A Guide to Managing Assignments in Social Policy

Introduction

As will be clear from reading the *Companion*, social policy is a dynamic, evaluative discipline concerned with:

- examining the ways in which social needs and problems are, and have been, construed;
- considering the varying policies and proposals for addressing them;
- accounting for how and why particular measures are adopted;
- appraising their effectiveness.

In addressing these issues social policy analysts draw on a 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. The discipline, therefore, not only has a strong empirical base but also entails conceptions of what ought to be. Indeed, it is this combination of descriptive and prescriptive characteristics that makes social policy such a stimulating subject to study, and its assignments so thought-provoking.

This section of the website is designed to provide you with general guidance on how to approach the particular issues posed by the most widely used forms of assessment in the discipline: essays (including those written under examination conditions) and reports (including linked presentations). It also provides you with suggestions about how you might enhance your proficiency in responding to the types of questions you are likely to encounter and build up the knowledge, understanding and skills expected of social policy graduates/those studying it as part of a wider programme. These are outlined in the QAA (2016) *Subject Benchmark Statement* for social policy and, as we highlight later, you will find it worthwhile familiarising yourself with them.

Although not the focus here these suggestions should also help you with case study analyses, projects and undergraduate dissertations (detailed advice on the latter is provided at [www.socscidiss.bham.ac.uk](http://www.socscidiss.bham.ac.uk) among other sources). While geared to the needs of undergraduates, they should prove useful at postgraduate level too, particularly if you have not previously studied the discipline.

To further assist you the accompanying *Illustrations of Essay and Report Writing* provides suggestions on how to use the general guidance in crafting answers on particular essay and report topics in the main fields of the discipline. Here we have chosen chapter review and assignment questions from the *Companion*, enabling you to link your reading with the guidance and the illustrative answers and, of course, your tutors' advice.

Essay Design in Social Policy

What are Assessors Seeking?

While, in a number of senses, essay design in social policy follows the same general rubric as other social sciences, particular regard needs to be paid both to the discipline’s evaluative base and the UK or wider policy context within which the question/problem is to be discussed. In the case of the UK does it, for example, involve a discussion and assessment of: key concepts and theoretical perspectives; historical accounts; current challenges; and the dynamics of social change and
policymaking; the impact of devolution; patterns of welfare production, provision, organisation and governance; particular welfare domains across the country or within its constituent nations; experiencing welfare, social differences and inequalities; or research issues? Or are you being asked to address international and comparative issues?

Once you have determined the context and the required evaluative base, the cues to effective essay design lie in deconstructing the question/problem. There are often ‘command’ or ‘direction’ words and phrases in the question that dictate what tack you are expected to take; these are terms such as: ‘discuss’, ‘account for’, ‘compare and contrast’, what are the main criticisms of...’, ‘what are the implications of...’, ‘to what extent...’ or ‘assess the impact of...’.

Further cues are 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).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Box 1: Criteria Commonly Used in Essay Marking</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Criteria</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>This section may include a rating system (usually based on a 5-point 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</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Introduction</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Knowledge and understanding</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Clarity and coherence of the discussion/argument</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Evidence base</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research base/range and relevance of sources accessed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of sources/data analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conclusion</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Presentation</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure and organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarity of expression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Referencing</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citations in the essay</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
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</table>

As Box 1 indicates assessors are typically seeking evidence of: question-specific knowledge and understanding, underpinned by wider cognisance of the subject area; the ability to select relevant...
studies, using these to respond to the issues posed by the question; and the observation of 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, your knowledge of alternative approaches, 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, highlight 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, focus on what you consider to be the 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, you should show how you will demonstrate your understanding of the issue being addressed and awareness of the relevant debates in greater depth. 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 their viability. You should therefore seek to substantiate your claims by referring to recognised
sources upholding the same or similar arguments and/or supportive numerical information. 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 and policy field in which the question is embedded.

• The Conclusion: There are several possible ways of rounding off a social policy essay; all though 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-emphasises 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 response in which you recap the key points of contention, emphasising 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 welfare services or delivery structures);

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

• Presentation and 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 ensuring it is grammatically sound and acknowledging your sources through both citations in the essay and referencing. In doing so you should ensure you adhere to the style of referencing for print and electronic sources recommended by your assessors (e.g., the Harvard system for the former). It is also crucial to keep within the specified word length – this signals how tight or detailed your response to a particular policy issue is expected to be and is a further way of enabling you to demonstrate your skills in policy analysis.

- 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 considered an important preparation for employment. Reports are a widely used form of descriptive and evaluative writing in contemporary organisations, and constructing and presenting them in a way attuned to the needs of particular
audiences are seen as key managerial and professional competences. The skills central to social policy essay writing and its focus on real-world issues go some way to meeting what is required by reports, but structuring those demands a different approach.

what are assessors seeking?

