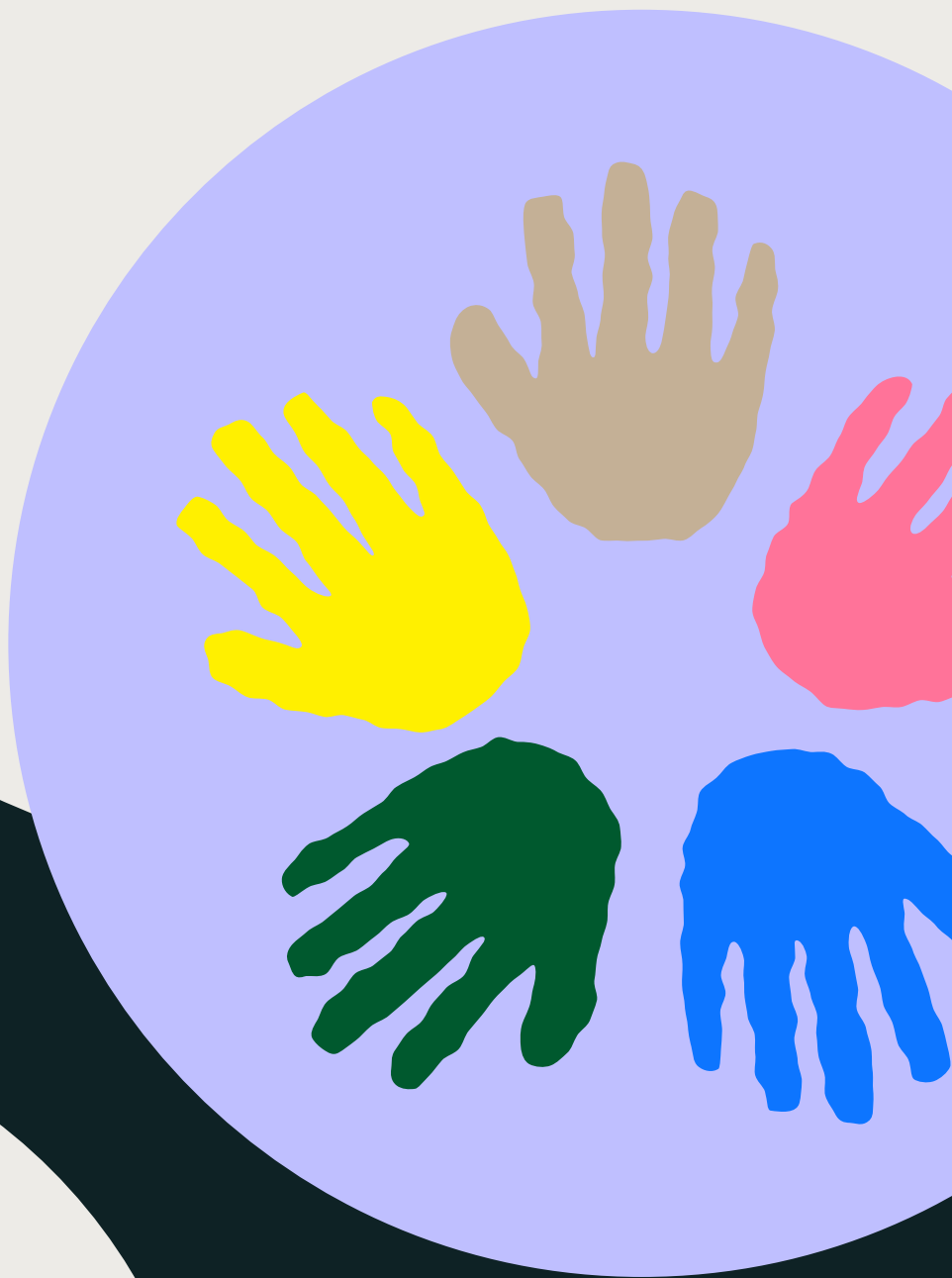


# Autism Toolkit



**Student Support  
Study Skills**

# Welcome to the toolkit!



- The way we talk and think about autism is continuing to change.
- We welcome feedback to keep developing this resource.

