

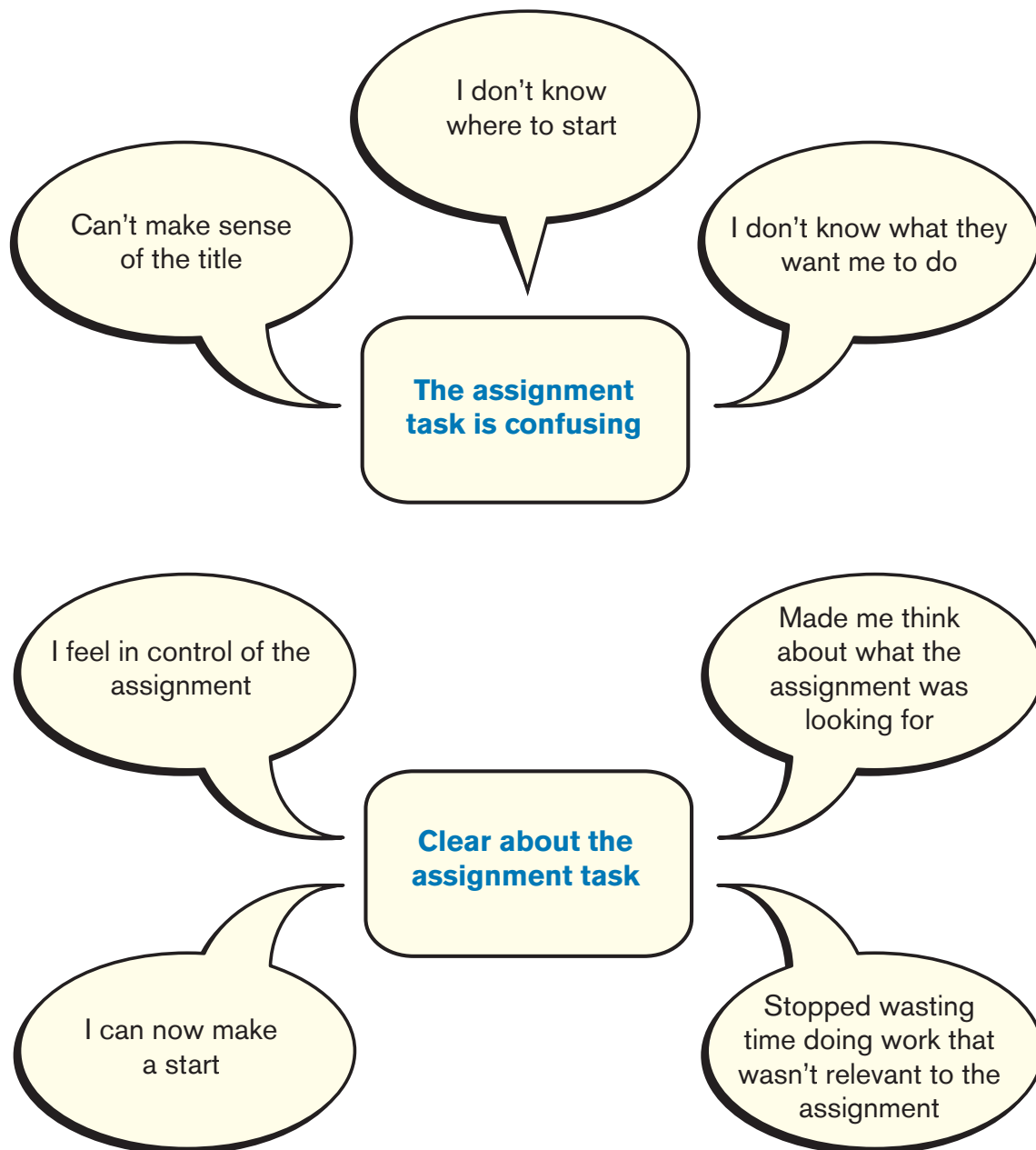
Stage 1

Understanding the assignment title and getting started



Understanding the assignment title: Working out what you have to do

Why is it important?



