IT TOGETHER

Based on your understanding of the assignment instructions, you should be ready to begin working on:

- A preliminary thesis statement based on your understanding of the major sections/content required and related to the primary purpose you have identified for the paper
- An initial structure for your paper with a list of sections you will need to cover and estimates for how long each section will be
- An estimated list of the course concepts you will need to utilize for your paper and how much of your paper you need to devote to each.
CONCLUSION

Planning out your assignment in advance will make sitting down to write your actual paper an easier and less stressful process because you will know exactly what needs to go into the paper to meet all of the assignment requirements.

If you are still struggling to fully understand your assignment guidelines, make an appointment to meet with a writing coach and/or content tutor, using our scheduling website: http://uscvacmsw.checkappointments.com/

Additional questions may be addressed to sowklearningsupport@usc.edu