- We're Sara Erskine ([study.skills@norwichuni.ac.uk](mailto:study.skills@norwichuni.ac.uk)) and Helen Treutler ([h.treutler@norwichuni.ac.uk](mailto:h.treutler@norwichuni.ac.uk)) from Norwich University of the Art's Student Support.
- We developed the toolkit to cover common areas you may encounter at university.
- You don't need to read it from start to finish. Use the contents page to jump to the sections that interest you most. Each heading is linked to the page, so just click to navigate.
- You'll find useful resources at the end of the toolkit.

# Contents

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# Starting the conversation



## What is autism?



- Autism relates to how information from communication, social cues and interactions is processed and understood.
- It can also alter how individuals perceive their environment (Beardon, 2017, p. 33).
- There's no such thing as a 'typical' experience.
- Autism can also co-occur with other learning differences such as ADHD and dyspraxia.

**Estimated 1 in 100**  
in the UK  
are autistic  
(NAS, 2024)



I like to tell people in my own way—I don't want headlines. It's how I am and that's how you are. (Michael, quoted in Cohen, 2005)



## What's the correct language?

- There's lots of terms that relate to autism.
- Some people may not want to be labelled.
- Always check with the individual.

- **Person first language (PFL)** = person with autism.
- **Identify first language (IFL)** = autistic person.

**'Autistic spectrum' OR 'on the spectrum'**: refers to the variations within autism. Avoid thinking of this as representing high or low functioning.

**'ASD/ASC = autistic spectrum disorder/condition'**  
**ASD** is becoming less used as it aligns with a medical model of disability, focusing deficits.

# Autism Constellation



- Imagine autism as a 3D constellation with different characteristics.
- Everyone's experiences will be unique, depending on their gender, race or background. The NAS website contains individualised guidance at the bottom of this page: [www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/what-is-autism](http://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/what-is-autism)

“ Each of us is a star, eager to be discovered and named in the atmosphere (Murray, *Inside Our Autistic Minds*, 2021) ”

## Task



Enter your traits (strengths/challenges) into the constellation diagram below.



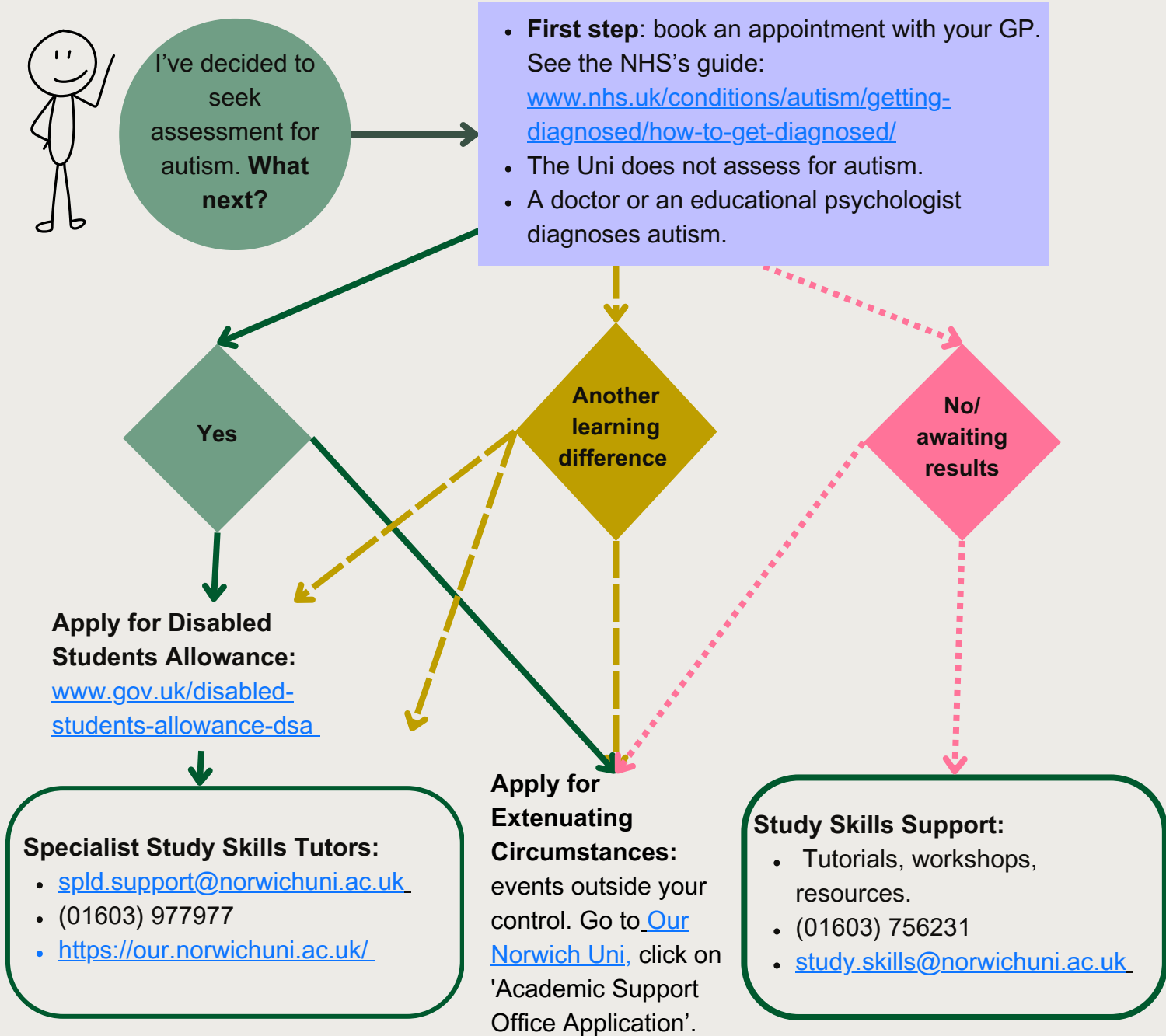
### Disclosure:

