Chapter 6

Marking and Commenting on Essays

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INTRODUCTION

As a tutor, you may well be asked to mark and comment on at least some of the essays and other written work which your students submit as part of their coursework assessment. This chapter is therefore concerned with what is involved in marking essays accurately and reliably, and in providing students with constructive feedback in the form of written or oral comments.

At base, assessment entails making an informed and considered judgement about the quality of a student's performance on a given assignment. Coursework assignments require students to 'put their learning on display',[1] so that tutors can evaluate:

- how well the subject-matter has been grasped;

- how effectively students have practised the critical and analytical techniques which that discipline calls for – whether it be English Literature, Physics, Economics or Anthropology;

- students' degree of mastery of the skills involved in communicating ideas and evidence clearly and cogently.

Needless to say, evaluating essays and other coursework assignments is a crucial as well as a demanding task. Tutors have a responsibility to their university and to their chosen discipline to ensure that appropriate standards are pursued and upheld. Equally, they have a responsibility to their students, whose academic progression depends on the grades they receive, to mark their work fairly, consistently and promptly.

Yet assessment, it needs to be emphasised, has not one main purpose but two: coursework enables university teachers to judge what standards students have attained, but it also provides students with the feedback they need to learn effectively. Even the earliest research efforts by psychologists, nearly a century ago, established the importance of what was then called the Law of Effect: it is hard to make headway in any kind of learning task if you do not have a firm impression of how well you are doing.[2] Feedback on coursework meets this need by alerting students to their strengths and to their weaknesses, and by suggesting how the quality of their work might be improved. Feedback therefore helps students to focus their intellectual energies in the most productive way, and thus to achieve the best of which they are capable. And in so doing, it makes it possible for universities to set and to sustain high academic standards.

This chapter explores how you might best pursue these twin purposes of coursework assessment – what we might call *assessment-for-grading* and *assessment-for-learning*. It looks at what you will need to do to prepare the ground, for yourself and your students, prior to a coursework essay; at what marking and commenting on students' work will involve; and at what is likely to be required to ensure that your marks and comments are taken note of and followed up. First, however, it looks at what is known about how students go about their coursework and what they derive from it. The majority of the findings discussed originate in studies of undergraduate essay-writing, although many of these findings are applicable to other kinds of coursework assignments.

> *As a tutor, you are obviously someone who has done very well academically - so well, perhaps, that it is easy to lose sight of what a typical undergraduate student can realistically achieve. You might therefore find it helpful at this point to try and think back to your early (and perhaps faltering and uncertain?) experiences of what writing an essay was like in your first year at university. And if you still have your first-year essays on file, why not take a look at them again with a fresh eye, to jog your memory?*

COURSEWORK AND STUDENT LEARNING

"I sit at my window" says a character in Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*, "and the words fly past me like birds – with God's help I catch some".[3] Writing seldom comes easily to most people. It is a struggle to commit one's thoughts, ideas and feelings to paper in a way which seems to do them justice.

For most students, too, writing takes very considerable effort. It also occupies a large swathe of their independent study time. In some universities, arts and social sciences students are required to write the equivalent of one essay every ten days; and even where the volume of coursework is not as high as this, writing assignments is nonetheless time-consuming. Some students, it seems, manage to get their essays written in under ten hours; others may take as long as thirty, extending over several days or even weeks.[4] Equally pertinently, students and tutors alike are inclined to underestimate just how much time is required to complete a coursework assignment.

One well-designed Australian survey looked at a large variety of assignments across a wide range of subject areas, and compared tutors' and students' forecasts of how long it would take to write each assignment with the time students actually spent. On average, the students spent nearly twice as much time as they had anticipated – and almost *three* times as much as their tutors had estimated.

