

Define and use concepts in your writing

Being able to define and use concepts, principles, instruments and theories is an important part of **practising academic integrity** in assignments and **demonstrating your understanding** to your marker. This guide explains when, why and how to define concepts in your assessment tasks.

What is a concept?

A concept is an **abstract idea**. We use concepts in our everyday lives to make sense of ourselves, others, and the world around us. All of the units you study at university will teach you disciplinary concepts that are part of wider theoretical approaches.

Two important things students need to know about theoretical concepts at university:

1. **Each discipline or field of study at university teaches its own theoretical concepts**
 - These concepts are used to:
 - describe, explain, and analyse phenomena
 - investigate contexts, issues, and problems
 - generate responses or solutions.

This means that each area of study at university has its own disciplinary language (specialist terms). Learning the concepts taught in your course can be challenging at first, but is essential to study success.

2. **Studying at university is about more than learning 'information' and 'skills'**

Your course is teaching you a new way to think that includes how to make sense of issues, respond to problems effectively, and continually reflect upon experiences in order to improve.

The first step towards learning new disciplinary ways of thinking involves learning the theoretical concepts taught in your course. Introductory units tend to focus on teaching new students the most important disciplinary concepts to get them started. However, all units teach students concepts and ways of thinking.

When and where to define concepts in assignments

- Concepts should be defined **BEFORE** you use them. Doing this **demonstrates to the marker that you understand the unit/disciplinary meaning of the concept**, helps **'set up' your discussion**, and **makes your work easier for the reader to understand**.
- The short definition of simple concept may be included in the introduction of case studies, book reviews, research papers, and reports.
- In essays it is often OK to provide a **short** referenced definition of a simple concept (e.g. is not contested and does not require detailed explanation) in the introduction. Often, key concept definitions are presented in the **first paragraph(s) of the essay body**.
- It is common in theoretical essays to use the **first few paragraphs of the essay body** to introduce your theoretical approach by **defining key concepts**, and then use the rest of the essay to **apply these concepts** to make sense of historical events, explain social issues, evaluate political processes, reflect upon professional practice, analyse texts, solve problems, generate responses, or offer potential solutions.
- In some theoretical essays and literature reviews written in advanced units, much of the assignment involves comparing, contrasting, and judging the ways disciplinary experts define and use theoretical concepts.
- Less important concepts (e.g. not identified in the assignment topic/question and not crucial to your argument) can be defined as you use them (they don't need to be defined early on).

Always ask teachers about how they expect you to define and use concepts in your assignments.

How to define concepts effectively in assignments

The following guidance offers **general rules** about defining concepts effectively in university assignments, and draws upon APA 6th edition referencing style.

General writing rules can be useful, but it is important to **always read the assignment marking criteria and ask your teacher about disciplinary writing conventions in your course**. For example, in some types of scientific writing concepts are defined by using paraphrases (not direct quotations as suggested below).

Always ask your teachers if you need clarification.

There are five key steps to follow when defining concepts in your assignments:

1. Always use **disciplinary experts** when defining concepts in assignments. Remember the same concept/ word can be defined differently depending on the discipline. Often this means using unit sources.
2. Use a direct quotation to provide a precise and exact statement about the nature and limits of the concept.
3. Always accurately reference direct quotations to acknowledge you are using others' words and ideas.
4. If using a quote to define a concept try to introduce the quote (e.g. name the author, use a reporting verb such as 'defines') and unpack the quote (e.g. explain the definition in your own words).
5. If there is more than one definition for the concept, or disagreement about the definition, note this, and then offer the definition you will use in the assignment. If you are studying an advanced unit, you will likely need to also identify similarities/differences between the different definitions, and justify the definition you have chosen to use (e.g. give reasons for why). Doing this helps **demonstrate your understanding to the marker**.