- It's your choice as to whether you disclose your autism.
- Disclosure means telling others (officially or unofficially) about your disability.
- Use Our Norwich Uni to begin this process: <https://our.norwichuni.ac.uk>

# Assessment



- Assessment or diagnosis can be helpful in terms of securing specialist support and creating a plan of reasonable adjustments.
- Note: 'some people don't like the term diagnosis and prefer identifying or even better self-identifying' (Beardon, 2023, p.61).
- Follow the flowchart below to see the different avenues of support. You can also contact [disability@norwichuni.ac.uk](mailto:disability@norwichuni.ac.uk) for more information.



Helen



Michael



Jo



Sara

# Developing confidence



## Why is it important?

- Developing confidence can help you to communicate with others and become an independent learner.
- Sometimes people use the words 'self assurance' or 'self belief'.
- You'll find one definition of confidence in the quotation marks below.

“ Confidence is ‘feeling sure about your abilities, qualities and ideas.’ (Collins Dictionary, 2024)



## Task



**What does confidence mean to you?**  
Reflect on the 5 questions below, using the white input boxes.

What does the word confidence mean to you?

Has your confidence changed over time (e.g. since school/college)?

Are you more confident in certain places or situations?

Are you more confident in groups or with certain numbers of people?

Think about when something has gone well. Why did it work well?

# Communicating with others



## Your communication identity:

- **Masking** = when we alter our behaviour to fit into a situation. However, masking can lead to exhaustion, lack of understanding yourself, and stress (Beardon, 2017, p. 56).
- Therefore, it's important to understand how you prefer to communicate.
- For instance, you might like time to process verbal information, clear language and tasks that are chunked into steps (Duffus, 2022, p. 51).