Given what preparing and drafting an assignment involves, however, the amount of time and effort required is hardly surprising. First, coursework is typically stipulative: it is the teacher rather than the student who decides what the topic is to be, how it is to be tackled, what counts as 'essential' or recommended reading, and how long the finished assignment should be. Students therefore have to work closely to this brief, rather than being free to follow their own instincts or preferences. Second, assignment-writing involves an intricate series of steps, as shown in *figure 1*. It is worthwhile taking a closer look at these six steps. We can explore the demands which each step makes of students and begin to reflect on what implications this might have for the guidance students will find most helpful (a question to which we return later in the chapter).
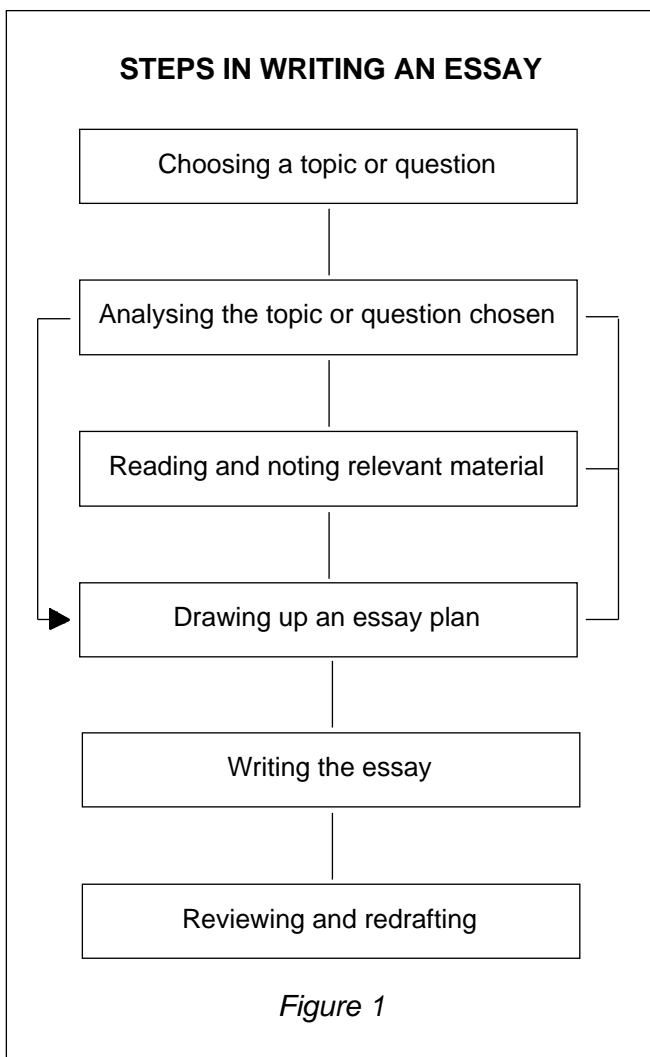
Choosing a Question or Topic

A student's usual first step is to choose the essay topic or question to be tackled. Having several different titles to choose from is not necessarily liberating, as the following comment suggests:

> It's horrible when there's about eight choices, 'cos I'm like a rabbit, a rat with several traps – I don't know which one to stick my head in.

Some students, of course, put off deciding which title they will tackle until they have done enough of the required reading to be able to make a more informed choice. And as class sizes rise at a time when library budgets too are under pressure, it is important to bear in mind that students' scope to choose between assignment topics may be more apparent than real. Which topic is eventually chosen may be influenced as much by the availability of library copies of recommended reading as by what most engages a student's interest.

Analysing the Question or Topic

Assignment titles and topics are usually crafted with great care. Most university teachers take pains to devise titles which will subtly stretch students' intellects whilst at the same time focusing their energies within realistic and manageable bounds.

STEPS IN WRITING AN ESSAY

Choosing a topic or question

Analysing the topic or question chosen

Reading and noting relevant material

Drawing up an essay plan

Writing the essay

Reviewing and redrafting

Figure 1

Some students are alert to these subtleties of phrasing and direct their thinking accordingly. Others, however, lack this awareness: without guidance in dissecting assignment questions, they will be prone to take a question as a broad invitation to write on a theme rather than as a call to address a tightly specified topic.

Furthermore, almost any assignment question at undergraduate level will be tacit to greater or lesser degrees: what is required often goes beyond the surface meaning of the words appearing in the question.[5] Students may be invited, for example, to 'discuss', 'consider', 'review' or 'examine' a particular issue, but dictionary definitions of commonplace terms such as these will be of limited value:

> I felt pretty satisfied with my essay. I thought I'd get a brilliant mark for it. So I was really put off when I saw the lecturer's comments. I just thought it was what the essay said: "What limits a person's ability to do two things at once?" Not why, or how it was done. What I did I thought was very relevant, but the lecturer wanted 'how' and 'why' factors, and I didn't quite answer that.

At base, then, all assignment questions can be thought of as similar regardless of how they are worded. All carry with them the implicit expectation that the conventions of written academic discourse in the discipline concerned – weighing, analysing, assessing critically, evaluating systematically, as a historian or geologist or linguist would do – will be followed.

When, therefore, a student's essay seems to lack 'relevance', or simply fails to 'answer the question', the problem may well lie beyond inattention to the particular assignment question or topic set. As we shall see, the student may not yet have grasped what is expected of an undergraduate assignment in Politics or Zoology, or whatever the discipline concerned may be.