Using direct quotations from disciplinary experts to define concepts shows the reader (marker) that you are using relevant and credible sources. **Explaining quoted concept definitions in your own words demonstrates your understanding** of complex disciplinary ideas, and it will help you better apply the concept later in your essay (e.g. because you understand it better). This in turn should improve the quality of your writing.

Examples

Example one

Bhopal (2002) defines epidemiology as "the science and craft that studies the pattern of diseases ... in populations to help understand both their causes and the burden they impose" (p. xxii).

Example two

Sociological theorists, Jureidini and Poole (2003, p. 33) define social integration as "the extent to which individuals have a sense of belonging to the collective".

Example three

Human communication is defined by Pierce (2003, p. 10) as "a process wherein one or more humans create a message (or messages) allowing meaning to be evoked and understood by one or more other humans".

These three examples (above) all use direct quotations to provide precise definitions of disciplinary concepts. Referencing acknowledges the use of others' ideas. Using direct quotations to define concepts is an important way to **blend** ideas and words found in credible disciplinary sources with your own ideas and words.

How do I know which concepts to define in assignments?

It is important to define and use relevant concepts in assignments. There are three key places you can look to find out which concepts need to be defined in your assignments:

1. The **assignment topic or question**. See examples below.
2. The **concepts taught in unit topics**, and discussed in unit materials.
3. **Concepts found while researching** the assignment.

If in doubt, check with your teacher.

Example assignment questions: Identifying key concepts you need to define

Example one

Select one **Australian risk population** and explain how **social inequalities** impact on the **health outcomes** of this social group.

Four concepts are included in this essay question. These concepts are: *Australian risk population*, *social inequalities*, *health outcomes*, and *social group*.

Example two

Explain how the **novel** is a **post colonial text**. Identify two **post colonial strategies** used in the novel. Discuss **identity**, **characterisation**, and **reader position**.

Six concepts are used in this assignment question. These concepts are *novel*, *post colonial text*, *post colonial strategies*, *identity*, *characterisation*, and *reader position*.

Example three

Explain what **client confidentiality** is. As a **health professional**, what are your **responsibilities** in relation to **client health rights**?

Three concepts are used in this assignment question. These concepts are: *client confidentiality*, *health professional responsibilities*, and *client health rights*.

The highlighted words in the example assignment questions are disciplinary concepts and need to be defined in the assignment. You will be familiar with these concepts from your unit. Always go to unit materials **first** when clarifying concepts in assignment topics/questions.

Examples from across the disciplines: Some assignments where students need to define and use concepts

Across all areas of study at university assignments require students to define and use concepts. The following section lists a few examples.

- It is common for media students to use (apply) concepts to analyse media texts including newspapers, films, advertisements, TV programs, radio shows, and websites.
- In a Law and Justice Studies assignment students might draw upon the concept of 'contract' to explain a legal judgement to a (hypothetical) client.
- In an Engineering assignment students apply scientific principles and mathematical equations, as well as engineering concepts to solve engineering problems and make recommendations.
- In Creative Writing assignments it is common for students to apply literary theory concepts to analyse short stories, novels, and poems.
- In some Education assignments students apply concepts about inclusive teaching to critically reflect upon their own teaching practice.

Tips for using concepts effectively in assignments

1. **Defining** and **using** concepts is an important part of practising academic integrity because it is one way to **acknowledge sources**, and **blend** their ideas into **your writing**.
2. Keep a **concept journal** during session. Concept journals can be used to deepen learning during session and save time when writing assignments.
3. Always define concepts using experts from **your discipline or area of study**. Remember, the same concept/ word will be defined differently depending on the discipline.
4. Define concepts **before** you use them in your assignment.
5. Always **reference** concept definitions (you are using ideas and words from sources).
6. Check the **assignment question/topic** to find the key concepts you need to define. During research you might also find extra concepts relevant to the topic.
7. **Demonstrate your understanding** by defining concepts using **disciplinary experts**.
8. Use concepts properly to show the marker you have learnt **new ways of thinking** (disciplinary learning) relevant to your future profession.