## Task



**Make a list of your preferences in the box beside.**



**What preferences do you have for communication?**

## Working in groups:

- When working in groups, it's useful to establish a 'contract' of how you'll interact.
- **Consider goals and rules:** Who will be doing what?
- **Make a plan:** How will you plan the project from start to finish? How will you work individually/together?
- **Communicate:** How often will you meet? How will you communicate outside of meetings? What will you do if something isn't working? (Hughes, 2020)

**Example phrases:** see the speech bubbles to the right for tips on how to respond in different instances.

**Make suggestions:**  
'There's some useful information in ...'; why don't we ...'

**Admit mistakes:** 'Sorry, I didn't realise that ...'

**Disagree:** 'What makes you think that?' 'Have you thought about ...?'

(Cottrell, 2019, p. 236)



# Managing Environment



**Autism + environment = outcome (Beardon, 2023).**

- The settings where we live, study and socialise, can alter how we feel and act.
- Our senses affect how we process information and may be under or over sensitive.
- Find out more on the National Autistic website: <https://tinyurl.com/yd3c3k2w>
- Universities are required by the Equality Act (2010) to make reasonable adjustments.
- Find guidance on how to outline your needs: <https://tinyurl.com/2s7m2vma>

## Task



Use the table below to enter your likes and dislikes in relation to the senses.

Sensory factor	What I like 	What I don't like 
Sounds		
Sights (lighting, colour, pattern)		
Touch/personal space		
Smells		
Taste		

### Navigating your environment:

- Make changes based on your preferences above e.g. use noise cancelling headsets (sound), control light levels (sight) through tinted glasses or curtains/blinds.
- Know where you can ask for support.
- **Library Help Desk:** Duke Street (1st floor), (01603) 751469, [library@norwichuni.ac.uk](mailto:library@norwichuni.ac.uk)
- **Design Studio** (IT, printing): Guntons (1st floor), [helpdesk@norwichuni.ac.uk](mailto:helpdesk@norwichuni.ac.uk)
- **Student Support** (finance, disability, mental health, housing): St Georges SG30 (drop-ins 12.30-3.30 during term time), [student.support@norwichuni.ac.uk](mailto:student.support@norwichuni.ac.uk)



# Managing stress

## What is stress?

- Stress relates to ‘how we react when we feel under pressure or threatened’ (Mind, 2024).
- It might affect your physical well-being, sleep, eating patterns, emotions and ability to concentrate.
- Everyone experiences stress, but how ‘we respond to stress ... makes a big difference to our overall well-being’ (WHO, 2023).

## Task

- **Left column:** list common stressors.
- **Right column:** list what you do to relax.

Your common stressors	Activities or actions to relax

# Managing stress: tips

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- Look at the list of tips below.
- Tick the ones that may work for you.



## Talk to someone:

Make a plan to keep talking regularly. This could be with University friends, friends at home, family, a counsellor or Student Support. Visit the Student Support VLE:

<https://vle.norwichuni.ac.uk/course/view.php?id=51>



## Do what you love:

Reading, researching or doing more of your special interest will help you feel better when routine has changed (Ambitious about Autism, 2024).



## Physical activity:

Exercise, making something, cooking for example can release endorphins that make your body feel well and give your brain a rest.



## News or Social Media:

Only access at certain times each day, as the rolling news and online world can be exhausting.



## Create a structure:

Make things reliable and regular. Build in time with or without people!

# Healthy living

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Healthy living is like a structure of good habits to support daily life.

## Diet

- Vary your diet, and plan what/when you'll eat as part of a healthy routine. Also aim to keep hydrated; drink between 6-8 cups of fluid a day. Find tips from the NHS: [www.nhs.uk/live-well](http://www.nhs.uk/live-well)

## Exercise

- Being active creates endorphins (happy chemicals) that can help with physical and mental wellbeing. Your SU has sporting clubs to join ([www.nuasu.co.uk/societies](http://www.nuasu.co.uk/societies)), and you can access varied activities at UEA (<https://ueasport.co.uk/clubs/>).

