

10 Focuses for A First in Social Work

*10 keys to go from failure to
first*

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Introduction

I remember the time I got back my first assignment from university. I was so excited.

How high would I get?

Then I saw the mark.

35.

Was it out of 50? No, it wasn't. It was out of a 100. That's when I realised that I had failed.

Sitting at the edge of the pool, I felt like crying. I couldn't believe it. I had come all the way from Singapore to England... to fail?

That's when I realised I truly needed to bring up my game. If I was not going to be serious, the 35 would not be an isolated event, but a continual series.

This short book covers the series of steps I took to move from failure to first. I hope it helps you on your own journey in social work too.

In this short book, the first 3 focuses cover what happens before your coursework has been assigned. It covers the basics of class-going, reading, and creating the right study environment. Focuses 4 to 7 cover the writing process, from understanding the essay-writing process, to planning deadlines, to the actual writing itself. Focuses 8 and 9 share about how you can polish up the essay before submitting, before 10 suggests how you might use the returned coursework as a springboard to your next A.

Note: Please bear in mind, this bears relation to academic papers we must write as part of the social work course and not the performance on placement.

Focus 1: Understand what tutors want

If you don't know what your tutors want, they will never give you what you want – a high grade. Therefore, it's important that you and I turn up for our classes. I know, I know, it's a travesty when universities force you to turn up for class at 9am.

But there's no excuse if a first is what you want. Appearing at lectures is essential to see what tutors are focusing on when they teach you something. It also helps to see what tutors know, and more importantly, *do not* know, when they teach.

Why do I say that? When you write an essay, the thing that differentiates an average essay from an A+ essay is the number of unique insights you give. Rehashing what your tutors have said is simply not going to get you a high grade. Therefore, when you appear at their lectures, see what they have focused on, you can start giving your own insightful take on what they have said.

To put it more simply,

$$\textit{Basic arguments} + \textit{Unique Insights} = \textit{Mark attained}$$

Secondly, when you turn up for your lectures and seminars, you build a treasure trove of insights that other students give when they are in class. It's no use to appear at the last lecture, hoping that the tutor is going to give you all the essential tips for scoring an A+. It doesn't work that way.

Consistency is key.

Focus 2: Read right

When I see students lug their 6 pack Red-Bulls to the library, bring the blanket, and prepare for an overnight stay at the library, I empathise with them.

Why? Because just 5 years ago, whilst I was studying for my A Levels, I was like them. I thought that doing well meant that you had to sacrifice on your sleep, spend long hours at the library, and down litres of caffeine.

When my A-Level results were released, I was deeply disappointed. All those hours of suffering at the hands of caffeine, worrying about work...all that hadn't worked? What had I done wrongly? Many things. But for one, I realised I had not focused on consistent work. Instead, I had focused on bursts. I had failed to realise that *the assessment started the day lessons started*. This was a crucial insight. This meant that lessons were no longer a joke, a chance to play with my friends, or to laugh at the homework I hadn't completed. It was when the assessment *started*.

Putting in effort during classes is vital for reducing the amount of work you do for your final assessment. But it does not mean doing everything that the tutor asks you to do. Nor does it mean reading everything the tutor tells you to read.

When I was at university, everyone used to joke about how they never had to do readings, and yet still managed to survive. I know readings are long and boring. But they are important to build your understanding of the topic. In social work, this is vital. For example, understanding the method of practice is important to help you choose the right method to write about. One that engages you enough to spend weeks researching, writing and editing. You cannot write about something you are not interested in.

There's an important caveat though – you don't have to read everything. With readings being hundreds of pages, you would not have enough time physically to read all.

To help you determine what to read, Newport developed a useful heuristic.

Readings that make an argument > Readings that describe an event or person > Readings that provide context (speech transcripts or press clippings)

For example, a reading that explains why we use the relationship-based approach is more important than one describing Gillian Ruch, who brought it into prominence, which is more important than an article describing BASW's 2019 theme of relationship-based practice.

