

A Guide to Managing Assignments in Social Policy

○ Introduction

As you will appreciate from reading *The Companion*, Social Policy is an evaluative discipline concerned with the following:

- ❖ **Examining the ways in which social needs and problems are, and have been, construed**
- ❖ **Considering the varying proposals for addressing them**
- ❖ **Appraising the effectiveness of the ensuing interventions**

Its analyses, which regularly extend to international and cross-national inquiry, embrace a diverse and conflicting range of perspectives and explanations that feed debates on the best ways to meet the needs of particular groups and/or secure individual and social well-being. It is a discipline that therefore not only possesses a strong empirical base but also has important conceptions of what ought to be. Indeed, it is this combination of descriptive and prescriptive characteristics that makes Social Policy such a stimulating form of study, and its assignments so thought-provoking.

The main aim of this section of the web site is to provide you with general guidance on how to tackle the particular issues posed by the most widely used forms of assessment in the discipline, namely, [essays](#) (including those written under invigilated conditions) and [reports](#) (and linked presentations). Although not actually the focus here, the suggestions should also be useful for case-study analyses, projects, and undergraduate dissertations (assistance on the latter is provided at www.socscidiss.bham.ac.uk among other sites). The advice that follows is geared to the needs of undergraduates, but it could well prove useful in subsequent studies, particularly when it is linked with your tutors' support. In the *Illustrations of Essay and Report Writing*, we provide you with suggestions on how to use the general guidance in answering particular essay and report topics in the different fields of the discipline. To assist in this task, we have chosen chapter review questions from *The Companion*, thus enabling you to link your reading with the guidance and the illustrative answers.

○ Essay Design in Social Policy

❖ **What are Assessors Seeking?**

While, in a number of senses, the essay design in Social Policy follows the same general rubric as other social sciences, particular regard does have to be paid to the discipline's evaluative base and also the specific context within which the question/problem is to be discussed. Does it, for example, involve a discussion and assessment of: key concepts and theoretical perspectives; historical accounts; contemporary welfare production and governance; particular UK services or international and comparative issues? Having decided on the context and the required evaluative base, the clues to effective essay design emanate from unravelling the question/problem. There are often 'command' or 'direction' words and phrases in the question that dictate what tack you should take; these are terms such as: 'discuss', 'account for', 'compare and contrast', and 'to what extent do you agree with'. Further direction is proffered by the marking criteria, which not only inform you of what the tutors assessing the assignment are seeking but also how to structure your response (see Box 1 for an illustration of frequently used criteria).

Box 1: Criteria Commonly Used in Essay Marking	
Criteria	Comments/feedback
	This section may include a rating system (usually based on a 5-point Likert scale giving you, for example, a grade from 'A' to 'E', or a pointer ranging from 'excellent' to 'needs much more work') as well as criteria-specific and overall comments
Introduction	
Quality of the analysis	
Knowledge and understanding	
Clarity and coherence of the discussion/argument	
Evidence base	
Research base/range and relevance of sources accessed	
Use of sources/data analysis	
Conclusion	
Presentation	
Structure and organization	
Clarity of expression	
Referencing	
Citations in the essay	
Bibliography	

Box 1 suggests that assessors are typically seeking evidence of question-specific knowledge and understanding, underpinned by wider cognizance of the subject, the ability to select relevant studies, utilizing these to respond to the issues posed by the question, and following academic conventions in presentation and referencing. *What they are not looking for is a definitive answer*; the very nature of the discipline and its range of perspectives pre-empts a 'correct' response. The focus of markers is therefore not so much on the viewpoint or stance you adopt as *the way you arrive at it* and, in particular, the evidence base you utilise to support the case you are making, and the quality and clarity of your analysis.

❖ Essay Construction

The starting point for meeting assessment criteria is an initial outline plan in which you identify the key sections of the assignment. Usually, these are

- An Introduction: This sets the pitch and describes the structure of your response and thus, for assessors, is an important gauge of the overall direction and standard of what is to follow. It is normally drafted in the planning stage but rewritten in the light of subsequent reading and analysis. In practical terms, you should:

start by indicating your awareness of the significance of the social policy area/issue on which the question is centred and, where appropriate, describing its controversial nature;

demonstrate your understanding of the question by outlining your interpretation and approach in the light of the requirements set by the different 'command words';

describe the question's scope and indicate whether you are going to deal with all the issues it raises or, because of limitations of space, you will focus on key concerns;

give a brief indication of the sources to be used, their value and possible limitations;

provide a route-map advising the reader of the sequence of your response (phrases such as 'the first section will', 'the next considers', 'the discussion then moves on to', and 'concluding with' can be useful here).

- The Analysis: This is the body of the essay. Here, your plan should show how you will demonstrate in greater depth your cognisance of the issue being addressed and awareness of the linked debates. It should

clarify any matters of definition particularly where concepts are disputed or terms require elaboration;

where appropriate, provide a synopsis of the main features of a particular policy, form of provision, legislative measure, or welfare programme;

give an account and discussion of the main viewpoints and areas of contention, weighing up the key studies and arguments that you have found relevant to the question and building up to your overall response.