## Sleep

- Not getting enough sleep can cause fatigue and loss of concentration. Try to build in activities for winding down. See the NHS: [www.nhs.uk/every-mind-matters/mental-wellbeing-tips/](http://www.nhs.uk/every-mind-matters/mental-wellbeing-tips/)

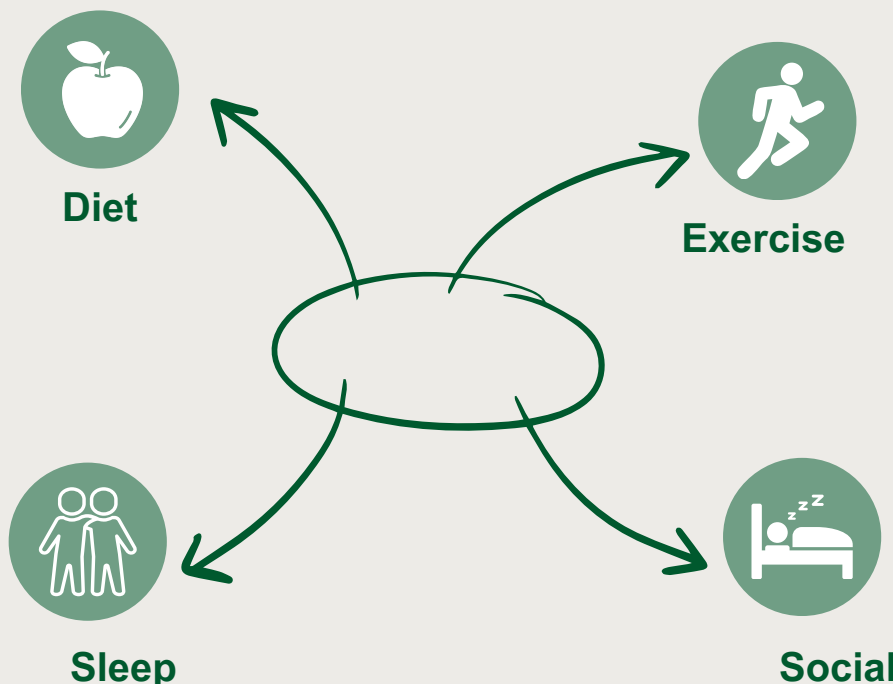
## Social

- Being connected to others can benefit your mood and ability to think (Hughes, 2020, p. 62). List/mind map opportunities to meet potential friends e.g. societies, events, classes, shared interests.

## Task



Use the mind map to list your current habits and anything you'd like to do differently.



# Balancing time

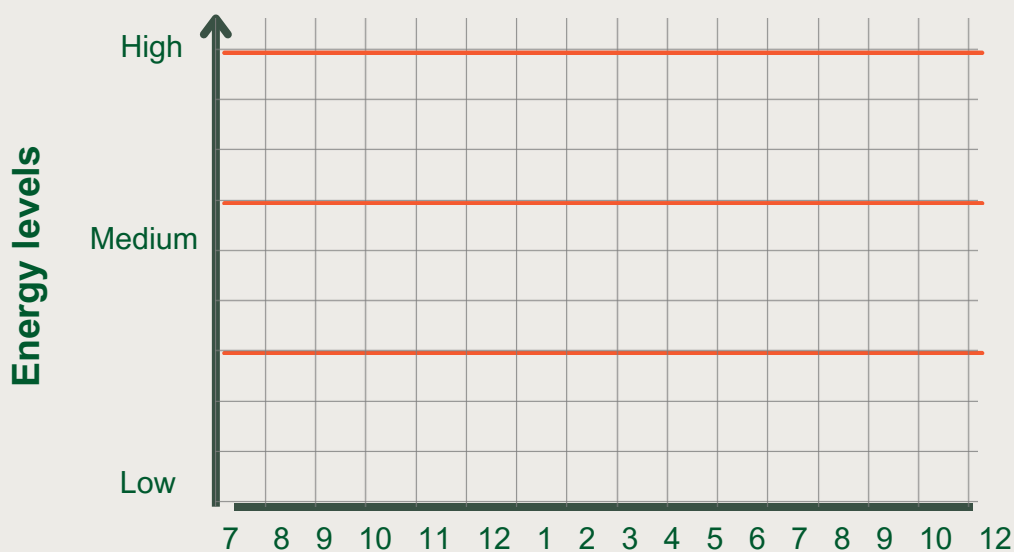


- Energy levels change throughout the day, and may be expended through different instances e.g. social, mental, emotional, situational (Beardon, 2023, pp. 14-24).
- **Tip:** leave easier tasks (e.g. tidying, scheduling) for when energy levels are lower.