This section will help to:

- Understand what the assignment is looking for
- Start to consider your ideas.

What is the assignment looking for?

Unpick the title

Usually you will have a title or task, and very often this will include:

- the subject
- a keyword (telling you how to write your assignment)
- the aspect of the subject matter (often a phrase ending in 'of')
- and possibly restrictions (eg., a context for the topic).

See the following example:

KEYWORD	ASPECT	SUBJECT	RESTRICTION
Discuss	the impact of	celebrity culture	in the 21st Century

Look at your own title and dissect it, (underline/cut out/separate the words) to identify what is included. In the title above, the key word is 'discuss', however this could be different, such as: 'describe' or 'evaluate'.

For further definitions of key words see: 'Glossary of academic key words used in titles' on page 5.



Investigate the assignment brief further

You may be provided with further information from your lecturers, such as the assessment criteria or additional information you should refer to.

Key questions to find out:

- What is the format that is expected of your assignment, a report or essay?
- What is the word limit?
- What criteria are being used to assess your work?
- Are you being referred to specific sources of information?
- What is the deadline?



Make the assignment your own

Take time to understand what you are being asked to do, and don't rush into writing straight away.

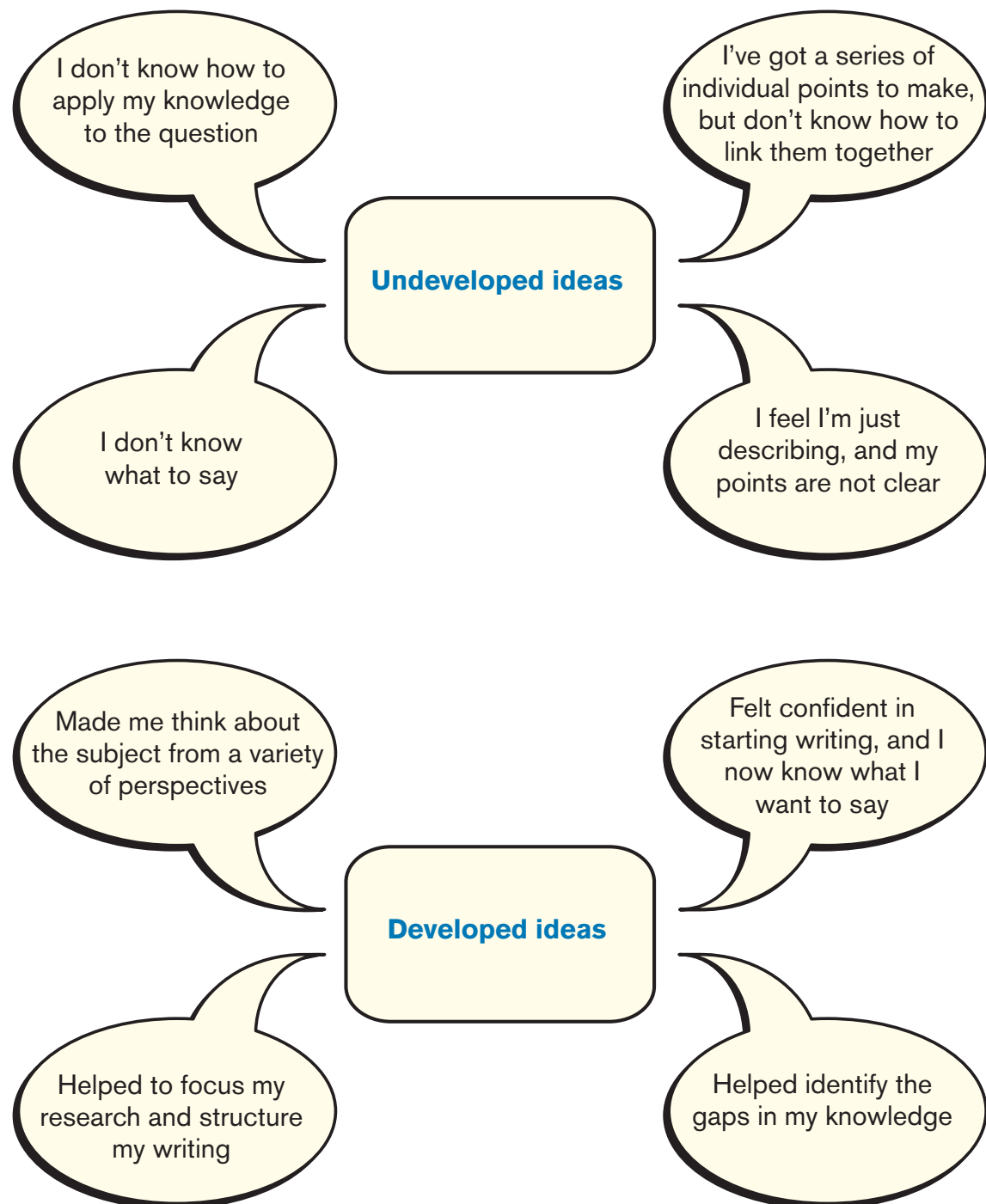
Record the information you have so far, a mind map with individual words is enough at this stage. Try re-phrasing the title into your own words, this will help you to understand it and prompt ideas for your response.

