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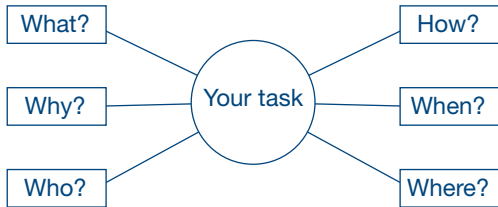
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# GETTING A CRITICAL MINDSET

## Getting strategic

This section takes a good look at how to get that critical mindset in your studies. It starts asking questions right from the beginning.

Six **strategic questions** are used by many people to get themselves started in tackling a task, whether it's planning a project, getting to grips with reading, or writing something:



The task defined ...

... and how to do it –  
an action plan

Finding the answers to these key questions will help to keep you alert and critical. Try it first in relation to a course handbook.

## A strategic reading of a course handbook!

Course handbooks are an essential source of guidance. They tell you what you have to do, and often quite a lot about how to set about it, as well as the practicalities like when it needs to be done by.

Your critical approach to your studies starts here! Read your handbook carefully and check the Virtual Learning Environment to make sure you have all the information you need to answer the strategic questions.

### The task defined

The first three key questions (on the left in the table) will help you to get the measure of the task(s) you have been set.

<b>What</b> exactly do you have to produce?	... in your next essay/ assignment?
What format? Essay? Report? Specific format? Presentation? Tests?	
Any guidance about structure, layout and style?	
How long?	
What % marks does the task count for?	
What topic(s)?	

<b>Why</b> are you being asked to do this?	
External reasons: the ‘learning outcomes’ you are expected to achieve.	
Internal reasons: your private purpose – interest in the subject, personal satisfaction.	

<b>Who</b> are you writing for? It helps you write if you can visualise your reader.	
Your tutor is always your audience. What do you know about what s/he wants to see?	
Do you have another real audience, for example giving a presentation to your seminar group?	
Or an imagined audience, like writing a report (for a company for example), or an article for a particular journal?	

Most writing tasks do not specify an audience (beyond the obvious – your tutor or a colleague). You may find it helpful to imagine a ‘default’ audience when you write.

### **Write as if ...**

... you are addressing someone with the same experience and knowledge of the general subject area as yourself, but who has not yet covered this particular topic/module/course. If you do this you will not be tempted to:

- ▶ talk up, using fancy language designed to impress
- ▶ talk down, with an inappropriate informal or chatty style.

Talk on the level, using clear, simple language; use short sentences; and draw on the specialist language, conventions and style of your subject when you need to.

## And how to do it – an action plan

<b>How ...?</b> What guidance are you given about what to include?	... in your next essay/ assignment?
For example: Use of appendices? Style of referencing? Acceptable and unacceptable practice?	
<b>When ...?</b> is the deadline for the final hand-in?	
Are there earlier deadlines for drafts and various elements?	
How will you balance working towards one deadline with working towards others? And life, job etc.?	
<b>Where ...?</b> will you find the information?	
How much of it is easy to find (course readers, textbooks, special collections)?	
How much do you have to research yourself? And go beyond the reading list?	

Your answers to these questions will help you work out an action plan for getting it done. You may like to try some of these suggestions:

- ▶ Complete a term or semester timeline (see the template on p89).
- ▶ List the specifics: break down major tasks from the timeline into small tasks.
- ▶ Check your diary – for job schedules, weekends away, a social life even ...
- ▶ Plan your week: look for short start-up slots, longer working chunks, short review slots.
- ▶ Write ‘to do’ lists (make each item a small one!), and tick them off when you have done them.

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