This is not an excuse to skip readings, but to read the ones that truly matter.

Focus 3: Create the right study environment

When the deadline is close, we often bring along packs of Red-Bull to the library, hoping that the wings Red-Bull gives is going to help us to sail through this assignment.

It works when you want to turn in a mediocre assignment, but for a first, it doesn't work very well. That's because your brain is on a sugary high, and is focused on getting the job done. Rather than trying to draw unique insights from the readings, you are focused on getting the essay out of the door.

To create the right study environment where this cramming does not need to happen, there are 3 essential tips that helped me.

Firstly, study alone. When you are studying in a group, the tendency is for you to chat from time to time, go out for breaks, laugh together, and end up with little work done. But I'm a social person! Sure, that's important. But you can always be sociable *after* the work is done. This way, you focus entirely on the work that is in front of you, rather than the friend that is beside you. You face little distractions that will take you away from developing a great essay.

Secondly, study in a quiet area. This is as clear as it gets. studying whilst lying on the bed, with Netflix in front of you, and trying to type out a great essay is not a great idea. Cal Newport, founder of the famous studyhacks.com website, calls it 'pseudo-working'. Sure, you can complain about the hours you spent on your essay, but how much of it was quality time, instead of quantity time? When you want to write your essay, take yourself to a library with few distractions around you, and focus.

Lastly, study smart. We are human. Expecting yourself to focus for 2 consecutive hours is impossible. Rather, it becomes more productive when you focus for 25 minutes, rest for 5 minutes, focus again for 25 minutes, before resting again for 10 minutes. Called the Pomodoro technique, this breaks work down into more manageable chunks rather than an impossible mountain.

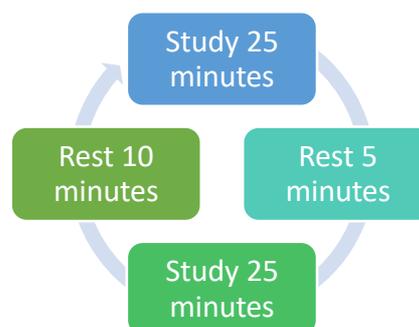


Figure 1 The Pomodoro technique

Focus 4: Understand the writing process

Rather than seeing an essay as a whole process of writing, breaking it down into its sequential parts will make the job much more organised, and much, much, more effective.

In the first step of research, determine the necessary sources for your arguments. Find at least 2 references for each argument before moving on. Reference those arguments correctly, indicating the page number. This makes it easy to put everything together later.

Then, we move onto the writing section. In this section, before you even start writing, construct a proper topic level outline for your essay.

Discuss this outline with your tutor, and get their feedback. Most tutors can't give direct feedback on written drafts, but they can give feedback on written outlines. This is important to ensure that your essay is moving on the right track and not going into potential dead-ends. This process of consulting your tutor is explained in the next section.

Then, start writing!

This is by far the most taxing part. Pace yourself properly and give yourself enough time to complete this section.