As with essays, the cues to effective report writing lie in the wording of the task you have been set and the marking criteria. The former 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 organisational, consultancy or advisory role, and ‘commissioned’ to report on a specific issue or 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 again 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, audiences and consequent constituents.

types of report assignments in social policy

Reflecting social policy concerns and policymaking processes, you might be asked to submit one or more of several different kinds of report, covering the UK, one of the devolved administrations, another country or several jurisdictions. Typically these may be:

- A background briefing paper, in which you are asked to provide either or a combination of:

  a description of a particular social policy debate, 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 current or emerging trends that might affect a particular policy issue/measure or future social provision.

- An evaluative briefing paper requiring you to distil, appraise and often make recommendations regarding the:

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

  effectiveness of a particular provision or initiative across the policy cycle (see Chapter 42 of the Companion);
implications/likely impact of a planned or new policy (which could include some reference to equality impact assessments (see Help Sheets 1 and 2).

• A persuasive report, policy proposal/memo 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 to other options, its viability and, in the case of reform or new measures, the change process you would adopt, the key groups (or ‘stakeholders’) that might be affected, likely obstacles and implementation issues (the last could also take the form of a feasibility assessment).

• 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 policy 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, discussion and decision-making by readers and committees often pressed for time. Unlike essays, they are typically written in note form not continuous prose and in short paragraphs with numbered headings and subheadings to signal different sections. They are often supported by tables, charts, or other representational graphics and non-textual inputs. The writing style should be impersonal and you should, as with essays, keep to the stipulated length.

The specific purpose of the report and its linked analysis determines the layout, although most contain all or some of the elements itemised in Box 2. You will, however, need to ensure that you are familiar with the format expected by your tutors.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Box 2: Main Constituents of a Report</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Structure</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Assignment issues</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marking/comment sheets may be the same as for an essay or aligned with a report format; if the former, the ‘presentation’ criteria will refer to your use of the report style.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Title page</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Detailing: the full title, for whom it is prepared, by whom, and the date of submission]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Contents page</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Normally only required for lengthy reports]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>List of abbreviations</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Where necessary/ should you use technical terms]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Executive summary/Abstract</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This forms part of the ‘Analysis’ criteria.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In some committee/decision-making 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.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depending on the brief, it should follow the layout of the report, summarising the aims, context, approach, key findings and conclusions/recommendations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Terms of reference/Introduction</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This section should either:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specify your commission/task/brief/the issue to be addressed and why, its social policy significance and context and the scope of your response; or</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State your aim(s) and explain the policy background and compass of your report.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Proceedings/Methodology</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This often forms part of the ‘evidence base’ criteria.</td>
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<tr>
<td>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.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Findings</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This is the main ‘analysis’ section.</td>
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<tr>
<td>It is here that you present the results of your study along the lines set by the type of report/your remit and also demonstrate your skills in building your evidence base and weighing up relevant qualitative and quantitative sources and social policies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If your brief requires you to make the case for a particular social policy the most effective way of doing so might be to start with the most crucial points rather than building up to them as in an essay (i.e. adopting what is termed an ‘inverted pyramid’ approach).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conclusion</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>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.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Recommendations/Proposal</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If required by the assignment, this section should, in the light of</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Summarise your findings and conclusions. 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. In others, particularly policy memos, you may be expected to reference your sources in the text.)

**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.

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**Presentations and Reports**

Report-based assignments may be set as a group as well as an individual task and employed in conjunction with solo or collective presentations. As in organisational contexts, the report normally serves as the basis for the presentation and is submitted/distributed at the same time or handed in subsequently.

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. Hence 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 slides, graphs, charts and handouts, as well as citations);
- the techniques used to capture and retain your audience’s attention;
- time-keeping;
- the quality of responses to questions from the audience.

Ways of developing the skills required for the last three are well covered in general study guides, as is the value of practising your presentation to ensure you can convey your analysis and conclusions in the time allowed.

But from a subject perspective what counts is that you demonstrate your understanding of the topic and proficiency in social policy analysis. This means ensuring you convey the key components and surrounding debates concisely and locating 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, and, if your brief demands it, signalling your view/rationale for possible ways forward.

**Problem Avoidance in Social Policy 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 spotlight issues to avoid that have been raised...
by assessors in marking exams, presentations and written assignments. Of these, the most frequently cited are:

- not contexting the assignment within broader social policy developments;
- not keeping up to date with changes in provision;
- not recognising the differences in policy and provision within the UK – that is, those aspects of welfare that are the responsibility of the devolved national administrations;
- disregarding the indirect or unintended consequences of policies and welfare interventions;
- relying on sweeping generalisations and description rather than analysis;
- proffering rhetorical rather than evidence-based responses;
- shifting from a measured discussion of a social policy issue into a polemic or diatribe.

These in turn largely stem from three or more general dangers:

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

Avoiding these problems involves taking the same (critically) evaluative approach to your sources as to the social policy issue(s) you are required to address in your assignments. Your main sources are likely to be textbooks, 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 thinktanks, pressure groups and newspapers. Selecting and using these though, 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 Social Policy’ and ‘EU and International Social Policy’ should assist you in the assessment of these items.