> *Can you recall the ways in which expectations of essay-writing varied across the different subjects you studied as an undergraduate? It is a useful thinking exercise that you might try out with your students as part of a tutorial: how does an essay or other kind of coursework assignment in **this** subject differ from those in other subjects taken by your students?*

Reading and Note-Taking

Though it is sometimes possible for students to base their coursework solely on material which they have gleaned from lectures, tutorials and associated reading, most assignments call for additional reading to extend as well as consolidate students' knowledge of the topic set. Reading of this kind can however take various forms: some coursework essays, for example, involve skimming through a large number of books and articles in search of relevant material, while others demand close and meticulous attention to one or two core texts. And generally speaking, students will also need to make notes of material they are likely to make use of in their completed assignments.

Here again, differences show up in students' reading and note-taking practices. Compare the following comments, by two second-year History students:

> Sometimes I just go through a book very quickly and just jot down fact after fact, events, what people actually did and said, quotes from the time. And then I have a good body of things that I can then use to support what I want to say. So in a book I'm looking for A, his argument, and then B, facts and evidence.

> I never think that what I'm reading is relevant. I find it really hard to say 'Well, that's OK, I can put that sort of thing in', and 'That's not OK'. I just ... can't do it. I don't know why. I end up putting things down just because somebody else has written about them in a book. I just go round in circles for days and days and days.

Reviewing and Planning

For most students, the next step is to review the material which has been gathered and to draw up some kind of plan. This is not, however, universal. Some students, probably a small minority, thrive on a process of drafting and redrafting parts of the assignment in-between completing the background reading. And some, also in a minority, get by without making formal plans – whether because they have already mapped out the essay in their head or, in sharp contrast, because they feel no sense of control over their essay-writing:

> I never do plans for any of my essays. They just happen. I do the usual reading and find a few quotes. I like to start off with a quote, because it's usually right. (Laughs)

But the great majority of students, perhaps because it was drummed into them at school, do regularly make some kind of plan of what they are going to write. This may take various forms:

- **a rough sketch**, cataloguing only some of the likely essay content, or not attempting to order points in sequence;

- **a basic plan**, outlining and ordering all of the key points;

- **an extended plan**, which takes the basic plan a stage further by numbering all the notes for ease of reference, and is thus particularly attractive to students who accumulate large quantities of notes;

- **an evolving plan** which, unlike its counterparts, precedes reading and notetaking, and is modified as work on the essay develops.
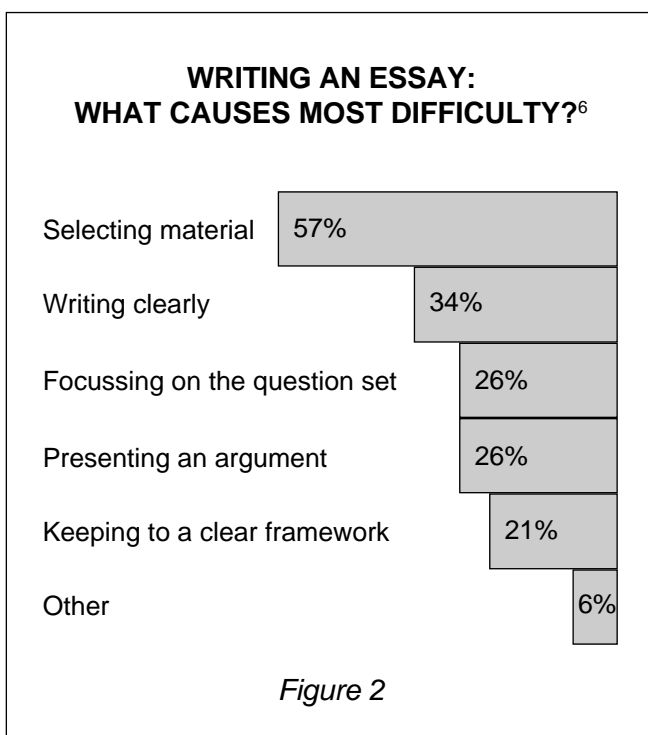
With the possible exception of the last of these four, however, which type of plan a student pursues does not in itself seem to matter a great deal. Much more crucial is what it is that the plan seems directed towards: in other words, the student's notion of what will make for a good essay.

WRITING AN ESSAY: WHAT CAUSES MOST DIFFICULTY?[6]

Selecting material   57%

Writing clearly   34%

Focussing on the question set   26%

Presenting an argument   26%

Keeping to a clear framework   21%

Other   6%

Figure 2

Drafting and Writing Up

The decisive step, actually writing the essay or assignment, creates many competing demands – and thus sources of difficulty – for students, as *figure 2* suggests.