## Task



Work out your energy levels during a typical day, using the chart below from Mike Clayton (2024). Plot an x next to your energy levels for each time across the horizontal axis.



### Quick tips:

- **Break an assignment down:** identify smaller steps within a wider outcome e.g. an essay.
- **To do lists:** write tasks, consider how long they'll take and set deadlines. Make **SMART** targets: specific, measurable (How much/many?), achievable, relevant, time bound.
- **Short bursts (Pomodoro):** pick a task, set a timer for 25 minutes and work uninterrupted. Take a 5 minute break. After 4 of these segments, take a longer break.
- **Make a schedule:** List your main actions for each day, including lectures, self-study and household tasks (e.g. shopping, cleaning). There's a weekly template on the next page.

- **Time templates:** <https://library.norwichuni.ac.uk/study-skills/time-management/>
- **To do lists:** <https://to-do.office.com> (Microsoft), [www.rememberthemilk.com/](http://www.rememberthemilk.com/)
- **Pomodoro timer:** <https://pomofocus.io>
- **Stay focused:** Forest [www.forestapp.cc](http://www.forestapp.cc)
- **Schedules:** Trello <https://trello.com>, [www.tomsplanner.com](http://www.tomsplanner.com) (Gantt)



# Weekly Planner

Date:

Mon

Tues

Weds

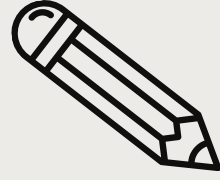
Thurs

Fri

Sat

Sun

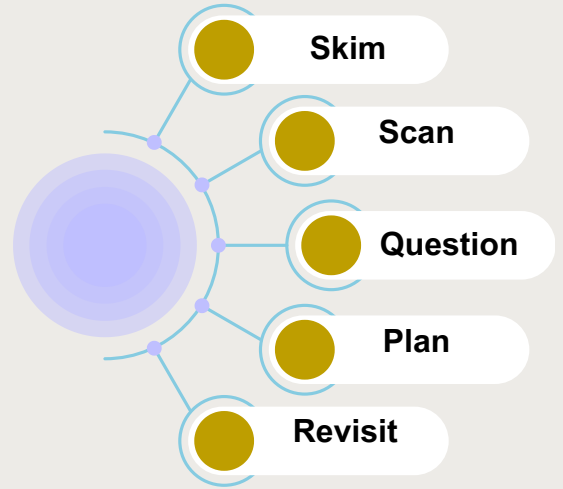
Notes:



# Understanding assignments

## Navigating unit handbooks and briefs:

1. Begin by **skimming** (reading quickly): What is the overall theme or purpose?
2. Secondly, **scan** to identify key information: assessment requirements, due dates.
3. **Question**: Is there anything you don't understand?
4. **Plan**: How will you balance your time?
5. **Revisit**: Have you met all the expectations?



## How can I identify key information?

- Personalise the brief by highlighting or rephrasing in your own voice.
- Also, look out for different types of information.
- **Directive or task words**: tell you what to do e.g., discuss, argue (see below).
- **Subject matter**: the key themes and topics of the assignment brief.
- **Limiting words**: any words that narrow or limit your focus (e.g. amount, style).

### Example instruction verbs

See more examples here:  
[https://library.leeds.ac.uk/downloads/download/45/using\\_the\\_right\\_instructional\\_verbs](https://library.leeds.ac.uk/downloads/download/45/using_the_right_instructional_verbs)

Verb	Definition
Analyse	Examine in very close detail; identify important points and chief features
Evaluate	Assess the worth, importance or usefulness of something, using evidence
Discuss	Write about the most important aspects ... give arguments for and against
Summarise	Give a concise account of the chief points of a matter, removing unnecessary detail

# Approaching writing



- You may experience challenges in areas such as planning, writing for a reader and creating a logical structure.
- However, autistic writers can also be creative rule breakers (Brown, 2020) and attuned to seeking patterns, spotting inconsistencies and checking errors (Baron-Cohen, 2020, p. 49).