Enhancing Your Skills in Social Policy Analysis: Book/Chapter/Article Reviews, Blogs and Newspaper Articles

You can further safeguard yourself and enhance your skills in social policy analysis by drafting book/article reviews, blogs or feature commentaries for a newspaper as a way of figuring out a response to an assignment or following up a lecture/seminar/reading you found particularly interesting. These all require an evaluative stance, a focus on the core issue(s) and debate(s), targeted analysis and concise writing. For these reasons you may be set one/more of these as an assignment or be expected to contribute to a group blog or discussion board. But whether this is the case or not, considering these differing tasks could enable you to get to grips with some of the main building blocks of social policy: assessing a particular study/set of studies or perspective, and making a case for a particular viewpoint or intervention. It could also help you determine how, as in as in a report or presentation, you might gear a social policy analysis to an audience (be it an academic, policy-involved or more general readership).

Draft Book Reviews

Book reviews are intended to give readers an insight into the roots and main features of a publication and a signal as to whether it is worth reading. As a study/assignment aid, its brevity and typical five-part structure allows you to think through how you might:
• construct a one/two sentence introduction, capturing the readers’ attention and indicating your view of the social policy significance of a particular text/article;

• summarise its essence and methodological base by outlining what you regard as the author’s main aim(s)/social policy concerns and theoretical framework/approach, the scope of the study, its key concepts/tenets/findings/themes and central argument(s)/thesis;

• place it in the context of a particular area or debate in social policy, pointing to how it relates to current developments in the discipline, challenges other work/takes these further, raises new questions or revisits certain concerns or issues;

• evaluate it in a balanced way and the criteria/yardsticks you could use. This entails gauging both the extent to which the author met her/his aims and what, from a social policy perspective, you see as the study’s main merits and limitations. Here you will only have space to make a few key points, but might want to highlight the issues raised, the adequacy of the approach taken, the evidence base and its use, the coverage, possible oversights or loose ends and the soundness/persuasiveness of the arguments, possibly with reference to other studies in the area. You may also want to comment on its ‘readability’ (if you are set a book review as an assignment this is the part assessors will be most interested in);

• round-off/conclude with your view of the study’s value to yourself and others interested in social policy in terms of its importance/distinctiveness, contribution to understanding a particular issue, area or the discipline overall and suitability for the intended readership.

Your draft should of course start with the full bibliographic details of the study and if you cite any other studies these should be fully referenced at the end in accordance with the style expected by your tutors. The best tactic for choosing a text or article to review would be to focus on one(s) from a module reading list that you are required/intend to explore for an essay or report assignment. In drafting it you could include an explanation of why you selected it and note the points you may want to draw on for an assignment. Looking at published book reviews will help you sketch yours. As a further study aid, it will also provide you with a way of keeping up with new developments in social policy and a ‘short cut’ to key sources in preparing assignments (though their use should be fully acknowledged and referenced).

 Draft Blogs and Newspaper Feature Articles

There are of course many different types of blog, but that most widely deployed by social policy bloggers is issue-based and may involve spotlighting the writer’s recent research findings (either on a personal blog or an organisational site). Drafting possible entries of your own offers you another way of developing your understanding of social policy research and analysis, as does devising feature articles or opinion pieces for a newspaper. Either can give you a route into the debates at the heart of what is a dualistic discipline concerned both with delineating welfare arrangements and scrutinising them with a view to securing individual and social well-being and social justice. As study/assignment aids, crafting them means you can:

• engage directly with debates about the future of social policy arrangements;

• focus on an a social issue or problem that concerns you, a new Government measure or proposal (or one advanced by a pressure group or in a research report) that you feel strongly about;

• point to its importance and the need for action (for those affected and the wider society/policy);

• take a particular line on the issue/policy, voicing your view on the course to be taken;

• delimit and prioritise your key points/the core arguments supporting your case (some pieces may be more effective if you open with the most rather than the less important angles);
• encapsulate these succinctly and in a straightforward manner (a basic prerequisite given the way both are usually read);
• consider supporting your case with non-text material and/or, in the case of blog posts, links to other sites.

Whether you opt for an article or blog as a strategy to help you manage social policy assignments, try to bear in mind both your likely readership and the general features of each medium. In the case of the former, these will vary with the type of paper and its journalistic style and tone; in the latter they include an informal mode of writing, the possible use of a comment feature and, of course, regular updating. Drafting both, however, will also give you the chance to contemplate possible attention-grabbing headers and concluding punch lines (and help with presentation-based assignments).

Should your assessments include a book review, blog or newspaper article, the marking criteria for each are usually the same as those for social policy essays, adapted to the requisite format and word length. If you opt to draft your own as a study aid it is again crucial to try and bear these in mind or, as a further strategy to help you respond effectively to assignments in Social Policy, you could try adjusting the general criteria yourself.

Whatever the task set or you set yourself, thinking about these and the suggestions here offer you a route to successfully tackling assignments in the discipline. In taking them up, however, you should also take account of the ‘Learning Outcomes’ specified for each of your modules and your overall programme of study and, as we indicated at the outset, the QAA (2016) Subject Benchmark Statement for Social Policy (which you can access at www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/the-quality-code/subject-benchmark-statements/honours-degree-subjects).