Glossary of academic words used in titles

Account for	Give reasons for: explain why something happens
Analyse	Examine something in very close detail and from a number of angles. Identify the important points and chief features, and understand their relationships.
Argue	Present a case for and against a proposal or statement and present your own opinion at the end.
Compare	Show how two or more things are similar.
Contrast	Look at two or more things and draw out differences. State whether the differences are significant.
Critically evaluate	Weigh arguments for and against something, assess the strength of evidence on both sides.
Define	Give the exact meaning of
Describe	Give a detailed account of the main features or characteristics ...
Discuss	Write about the most important characteristics of something. Give arguments for and against, look at it from a variety of perspectives.
Distinguish	Identify the differences between two items.
Evaluate	Assess the worth or usefulness of something. Use evidence to support your opinion.
Examine	Look at something in detail. You may be expected to 'critically evaluate' it as well.
Explain	Make it clear why something happens or why it is the way it is.
Identify	Recognise name and briefly describe something
Illustrate	Use examples to further explain or justify something. Could be visual or verbal.
Interpret	Explain the meaning or significance of information or data that you are presenting.
Justify	Provide evidence that supports an argument or idea.
Outline	Give only the main points, show only the main structure.
Prove	Present evidence in a logical structure to support an argument for a point of view.
Relate (Two meanings)	1. Show how ideas/theories/events etc are linked or connected 2. Tell a story. Explain something in a narrative fashion
Review	Survey and comment on the key aspects of something or a range of things.
State	Give the main features clearly and simply.
Summarise	Draw out the main points, omitting detail and examples.
To what extent...	How far is something true, or contributes to a final outcome. Also how far is it not true? In academic writing the answer is usually somewhere in the middle.
Trace	Describe the development of something; follow the order of different stages in an event or process.

Adapted from Cottrell. S. (2003) *The Study Skills Handbook*. Basingstoke. Palgrave

Making connections, developing ideas...



This section will help to:

- **Develop confidence to make a start with your writing**
- **Expand and organise ideas**
- **Develop planning strategies.**

How to develop your ideas

Start with what you know

- A really good place to start, is writing notes about what you know already about your title or assignment task. By doing this, you may discover that you know more than you originally thought.
- Choose a method of note taking to record your ideas that suits your learning style. (See 'Planning and breaking down your assignment using your learning style' page 9).
- Refer to your lecture notes and course materials for initial references.



Dig deeper

- Ask yourself some questions about the title eg. Is the subject important? Why? What are the current views or research?
- Apply these key words to your subject: What, Who, When, Where, How and Why (see page 8 'Making a start'), to develop your thoughts further.



What do you need to find out?

