Practising academic integrity: How to define and use concepts in your writing

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What is a concept?

A concept is an abstract idea. We use concepts at university and in our everyday lives, to make sense of ourselves, others, and the world around us.

Everyday examples of concepts:

The concept ‘belonging’ is likely to be familiar to all of us. It is an abstract idea we use to explain our own and others’ feelings, behaviour, practices, values and identities. It is common for us to make sense of our own experiences in terms of feeling a sense of belonging, or a lack of belonging, for example.

Another concept familiar to all of us is love. We use this abstract idea to describe, understand, and evaluate our relationships with others, and with ourselves.
At university, concepts, or abstract ideas, are part of wider theoretical approaches taught in disciplines, or areas of study. Each discipline uses its own theoretical approaches and specialised concepts (abstract ideas).

**Why should I bother learning concepts taught in my course?**

Concepts are a big deal at university, and will vary depending on the disciplines or course you are studying. Understanding what concepts mean, and how to use them will help you to learn new ways of thinking relevant to your course, and future professional role. Focusing on learning the concepts taught in your course can deepen your learning, and improve the quality of assignments.

**There are two main reasons why it is important to learn the concepts taught in your course:**

1. Each discipline or area of study at university has its own theoretical **concepts** (abstract ideas) and approaches. These concepts are used to:
   - 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) used to describe, investigate and explain phenomena. 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 on a given subject. It involves learning new **ways to think** (including how to explain, analyse and respond to problems). The first step to learning new **disciplinary ways of thinking** involves learning the specialised **concepts used in your course**. Introductory units tend to focus on teaching new students key disciplinary concepts.

**When and where should I define concepts in assignments?**

The following section of this resource outlines general rules about **where** and **when** to define concepts in assignments written at university. However, it is important to understand that rules about defining concepts will vary depending on:

- the type of assignment you are writing
- the academic writing conventions of the discipline you are studying.

Always check the assignment description and marking criteria, and ask your teacher about where and when to define concepts in assignments.
Tips: When and where to define concepts in assignments

• Concepts should be defined or clarified **BEFORE** you use them. Doing this demonstrates your understanding of the concept, helps ‘set up’ your discussion, and makes your work easier to understand.

• **The definition of a key concept** is usually included in the introduction of essays, case studies, book reviews, reports, and case studies.

• In essays the general rule is to provide a short, simple, referenced definition of a key concept in the introduction. However, definitions of key concepts should be presented in the early paragraphs of the essay body if they are long, contested (there is disagreement over how to define it), or there are a number of concepts to define.

• 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 explain phenomena, analyse problems, and generate responses or solutions. In some theoretical essays much of the assignment will involve comparing, contrasting, and judging the ways disciplinary experts define concepts.

• Less important concepts (not identified in the assignment topic/question) can be defined as you use them.

How do I 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.

Learning general rules can be useful when first learning to write assignments at university. However, 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 about academic writing conventions in your area of study or course.

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.

2. Use a direct quotation to provide a precise and exact statement about the nature and limits of the concept.

3. Always reference direct quotations to acknowledge you are using others’ ideas. Remember, when referencing direct quotations referencing details need to include author name, year of publication and page number.

4. Introduce the concept definition by naming the author and identifying their expertise, using the reporting verb ‘defines’.
5. If there is more than one definition for the concept or disagreement amongst disciplinary experts about how to define the concept, note this, and then identify and offer the definition you will use in the assignment.

Using direct quotations from disciplinary experts to define concepts shows the reader (marker) that you are using relevant and credible sources. It is always a good idea to also explain the direct quotation/definition in your own words. Doing this demonstrates your understanding of complex disciplinary ideas, and improves the flow and 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 define disciplinary concepts and include referencing in order to acknowledge 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. Academic writing involves blending ideas, arguments, and words from existing work with our 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 usually contains the key concepts that need to be defined. See examples below.
2. The concepts mentioned in the assignment question will be taught in unit topics, and discussed in unit materials. Check unit materials (the Study Guide and myReadings) related to the assignment topic to identify concepts you need to define in the assignment.
3. When researching the assignment you find extra concepts, used in credible sources about your assignment topic. 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 and of this social group.

Four concepts are included in this essay question. These concepts are: 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: 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?
Two concepts are used in this assignment question. These concepts are: *client confidentiality*, 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.

**Why is it important to define and use concepts in assignments at university?**

In assignments and exams at university students are usually expected to define and apply (use) concepts taught in the unit. Doing this shows the marker **your understanding**, and also **blends others’ ideas into your writing**.

Students show they have learnt **new ways of thinking** by defining and applying concepts in their assignments and exams. This is why it is so important to **define concepts using disciplinary experts**, and **use concepts** to explain phenomena. By using concepts students show their ability to **think like** an engineer, musician, or psychologist, forestry manager, counsellor, teacher, and so on.

**Defining or clarifying concepts by using experts in your discipline is important because doing so:**

1. shows the reader **what you mean** by the concept
2. allows you to **acknowledge** and **blend** others’ ideas into your writing
3. can remind you exactly what the concept means (helping you to use it effectively)
4. **demonstrates your understanding** of disciplinary ideas and approaches.

**Blending** happens when you introduce, explain, and then use concepts found in credible sources written by disciplinary experts. You can show you have learnt **new ways of thinking** in assignments apply concepts to analyse a text, explain a problem, or identify responses/solutions.

**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. **Access the Quick Guide to keeping a concept journal concept.**

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.

**Related Quick Guides**

How to keep a concept journal, Practising academic integrity: How to use direct quotes in your writing, Student academic integrity: An introduction, Practising academic integrity: An introduction to referencing