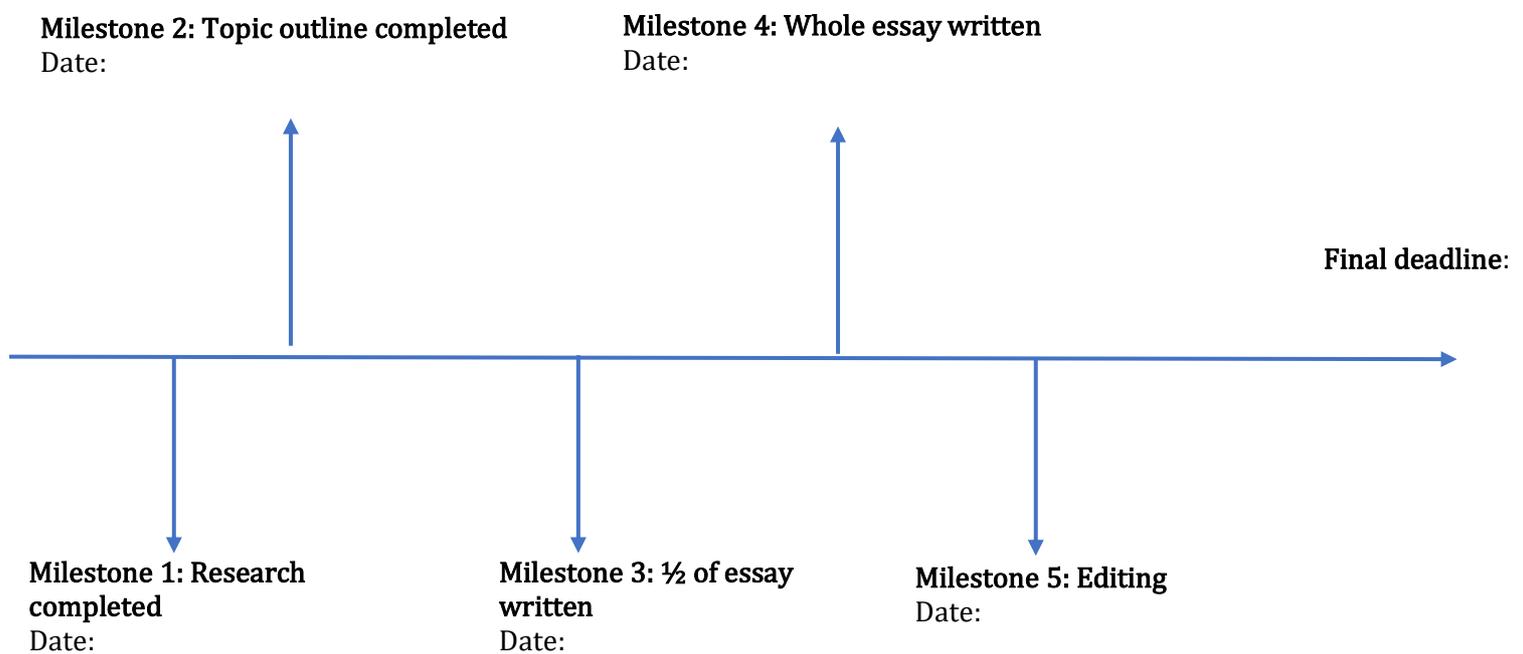


Focus 5: Plan deadlines

After you get your assignment, the next step is to start planning!

It doesn't matter where you are going if you don't have a plan. If you don't care about what grade you get, don't bother planning! It will be a waste of your time.

But if you do, then plan. The point of planning is that it breaks up what you are doing so that you can know what exactly needs to be done to get to the end. Here, I have developed a simple worksheet for you to keep track of your writing. Write down the dates, and keep yourself accountable to them by showing them to a friend.



Focus 6: Consult your tribe

Whatever you are writing, I can guarantee that you will not do well if you keep your outline to yourself. Why am I so sure? As humans, we are subject to the confirmation bias. Bestselling author Rolf Dobelli (2013:23) describes it as the ‘mother of all misconceptions’, because it is the ‘tendency to interpret new information so that it becomes compatible with our existing theories, beliefs and convictions’.

This means that however bad the outline you plan is, it will look brilliant to you. Why? Because you are the one who planned it.

That’s why it’s important to give someone you trust, such as your tutor, another colleague, or even your placement supervisor, a quick read through to ensure that you are on the right track.

Tell them to be honest with you about the theories you are using, the arguments you are going to make, and if they have any suggestions for you. This way, you ensure that you are on the right track to success before spending too much time on it.

Even though it might look troublesome and embarrassing, consulting others is very important. During my last practice analysis, my mark dropped from a previous high of 85 to 65, simply because I was too arrogant to ask. Just because my first practice analysis had been an all-time high of 85, I thought this meant that I no longer needed any consultation.

Well, now I know.

It’s a little too late now, though.

But I hope that sharing this with you shows you the importance of sharing your outline with someone else, and having the humility to take their feedback into consideration when you craft your eventual essay.

