Keeping a concept journal

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What is a concept journal?

A concept journal is an extended glossary of terms drawn from your study during session. A concept journal is a document that grows over session and contains referenced definition, and explanations using your own words, of unit concepts. A concept journal is usually a digital document (Word document).

The idea is to generate and maintain a concept journal as part of your weekly study tasks for each unit. Learning the specialist language of your discipline is an important part of making a successful transition to university studies. Keeping a concept journal is an efficient way to learn specialist language and abstract ideas taught in your course.

Why bother keeping a concept journal?

There are four key reasons to keep a concept journal.

1. Keeping a concept journal will help you to learn the specialist language of your discipline, or area of study

Concepts are abstract ideas used to explain phenomena and generate responses and solutions to problems. Each area or study has its own concepts, and specialist language. Learning the meaning of concepts taught in your course and how to use them to explain phenomena is an important part of study success.

Keeping a concept journal will help you to learn the new specialist language and concepts taught in your course.
2. **Keeping a concept journal will help you to focus your study efforts and engage with unit content in an active way**

It is easy to become overwhelmed by new ideas and information at university. Keeping a concept journal is a great way to focus your study efforts, and drive deep learning.

Studying at university involves learning new ideas and principles. Keeping a concept journal (and making entries as part of your study tasks each week) can help you to focus on the key ideas taught in each unit.

It is crucial to define each concept using credible sources (usually unit materials), and then add in an explanation in your own words. Doing this ensures you have a precise statement of the nature or limits of the idea from a credible source, and you understand the concept or principle well enough to put it in your own words.

It is also a good idea to keep a concept journal when researching new topics for assessment tasks. During the research phase it is common to encounter new specialist language and concepts. Clarifying new abstract concepts (and different definitions of the same concept) can help you to gain a deeper understanding of your topic.

3. **Keeping a concept journal will directly contribute to completing assignments and exams**

Most assignments and exams at university involve defining and using concepts or principles taught in the unit. By keeping a concept journal you will already have relevant referenced definitions ready to use in unit assignments.

4. **Keeping a concept journal will help you to use sources effectively in your writing**

Concept definitions are an important way to include sources in your writing. It is important to use disciplinary experts to define concepts (abstract ideas) used in assignments and exams.

Never use generic dictionaries to define specialist terms or disciplinary concepts. Even if the same word is used in everyday conversation, the meaning will be different when used in your area of study. It is likely that same term will be defined differently depending on the discipline or areas of study. For these reasons it is important to use disciplinary experts to define concepts you use in assignments and exams.

Unit materials are the first place to look for definitions of concepts. Study guides, readings, lecture notes, and discussion board postings are all good places to look for appropriate definitions of concepts.
How do I keep a concept journal?

Start your concept journal at the start of each session. Keep a journal for each unit you are studying. Every time you come across a new concept or principle make an entry in the journal. Each entry should contain a referenced definition, and an explanation in your own words.

Each time you make an entry into the journal try to include:

- A heading in bold using the concept or principle
- A referenced definition from a disciplinary expert (likely a direct quote)
- An explanation of the quote in your own words (notes will do).

Your concept journal will develop during session. It will also be a resource to draw upon as you move through your studies in a course.

Related Quick Guides

Practising academic integrity: Defining and using concepts in your writing, Practising academic integrity: How to include direct quotes in your writing