Differences in students' assignment-writing skills show up vividly in the extent to which they feel at ease with their introductions and, most acutely of all, their conclusions. For some, working towards a satisfying conclusion becomes second-nature:

> Conclusions are just, you've really got to just tie everything together, you've got all your strands of argument. But the conclusions, since I've come to university, have become less important, I think, 'cos your argument should be developing all the way through the essay anyway.

For others, conclusions are their slough of despond:

> Sometimes I can finish with a quote, sometimes I can sum up with my own feelings, or sometimes it just kind of gets to where there's nothing more to write, but you can't think of anything to sum up with.

> I might draw a conclusion, if I have time, and draw all the threads together. If not, I might just finish, you know, just finish, like that.

> *What makes for an effective introduction ... and an effective conclusion, in a coursework assignment in your subject? How could you best convey to your students that this is what is expected of them?*

Reviewing and Redrafting

And what of reviewing and redrafting? It seems that while there are some students who draft and redraft an essay several times, the commonest strategy is probably that of the rough draft followed by the 'clean copy', where the handwriting is neater, there are fewer crossings-out, and minor changes have been made to style and content and errors of grammar, spelling or punctuation remedied. Few students, it seems, practise the kind of thoroughgoing revision which involves reordering large segments of text, whether through lack of time or expertise or because they do not view what they have written as something which can be fashioned and refashioned to achieve their purposes.

In theory, the arrival of the word-processor should have stimulated more far-reaching revision, since it makes the task of modifying and rearranging text so much more straightforward. What little evidence we have, however, comes from a U.S. study[7] which found that undergraduates who word-processed their assignments made little use of 'cut-and-paste' keys – which suggests that their revision practices were directed towards altering words, phrases or sentences rather than more ambitious structural changes.

Conceptions of Essay-Writing

The six steps outlined here provide useful pathways from which to approach and understand assignment-writing. They help draw attention to the specific demands which an essay or similar coursework assignment poses at successive stages, and in so doing they serve to underscore its overall complexity.

Yet my own research on undergraduate essay-writing in the arts and social sciences (from which the illustrative student comments above have largely been taken) suggests that there is a more fundamental and overarching difference between students as writers of essays and other kinds of assignments. This difference is one of *conception:* how students in a given discipline conceive of what an essay is and what essay-writing entails.

In essence, essay-writing in higher education is an apprenticeship in what we might call 'academic discourse' – the conventions which govern how subject specialists communicate their ideas, theories and insights, and which determine what constitutes a plausible or at least acceptable mode of argument. In the context of essay-writing, academic discourse generally has three main characteristics:

- an overriding concern to interpret and make meaning through the presentation of arguments;

- careful attention to the marshalling of relevant and valid facts, examples and other kinds of evidence to substantiate or refute arguments and interpretations;

- a structure or organisational framework which has not been chosen arbitrarily, but is instead designed to present arguments and evidence in a coherent and logically appropriate form.

Some of the students who took part in my research had successfully grasped the nature of academic discourse. For them, essay-writing was at base an interpretive activity concerned with the disciplined pursuit of meaning. This meant that in History, for example, essay-writing was conceived of as a question of *argument,* coherently presented and well-substantiated:

> [In my preparatory reading] I try to find the author's own particular view, his argument, and also really just to really plunder it for facts. Whether the facts that he gives, you know, whether I agree with his argument or not, I think that the main thing in an historical essay anyway is that you make a case and back it up with actual facts of what happened, and evidence.

> Being able to construct an argument, that's where for me, this plan sheet here is the key because I get everything in a logical order where everything's building up, you know, and point 1, boom, boom, boom, like that. And so I try to aim that, come the end of the essay, no matter what they thought before that, the logic of the argument and the evidence produced is such that, even if they don't agree with my interpretation, they've got to say it's reasonably argued.

But essay-writing did not have this interpretive character for many other students:

> I tried to cover all the different areas. But one of the tutor's criticisms of the essay was why did I just keep going from one to the other. But I thought that's what I was supposed to do.

> I'm not quite sure what [studying History at university] is about. I don't think we get a lot of our own ideas into it. I know we're supposed to, but we seem to be reading books, and criticising what people think, more than actually … I don't know. It just seems to me as though you're reading about a period, and trying to fit your reading into an essay. It just seems like a lot of facts more than anything else.