Now look at your plan, and take a different colour pen and underline or write notes on the things you need to find out or you don't know. This will be your 'jobs to do list'. By doing this, you will use your time efficiently and not waste time making notes on areas that you don't need.



Now, what do you think you want to say?

Even at this early stage, having an idea of your overall argument will help you to write clearly and confidently. However, as you research your subject your initial ideas may change, so be open to the opinions of others along the way, and be prepared for this research to present you with lots of questions.

What is the balance of the points you want to make? Using the marker below, where would you place your views at this stage? 50/50, 70/30, 60/40?

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100

Your argument may not be clear at this stage, and very often it is not about finding reasons for or against. Your aim is to make 'a careful judgement after balanced consideration of all aspects of a topic' (McMillan and Weyers 2006 p137).

Making a start

Use the format below to think around your topic, what could you include that is relevant to your title?

WHO?
Who is involved?
e.g., groups/organisations

WHERE?
Where did it occur?
Where is the evidence?

WHEN?
What is the timeframe/genre
to be considered

Insert your title here:

Underline keyword, aspect, subject, restriction

WHY?
Why has this happened?
Why has it developed in
this way?

WHAT?
What are the
problems/issues involved?
What impact has there
been?
What evidence and/or
research supports
your points?

HOW?
How has the situation been
reached?
How has it developed?

Planning and breaking down your assignment using your learning style

The 'Sticky Notes Shuffle' or 'Chop and Sort' Approach

You will need:

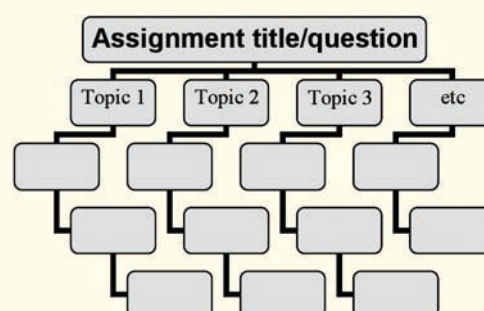
- Pens/pencils (a range of colours)
- A large piece of paper (or board, or even your desk) and
- A supply of sticky notes (in different colours) or
- Paper, scissors and poster tack

Brainstorm ideas about the assignment title/question, move them around – start to build a basic shape for your assignment and identify what else you need to do.

Use colour here to link similar parts and go on to use these colours in your research and reading.

The 'Family Tree' Approach

Start with the basic title or question and break it down into smaller and smaller chunks:



Extend the 'family tree' as you get more ideas.

Do you prefer lists or shuffling ideas around?

Use sticky notes or a large piece of paper that you cut into pieces.

Tip: Writing for 10 minutes without stopping is also a useful start.

Are you the creative type? Do you like having lots of handouts and diagrams?

Try the thought mapping or spider gram approach

Tip: This works particularly well when using colours and symbols.

Is your approach to break down the title or question into smaller parts?

The 'family tree' approach is useful.

Tip: This helps you to see how different parts merge into the whole package.

Is your approach quite tightly structured and organised?

A table may help you to focus on the task.

Tip: This grid provides guidance and a clear outline of what you already know and what you need to find out.

The Thought-Mapping (or spider gram) Approach



Just add more links as you get more ideas.

The 'Tidy Table' Approach

Assignment title/question				
Topic	What does this mean?	What do I already know?	What do I need to know?	How am I going to find it?
1				
2				
3				
4				

Time planning your approach to the assignment

There is no guide to how long an assignment will take to complete. However, managing your actions and your time well will contribute towards your success. Your target dates are likely to change as you begin to work on your assignment. Be 'SMART' with the tasks you set yourself: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, Time Related.

Jobs to do	Specific jobs	Target date	Achieved	Revised dates X or ✓	Notes
Understand the task	eg., read through assignment task, produce a 'mind map' of initial approach to the assignment				
Collect and record initial information					
Plan your approach					
Do supplementary reading					
Produce first draft					
Review first draft					
Produce final draft					
Submit your assignment		Hand in date		Hand in date	
Collect your marked assignment					
Make the most of feedback					