## Task



Rate the statements below between one and five. 1 = strongly disagree. 5 = strongly agree.

I can get confused about instructions and the task (see page 12).

It can be difficult to balance time for writing (see page 10).


My argument/structure isn't always ordered logically (page 14).

I can give too many details or over describe.

I can become stuck on one segment as I want it to be perfect.

## How can I organise thoughts into writing?

- Try a digital mind mapping tool: <https://xmind.app/> Use the branches to represent different ideas to explore.
- Create an outline plan of points and evidence (see right).
- Try the 'Dictate' function in Word to turn speech into text.
- Generative AI (such as [Chat GPT](#), [Claude](#), [Google Gemini](#)) can help to generate initial points, suggest possible structures or provide feedback on tone/language.
- See Sheffield Uni's prompt bank for examples <https://tinyurl.com/msywe3tb> and Norwich Uni guidance on using AI: <https://tinyurl.com/mv2rncrh>

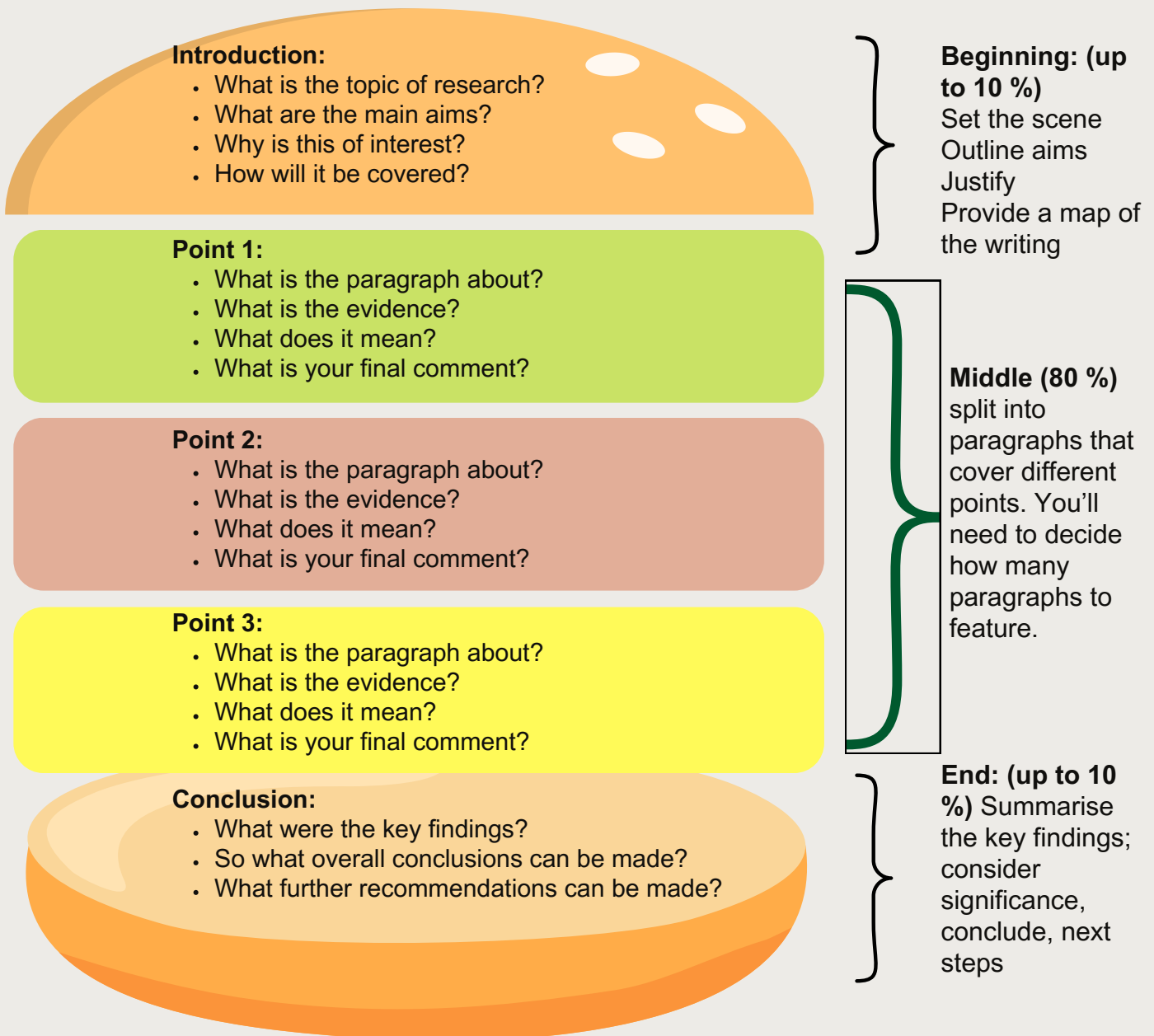
<b>Title of Assignment</b>
<b>Introduction (10% of word count)</b>
<b>Point 1: Keyword for Topic</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Note areas to include.</li><li>• Evidence to support point.</li><li>• Alternative viewpoints?</li></ul>