Students such as these had not grasped the nature of academic discourse. They were aware of the various elements that played a significant role in essay-writing – advancing thoughts and ideas, drawing on factual information and findings from research or scholarship, and assembling both of these into an organised whole – but they saw these as discrete rather than as elements which could be integrated into a coherent and substantiated argument. Their concerns as essay-writers were thus targeted at what seemed to be more manageable (but less intellectually exacting) goals: an essay as the expression of a personal *viewpoint,* only loosely anchored in the available facts; or an essay as simply an *arrangement* of facts and ideas.

These differences in students' conceptions of essay-writing have a number of practical implications:

- It is difficult to see how repeated practice in writing essays will *of itself* bring about a significant improvement in the quality of written work of students who do not conceive of essay-writing as academic discourse. Indeed, repeated practice which leaves an inadequate conception unchallenged may simply reinforce it (and thus make any shift in conception progressively harder to bring about).

- The procedures students follow in writing an essay seem closely bound up with the conceptions they hold. In consequence, the planning activities of students who are seeking to advance arguments (and thus, for example, testing out possible interpretations against the available evidence) will be very different from those of students who approach the generation of ideas and the culling of reading material as though each were separate rather than interrelated tasks. Simply advising students to "make a plan" – or indeed offering any advice on technique which considers means in isolation from ends – is therefore unlikely to be effective.

- Nor, as we shall see later, will feedback from tutors *necessarily* prompt a change in

conception, since such comments take for granted a mode of academic discourse which some students have yet to share.

• Students' conceptions are shaped not only by their assignment work but also by their learning experiences within tutorials and in their preparatory and follow-up reading. The latter can therefore be used by tutors as opportunities to help students gain a better understanding of academic discourse.

In the rest of this chapter, the focus shifts from student to tutor. Having reviewed what is known about students' assignment-writing, we now look at how you can build on these research findings in preparing for, marking and commenting on students' essays.

GROUNDWORK

Some aspects of assessing students' coursework can probably only be adequately learnt 'on the job', by gaining direct and first-hand experience of what is required. But there are other things which you as a tutor really need to know or to find out *before* students embark on their essays.

First, there are the basic facts about the assignment itself. In first- and second-year courses, as we have just seen, students are not at liberty to formulate their own theme but work to essay titles or topics set by course lecturers. You will therefore have to make sure that you know what the set topics or titles are and what scope students have to choose between them. You will need to know what deadline has been set for the submission of the assignment and, equally importantly, by what date you will be expected to have marked and returned the work to the students. And you will need to check what is required of students in terms of format and presentation, for example:

• What guidelines govern the format in which essays should be submitted – e.g. minimum width of margin, use of single- or double-spacing between lines, overall length to be aimed at (or perhaps not exceeded), whether the use of headings and sub-headings is encouraged or discouraged?

• To what extent will students be expected to display a familiarity with key works or 'essential reading' … and at least some acquaintance with 'background reading' or other relevant material?

• How should references to the literature be cited in the body of the text and at the end?

• Should the essays be typed or word-processed, as many departments now require?

Second, you will need to be well-informed about the faculty or departmental policies and practices which have a particular bearing on coursework assessment. The most fundamental of these have to do with the marks to be given to students. In many universities there is a standard university-wide marking scheme (see for example *figure 3*), but these are usually designed to ensure that all students' marks across the full range of courses are recorded in a common framework. Such schemes do not normally attempt to specify what standards these various marks represent within a given department, programme of study or course unit.

AN EXAMPLE OF A UNIVERSITY-WIDE MARKING SCHEME

	Final Honours		Non-Honours	
1 Honours Class	**2** Mark	**3** Grade	**4** Description	
I	75-100	A	Very Good	
II.1	65-74	B	Good	
II.2	55-64	C	Satisfactory	
III	50-54	D	Marginal Pass	
Fail	(45-49	E	Marginal Fail	
	(35-44	F	Clear Fail	
	(0-34	G	Bad Fail	

Figure 3

Guidance on the latter can be sought in a number of ways. In some courses, the qualities looked for in students' coursework and examination answers are discussed in a course handbook or circulated to students in the form of a handout. In others, the criteria to be used in assessing a particular assignment are notified to students alongside a list of titles or topics, or are set out on a specially prepared pro forma (see *Marking and Commenting* below). Whatever the case, you should regard the course leader or your teaching supervisor as the main source of advice on the criteria and standards you will be expected to apply.

Then there is the question of established coursework procedures and practices, which will often vary from one course to another and therefore also need

to be clarified. Under what circumstances can a student be granted an extension to a submission deadline, for instance, and from whom must permission be obtained? Are there penalties for late submission? What kinds of feedback, how much, and in what form, can students reasonably expect? What procedure should be followed if you are uncertain about a particular mark, or if one of your students wishes to lodge an appeal against the mark he or she has been given?