Focus 7: Argue well

This is a distillation of the most useful tips I learnt from 24 years of arguing in school, as a debater, as a writer, and as a student. It is meant as a list of guidelines you should use as you write your essay.

Firstly, when writing your essay, you need to offer a roadmap to the marker. Don't let them get lost. Where are you taking them on the journey through your essay? For me, it has been useful to write the introduction *last*, after I've been clear about the main arguments and conclusion I will make.

Secondly, always be clear about what your argument is. Don't assume that your marker is going to understand it without you stating it explicitly to them. I would suggest you state it within the first two sentences of your paragraph. Use clear markers such as, 'I would argue that...', 'This essay believes that...'.

Thirdly, connect the dots between each paragraph and your question. Remember to link your argument to the question with concluding words such as *therefore, thus, in summary*, to illustrate to your marker that you are drawing a link between what you have said to what the question has asked.

Fourthly, let your voice shine through. During my last assignment, I made the mistake of referencing every other sentence I wrote. An example is shown below.

The social pedagogy approach guided how I related to A. The 3 key concepts involve 'haltung, head-heart-hands, and the common third' (Ruch et al. 2017:1016). 'Haltung' brings one's whole self - 'rational, emotional and practical' to develop sincere relationships (Ruch et al. 2017:1016). With A, I brought the 'haltung' of authenticity. Authenticity is not 'hustling for acceptance and changing who we are to fit in' (Brown 2018:25). It was embracing myself, and using my 'self' to influence A.

My marker commented that it felt quite turgid and stilted. She meant that it had felt unnatural. She had felt that whilst I had referenced well, my own voice had not come through. Therefore, whilst evidencing is good, I would argue that your own perspectives must first be explained before you start throwing in references. This brings me to my next point on referencing.

The best students understand how to question the evidence that is given to them, rather than copying the references wholly from the source. Thus, rather than using references in a descriptive manner, start using it in an analytical manner.

Descriptive

I used the relationship-based approach (Ruch et al. 2017) to work with X.

Analytical

Ruch (et al. 2017) recommends bringing the authentic self into work with clients.

However, with X, I found that this was not necessarily helpful as he tended to overstep boundaries, taking advantage of my kindness.

I hope these 5 tips help you to write better essays.

Focus 8: Work consistently

I like to think of essay-writing as something similar to chopping a tree. You can chop a tree in a day, but it's difficult. Rather, taking small chops consistently ensures that you can give it a good 'THWACK!' each day, and come out alive.

I am aware that you might be reading this as another act of procrastination, telling yourself that you are going to go back to that essay after reading yet another article on how to write a good essay. Well, it's not going to work that way.

Working consistently helps. Period. If you like pulling all-nighters, rushing through your essay on the deadline, I cannot stop you. But I'm here to tell you that there is a better way.

There is!

To deal with procrastination, your mind needs to be assured that it is going to be able to rest. It hates the fact that you might put it through another all-nighter again, and it starts likening your early attempts to work to an all-nighter. Thus, to start the ball rolling, building momentum, start with 5 minutes.

5 minutes is all it takes. If you can't do 25 minutes of reading, just tell yourself, 'I will do 5 minutes of studying today.' Time yourself with a stopwatch. The probability is, after 5 minutes, your mind will start gathering momentum and will continue to work. Use the Pomodoro technique described above to have regular work-rest cycles.

Here is another important tip. When writing your essay, go offline. As we have discussed in *Focus 3 – Understand the writing process*, essay-writing is split into research, writing and editing. When you are researching, it's fine to be online. But when you are writing, go offline. This removes unnecessary distractions like email, social media, and notifications. When you go offline, you find it much easier to go into the flow, rather than trying desperately to switch between your browser, your word processor, and your phone. It makes you less likely to procrastinate, because there is nothing to procrastinate on.

Rather than telling yourself that you are going to finish 3000 words on the final day, why not set yourself a more manageable goal of 300 words over the next 10 days? Consistency, not craziness is key to your excellence.