- The Evidence Base: The quality of your analysis hinges not only on the points you make but also their viability. You must therefore seek to substantiate your claims through supportive numerical information and/or by referring to recognized sources proffering the same or similar arguments. For your assessors, this is a crucial gauge of your research skills and expertise in marshalling pertinent Social Policy material. It is also indicative of your awareness of the relevant literature and the wider debates in which the question is embedded.

- The Conclusion: There are several ways of rounding off a Social Policy essay; all, however, should involve a reaffirmation of the stance you adopted in the Introduction and which has framed your response. The options include the following:

a straightforward résumé of the main findings and debates;

a commentary starting with a brief summary of the essay followed by observations on the key points, their significance and implications for the area and (for a stronger conclusion) the discipline more generally;

a targeted synopsis that re-emphasizes your angle or approach to the essay topic, highlighting the factors, arguments and reading which support this and the drawbacks of alternative views (this strategy is particularly worth considering when you are asked to 'discuss', 'agree' or counter a particular line of argument);

a conditional ('on the one hand/on the other hand') response in which you recap the key points of contention, emphasizing their varying merits, the difficulties of reaching a firm conclusion and of reconciling the very different value bases and divisions underlying the debate you're discussing;

a contextual response – which follows a similar line to the above, but points more to other factors which might influence the evaluation (such as variations in services or delivery structures); and

a conclusion that, following a synopsis of the main issues posed by the question and your findings, queries and re-situates the question, pointing to gaps in the literature, other angles that might need to be considered, and the need for further research.

- **Presentation & Referencing:** These are important supportive elements of essay submissions. Traditionally, students were expected to write in a neutral, third-person, style. Today, however, many tutors accept assignments written in the first person. You should check on what is expected in your modules. The clarity of your submission is, of course, fundamental, as is the acknowledgement of sources through both citations and referencing. You should ensure that you are using the style of referencing (e.g., the Harvard system) that assessors think appropriate.

○ **Report Design in Social Policy**

While essays are the main form of assessment used in coursework and exams, many Social Policy programmes now also set other types of assignment, particularly report-based tasks. These have become more prevalent in recent years, as they are now considered an important preparation for employment. Reports are a widely used form of descriptive and evaluative writing in contemporary organizations, and constructing and presenting them are seen as key managerial and professional competences. The skills central to social policy essay writing do go some way to meeting what is required by reports, but structuring the latter demands a very different approach.

❖ **What are Assessors Seeking?**

As with essays, the cues to effective report writing rest with the wording of the task you have been set and the marking criteria. The first usually takes the form of a 'brief' in which you are charged with undertaking a particular investigation and reporting your findings or results. This can often involve a simulation exercise in which you are given an organizational, consultancy, or advisory role, and 'commissioned' to report on an aspect of social policy to a governmental or other agency or an inquiry. In such assignments, you are expected to 'role-play' your response and gear it to the specified audience, and this will be built into the marking criteria. These are essentially the same as those for essays and centre on

- the quality of the analysis;
- the underpinning research base.

Demonstrating these, however, hinges on an awareness of the different types of report that may be required, their varying purposes, and consequent constituents.

❖ **Types of Report Assignments in Social Policy**

Reflecting social policy concerns and policy-making processes, you might be asked to submit one or more of several different kinds of report, covering the United Kingdom, one or more of the devolved administrations, or another country:

- A Briefing Paper, in which you are asked to provide

a description of a particular social policy, service, benefit/benefit system, programme or measure;

a synopsis of an implementation process;

a summary listing of the arguments for and against a particular provision or initiative;

an overview of their impact on current and/or emerging trends (sometimes linked with feasibility assessments).

- An Evaluative Paper, requiring you to appraise and often make recommendations regarding

the relative merits of the arguments for and against a particular provision or initiative;

the effectiveness of a particular provision or initiative (across the policy cycle); or

the implications of a planned or new policy.

- A Persuasive Report, Policy Proposal or Position Paper, giving you the opportunity to make an evidence-based case for retaining or reforming an existing policy or developing a new scheme. In making your case, you would be expected to report why the particular course that you are proposing is preferable, its feasibility, and, in the case of reform or new developments, the change process you would adopt and its likely obstacles.

- A Research Proposal or Think Piece, in which you are expected to identify a social policy issue that you feel warrants investigation, explain why you have chosen it, the questions to be addressed, how you intend to explore it, the sources and methods of social research you would employ, and the value of such an enquiry. This is often set as the first stage of a project or dissertation.

❖ Report Construction and Style

Reports are traditionally structured as formal documents and written to facilitate assimilation and discussion by readers and committees often pressed for time. Unlike essays, they are usually written not in continuous prose but in note form and short paragraphs with numbered headings and sub-headings to signal different sections. Frequent use is made of enumerated listings often supported by tables, charts, or other representational graphics. The writing style should be impersonal. The specific purpose of the report and its linked analysis determines the layout, although most contain all or some of the elements itemized in Box 2. You will, however, need to ensure that you are familiar with the format expected of you in your assignments.