Thirdly, there is the all-important subject dimension. You cannot assess students' work fairly unless you have a good grasp of what they ought to know by a given stage in the course, and a clear sense of what they should be able to achieve in their assignments by dint of further study and reading. What will actually be necessary on your part to close this gap will depend on how familiar you already are with the subject-matter covered by the course and the course materials themselves. It is quite probable, however, that you will need to do at least some of the following:

- attend the lectures;

- study the course handbook, the class handouts and any other relevant course materials;

- make sure you are well-acquainted with whatever recommended reading forms an essential backcloth to the assignments set;

- check library holdings of recommended reading, and particularly of multiple copies of essential material, so that you have some feel for what most students will realistically be able to follow up in their preparatory reading and note-taking.

> *Why not now take a moment or two to review what advance groundwork you will need to do? What aspects of coursework essays are you already familiar with ... and what will you need to check out?*

BRIEFING AND ADVISING STUDENTS

Like you, your students will need to be well-briefed at the outset if they are to use their time on the assignment productively. It is therefore instructive to consider *what* they will want to have clarified, *how* you can best brief them, and *when* advice from you is likely to be particularly helpful.

Clarifying What?

Your students will obviously need to have the same basic factual information at their fingertips as you, i.e. they will need to know about topics, titles, deadlines, format and presentation for the particular assignment concerned. And if they are not yet acquainted with departmental procedures and policies surrounding coursework, they will need to be told about those too.

Most importantly of all, they may need guidance on how they should set about preparing and writing their assignments. As we have already seen, students are often uncertain about what is expected of them in the coursework they submit and how they might best achieve this. But precisely what guidance your tutees will welcome and will need will depend on a variety of factors, including:

- what stage they are at in their undergraduate studies – since for example second-year students will obviously be much more familiar with what is required than students in the first term of their first year;

- whether the particular essay or other assignment for which you are responsible is of a kind they have encountered previously and have some experience of;

- what guidance they have already been given, and in what forms – a point to which we shall return shortly;

- how confident they are, as individuals, in their own writing abilities, and how satisfied they are with the marks they have typically been getting up to that point in the course.

The conclusion to be drawn at this point is simply put. Don't fall into the trap of assuming in advance that you know what your students can and can't do well – and above all, avoid thinking that it is your job to tell them everything they might need to know about writing essays or any other kind of assignment. Too much advice, especially when it is not wanted or needed, is as unwelcome as no advice at all. A wiser stratagem is to :

- establish what guidance they have already been given;

- ensure that you give them opportunities to raise the queries that are uppermost in their minds;

- be alert to cues – especially in the first pieces of written work they submit – about which aspects of assignments most students have mastered and which they have not.

AN ASSIGNMENT CHECKLIST

(tick as appropriate)

Covering Information

My title/cover page clearly shows:

☐   my name

☐   course title and number

☐   my tutor's name

☐   the question/topic I have chosen

☐   date assignment handed in

Introduction

The introduction:

☐   sets the question/topic against a wider background

☐   clarifies my understanding of the question/topic

☐   defines key or problematic terms

☐   outlines the approach I will be taking to the question/topic

Main Text

In the main body of the assignment:

☐   my key points are clearly presented

☐   the points I make are systematically backed up by facts/evidence/examples

☐   quotations and references to other works are accurately cited

☐   any diagrams, figures or tables are properly labelled

Conclusion

The conclusion:

☐   brings together the main points

☐   links back to the question/topic

☐   states clearly my conclusion(s)

Style and Presentation

Overall, the assignment:

☐   reads clearly throughout

☐   makes correct use of grammar, spelling and punctuation

☐   accurately lists the background reading I have consulted

☐   is within the word-limits specified

Figure 4

Advising How and When?

Next, there is the question of how and when you can best advise your students, in ways which will complement the guidance already available to them in their course handbook and via faculty or departmental study skills workshops and books on essay-writing (see chapter 12, *Sources and Resources*).

Before they embark on the assignment, you could spend a few minutes in a tutorial suggesting how they might tackle it and answering any questions they raise; or circulate a handout offering useful tips and hints; or ask them all to make use of a self-review checklist. *Figure 4* is an example of one simple kind of checklist which depends largely on yes/no answers. *Figure 5* is rather more general, and geared to assignments which involve a large element of information-gathering, but is intended as a prompt to reflection which requires much more than box-ticking.