<b>Pattern is continued</b>
<b>Conclusion (10% of word count)</b>



# Patterns of writing

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- Academic writing follows its own rules and patterns.
- Try the questions in the diagram below to help prompt a generic essay/report structure.
- The burger represents a clear introduction and conclusion (encased within the bread). The main bulk (up to 80%) comes from the middle (the filling) that's split into paragraphs that make different points.



Paragraph questions adapted from Burns and Sinfield (2013)

- **Introductions & Conclusions:** <https://library.norwichuni.ac.uk/study-skills/introductions-and-conclusions/>
- **Paragraphs:** <https://library.norwichuni.ac.uk/study-skills/paragraphs/>
- **Grammarly (punctuation and grammar):** <https://app.grammarly.com/>



# Useful Resources

- We've gathered some key resources below.
- There's also a full reference list on the end of the toolkit.

## Organisations



### National Autistic Society:

<https://www.autism.org.uk/>

### Asperger East Anglia:

<https://www.asperger.org.uk/>

### Ambitious about autism:

[www.ambitiousaboutautism.org.uk/](http://www.ambitiousaboutautism.org.uk/)

### NHS Talking Therapies:

<https://www.wellbeingnands.co.uk/>

## Websites



### Autism and Uni Toolkit:

<https://bath.autism-uni.org/>

### The power of autism (Leeds Uni):

<https://tinyurl.com/5n6asn8f>

### Autistic Symptom Burnout Checklist:

<https://tinyurl.com/3xsbf6x2>

### Temple Grandin website:

[www.templegrandin.com/](http://www.templegrandin.com/)

## Podcasts and Programs



### Inside Our Autistic Minds (2023), BB2

<https://learningonscreen.ac.uk/ondemand/index.php/prog/3C091270?bcast=140681680>

### Christine McGuiness: Unmasking autism:

[www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m001k31t](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m001k31t)

### 1800 Seconds on Autism (podcast):

[www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p06sdq0x/episodes/downloads](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p06sdq0x/episodes/downloads)

### National Autistic Society YouTube:

[www.youtube.com/@NationalAutisticSoc](http://www.youtube.com/@NationalAutisticSoc)

## Books



*Fingers in the sparkle jar* by Chris Packham (2022)

*Unmasking autism : the power of embracing our hidden neurodiversity* by Devon Price (2024)







*What works for autistic adults* by Luke Beardon (2023)

*Autism, Identity and Me* by Rebecca Duffus (2023)



# Final thoughts ...

- We hope you've found the toolkit helpful!
- Use the 6 segments below to create your own 'toolkit' of preferences.
- This could be used to share with lecturers or peers.

<p><b>My preferences for terminology</b> e.g. person with autism </p>	<p><b>My preferences for communicating information</b> e.g. instructions, within class </p>	<p><b>My preferences for learning spaces</b> </p>
<p><b>My preferences for receiving feedback</b> (e.g. face-to-face, email, recorded audio) </p>	<p><b>My preferences in terms of senses</b> (sight, sound, touch, taste, smell) </p>	<p><b>My preferences for social interactions</b> </p>

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