Box 2: Main Constituents of a Report	
Structure	Assignment issues Marking/comment sheets may be the same as for an essay or aligned with a report format; if the former, the 'presentation' criteria refer to your use of the report style.
Title page	[Detailing: the full title, for whom it is prepared, by whom, and the date of submission]
Contents page	[Normally only required for lengthy reports]
List of abbreviations	[Where necessary; should you use technical terms, it is also helpful to attach a glossary as an appendix]
Executive summary/abstract	This forms part of the 'Analysis' criteria. In some committee situations, it may be the only section that is read and is a gauge of your skill in capturing the key social policy issues and points. Depending on the brief, it should follow the layout of the report, summarizing the aims, context, approach, key findings, and conclusions/recommendations.
Terms of reference/ introduction	This section should either: specify your commission/task/brief, its social policy significance and context and the scope of your response; or state your aim(s) and explain the policy background and compass of your report.
Proceedings/ methodology	This forms part of the 'evidence base'. Depending on the assignment, it should include: a short account of how you tackled your brief; the main methods used and other relevant sources consulted; your primary research (if any); an overview of the merits and drawbacks of the way you've conducted the study; and their impact on subsequent inferences.
Findings	This is the main 'analysis' section where you present the results of your study along the lines set by the type of report/your remit. It is here that skills in relevant quantitative and qualitative assessments are demonstrated.
Conclusion	As with an essay, this should be geared to your brief or aims. The focus, however, should be on providing a résumé of your main findings/points and the conclusions drawn from them.
Recommendations/proposals	If required by the assignment, this section should, in the light of your findings and conclusions, summarize your advice and concerns. Recommendations should be specific, measurable, and achievable.
Bibliography/ references	As with an essay, substantiating your findings/arguments by reference to your sources/research within the report and detailing them is a key expectation. (In some assignments, you may be asked to provide an annotated bibliography.)
Appendices (numbered)	These enable you to further support your findings and demonstrate your evidence/research base by providing background data and technical or other information too detailed or complex to be incorporated in your report but to which you refer.

❖ Presentations and Reports

Report-based assignments can be set as an individual or group task and employed in conjunction with solo or collective presentations. As in organizational contexts, the report normally serves as the basis for the presentation and is submitted/distributed at the same time or handed in after this session. The presentation operates as a synopsis of what follows in the report; it is a means of conveying key information, arguments, and ideas as clearly and concisely as possible. It also requires the additional skills of delivering them to a live (potentially critical) audience in a specified time frame. The marking criteria for presentations usually focus on

- the structure (from Introduction to Conclusion);
- the incisiveness and succinctness of the analysis;
- its evidence-base (often demonstrated through PowerPoint, slides, graphs, charts, and handouts, as well as citations);
- the techniques used to capture and retain the attention of your audience;
- time-keeping;
- the quality of responses to audience questions.

Ways of developing the skills required for the last three are well covered in general study guides, but from a subject perspective what counts is that you demonstrate your cognizance of the topic and proficiency in Social Policy analysis. This means ensuring that you convey the key components and surrounding debates concisely and locate these within the relevant literature or your own research. It also means setting your presentation in the context of wider developments in the discipline and providing some form of evaluation, however hedged or conditional. As with drafting essays, there is no substitution for practising your presentation to confirm that you can convey your analysis and conclusions in the time allowed.

❖ Problem Avoidance in Coursework and Exams

Although the guidance offered above should provide you with a constructive basis for Social Policy assignments, we thought it might also be useful to list issues to avoid that have been raised by assessors in marking exams, presentations, and written assignments. Of these, the more important are as follows:

- not contexting the assignment within broader policy development;
- not keeping up to date with changes in provision;
- not recognizing the differences in policy and provision within the United Kingdom – that is, those aspects of welfare that are now the responsibility of the national administrations;
- disregarding the indirect or unintended consequences of policies and welfare interventions;
- rhetorical rather than evidence-based responses; and, relatedly,
- shifting from measured discussion into a polemic or diatribe.

These in turn largely stem from three more general dangers:

- relying on a narrow band of similar sources;
- taking your sources at face value and not checking their provenance or stance; and
- confusing or mixing opinion with evidence.

Avoiding these problems involves taking the same (critically) evaluative approach to your sources as to the policy issue(s) you are required to address in your assignments. Your main sources are likely to be text-books, particularly in the early stages of your study. For an up-to-date response,

however, you will also need to seek out relevant journal articles, specialist academic studies, and government publications, as well as items from think-tanks, pressure groups, and newspapers. Selecting and using these, however, especially the latter sources, requires care. There may well be variations in validity, reliability, as well as policy significance and orientation. The Guides on 'Key Sources on UK' and 'EU and International Social Policy' should assist you in the assessment of these items.