While they are actually working on the assignment, you could invite them to raise any major queries they have at the beginning or the end of tutorials; or you could offer to be available to individual students at set times during your working week. Some students will welcome an opportunity to spend a few minutes talking through with you their assignment plan or a partial essay draft. For your part, however, you will need to set clear time-boundaries if you are to avoid getting swamped ... and if you are to avoid being so supportive to some students that you virtually answer the question for them, with the result that the assignment calls for very little real effort on their part.

Once the assignment has been marked and returned, there are various ways in which to back up the feedback which students will get from your written comments (see below). Whatever you decide to do, a useful rule-of-thumb is that telling students what is required is usually less effective than showing them how and explaining why. Bibliographic citation is a case in point. Students are much more likely to grasp the conventions of referencing if you explain why it is necessary to acknowledge the work of others and show them examples of good practice.

Do you feel you have a clear sense of what guidance on assignments your students have already been given? If you do, what additional guidance would they most welcome from you, do you think ... and how could you best provide it?

**TACKLING AN ASSIGNMENT:
NINE QUESTION-STEPS FOR STUDENTS**

What do I need to do?
(formulate and analyse need)

Where could I go?
(identify and appraise likely sources)

How do I get to the information?
(trace and locate individual resources)

Which resources shall I use?
(examine, select and reject individual sources)

How shall I use the resources?
(interrogate resources)

What should I make a record of?
(record and store information)

Have I got the information I need?
(interpret, analyse, synthesise, evaluate)

How should I present it?
(present, communicate)

What have I achieved?

Figure 5

MARKING AND COMMENTING

Of all the challenges of university teaching, marking (and commenting on) students' work is perhaps the stiffest as well as one of the most rewarding. It calls for intense and prolonged concentration, since each assignment must not only be carefully scrutinised in its own right, but also weighed and considered in the light of all the other assignments being assessed. And although the outcome in each case is a single mark, that mark is more than simply a rough-and-ready impression of the standard achieved: it represents a rounded judgment which takes account of how well the student has met each of the various criteria which have been adopted for that particular assignment.

Familiarisation with the assessment criteria to be applied is self-evidently a *sine qua non* of good marking. As far as most courses are concerned, these criteria are likely to include:

- criteria common to undergraduate assignments in a wide range of disciplines – e.g. use of

argument, organisation and presentation of material, style and 'English', i.e. grammar, spelling and punctuation;

- criteria which are discipline-specific (such as use of secondary sources in History, synthesising research findings in Psychology or Biochemistry, or appropriate use of textual illustration in literary criticism);

- criteria associated with a particular kind of assignment (e.g. mastery of the conventions of a book review, or breadth and depth of coverage in a review of the literature).

Figure 6 is one example of a set of criteria – in this instance, devised specifically for assessing English Literature essays.

For the new tutor confronting criteria such as these for the first time, it is not just a matter of acquainting oneself with the criteria as set out in their printed form, but also of finding out – usually in consultation with the course leader – how they are applied in practice. What are the relative weightings of each criterion, for example, given that however fluent the style in a particular student's essay may be, it is likely to have much less impact on the final grade than the strength and coherence of the argument presented? And what counts as 'good' or 'very good' use of recommended reading in, say, the first term of a first-year course?

Marking

Beyond being familiar with the criteria, how can you try to ensure that you mark well? The art of good marking is to approach it slowly and carefully, not rushing into hasty judgments and building in a series of checks on your accuracy and consistency. Here are a few pointers:

Getting started ...

- don't even try to mark the first few essays you read; instead, spend some time getting a broad feel for the standards the students have reached and the different ways in which they have approached the assignment;

- keep a copy of the assessment criteria for that piece of work close at hand, and refer to it frequently as a check on your consistency.

Once you have got a reasonable impression of overall standards ...

- work through each essay in turn, noting down the *provisional* mark which it merits (but do not

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ASSESSMENT CRITERIA FOR AN ENGLISH LITERATURE ESSAY[8]

Knowledge

Text	deep, thorough, detailed knowledge	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐	superficial knowledge
Author	wide knowledge used in analysis	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐	knowledge lacking or not used
Genre	wide knowledge used in analysis	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐	knowledge lacking or not used
Historical and social context	wide knowledge used in analysis	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐	knowledge lacking or not used

Essay

Structure	clear, logical structure	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐	confused list
Quotations	correct, purposeful use, properly referenced	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐	references lacking or incorrect
Other sources	wide range, relevant, properly referenced	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐	none or irrelevant
Grammar, spelling	correct	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐	many errors