Focus 9: Review your paper

Someone once said, 'it's not about the plan, but about the planning.' Similarly, in essay-writing, it's not about the final essay, but it's about the process of constantly reviewing what you have written. We have researched. We have written.

Finally, we come to the editing portion. In his book 'How to be a Straight-A Student', which I thoroughly recommend for every student, Cal Newport suggests three different edits.

1. The Argument Adjustment Pass
 - a. Read the paper carefully on the computer, ensuring clarity of argument.
 - b. Fix obvious flaws.
 - c. Rewrite when flow needs improving.
2. The Out Loud Pass
 - a. Print out your essay and read it out loud.
 - b. Highlight or mark any passages that seem unclear and edit it.
3. The Sanity Pass
 - a. Read over for the final time to fix any remaining flaws.

I don't know about your tutors, but my tutors were very strict on things like referencing, naming of clients, and naming of organizations. Editing ensures that these small chinks are ironed out, creating a beautifully crafted paper, ready for a first!

Focus 10: Ask for feedback

No matter how well or how badly you do, it's vital to learn from it. Don't simply let it go.

I would say that this is the most important factor in getting a first at social work.

Reading the comments about your essay, and the markings on the essay are not particularly helpful in and of themselves. It's only when you begin to have a conversation about them that it starts becoming helpful.

When you know the points you did well at, you can focus on including more of them in your next essay, so that you can get an even higher grade.

When you know the points you could even improve on, eliminating those pain points ensures that you make the marking process an easy one for your marker.

Arrange a call with your marker to review what you had done well or not so well over the course of your essay.

Many students forget that social work is a social science subject. This means that many of your assignments will be based on your writing capability, rather than your ability to write the *CORRECT* answer. There is *no* correct answer in something subjective like social work. Instead, markers grade you on how well you argue your point, the unique insights you give, and the evidence you have combed through to get to your point.

Therefore, getting your tutor's feedback on your writing ability, and the points you could improve on is helpful for your future essays. Look at it this way. your tutors do this for a living. That means they have seen hundreds, if not thousands of essays. They have also probably written hundreds of essays themselves to get to where they are.

They know what qualifies as good writing. Teasing from them the principles of arguing was perhaps the most important lesson of my university experience.

Summary

1. Understand what tutors want.
 - a. Appear at lectures and seminars.
 - b. Ask questions.
 - c. Store insights from classmates and tutors.
2. Read right.

*Readings that make an argument > Readings that describe an event or person
> Readings that provide context (speech transcripts or press clippings)*
3. Create the right environment.
 - a. Study alone.
 - b. Study in a quiet environment.
 - c. Study smart.
4. Understand the writing process.
 - a. Research
 - b. Writing
 - c. Editing
5. Plan deadlines
 - a. Have clear dates for significant milestones.
6. Consult your tribe
 - a. We are guilty of the confirmation bias.
 - b. Ask for feedback
7. Argue well.
 - a. Offer a roadmap to the reader.
 - b. Be clear about what your argument is.
 - c. Link your paragraph to your question.
 - d. Let your voice shine through.
 - e. Analyse the evidence.
8. Work consistency.
 - a. 300 words everyday is better than 3000 words on the last day.
9. Review your paper.
 - a. Argument adjustment pass
 - b. Out loud pass
 - c. Sanity pass
10. Ask for feedback.

- a. Ask your tutors: What have I done well? What can I do better?

I hope you enjoyed this short book that distils the essence of how I turned from failure to first in social work. If you have any feedback, please feel free to drop me an email at leshengjl@gmail.com.

Cheers to your next A,

John

Useful resources

These are a list of resources that transformed my study habits. If you have the chance, read them, and you will see why.

Dobelli, R. (2013) *The Art of Thinking Clearly*. London: Sceptre Books

Newport, C. (2007) *How to be a Straight-A student*.

Wong, D. (2012) *The Happy Student*. Singapore: Write Editions.