Personal

Response to text	vivid, personal	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐	no response
Viewpoint	clearly expressed	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐	viewpoint lacking or unoriginal
Creativity	imaginative, surprising	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐	predictable

Critical theory

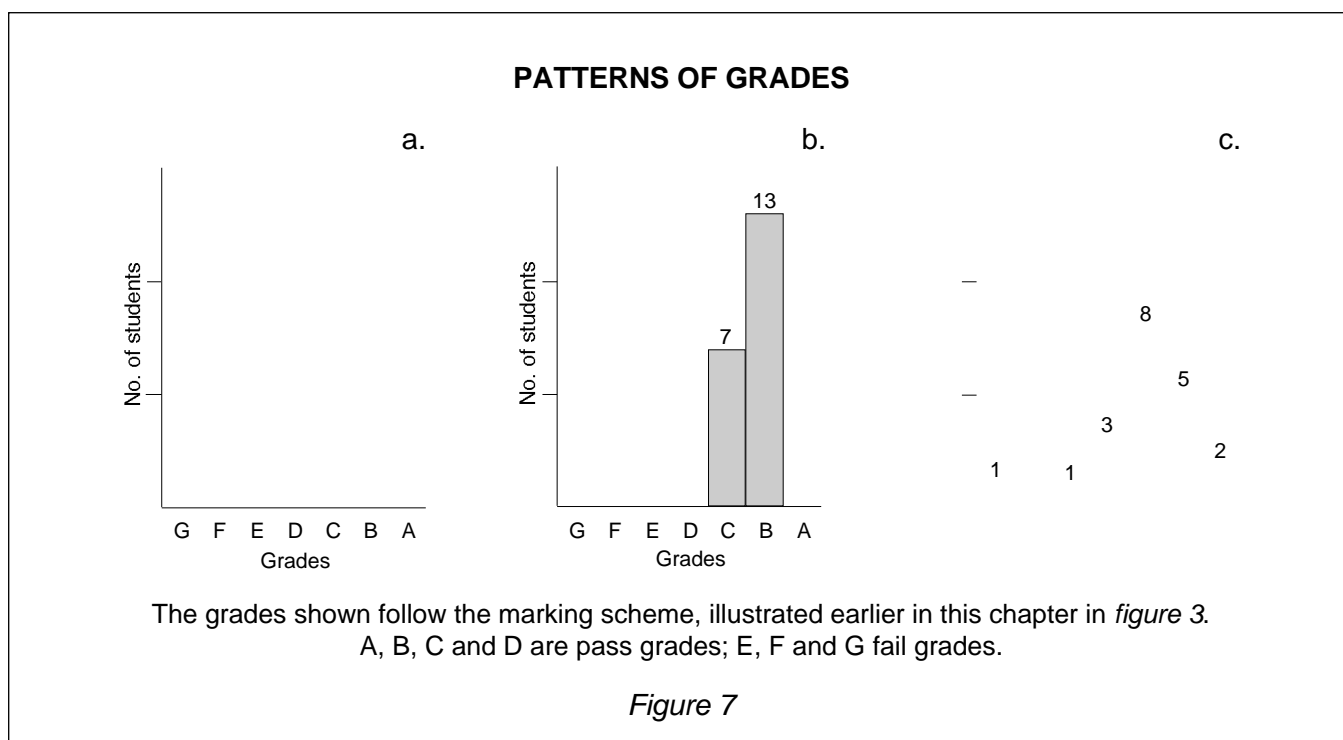|			
Understanding	clear grasp	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐	no grasp
Use of methods	wide range appropriately used	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐	range limited, inappropriately used

Figure 6

write this on the essay yet – you may need to modify it up or down);

- you may find it useful at the same time to jot down the main reasons for each of your provisional marks (as something you can quickly refer back to when you are reviewing your provisional marks);

- avoid getting too bogged down with a single essay that turns out to be an especially tricky one to mark – it may be easier to come back to it later when you have a clear picture of all the other essays.

When you have worked through all the essays, you will need to review your provisional marks. The first thing to check is your reliability. This is simply done by sorting the essays into separate piles for each provisional grade, and reviewing a sample of each. Are all the A's or B's or C's actually of a similar standard, or should some of the provisional grades

be raised or lowered? Are you still convinced that any essays which failed to earn a pass mark are quite so unsatisfactory?

Secondly, it is wise to check the overall pattern of marks. Technically speaking, any set of marks can be appraised in terms of the mean (where does the average lie, and is this appropriate?) and the spread (are the marks too tightly bunched?). If you only have a small number of essays to assess – no more than a dozen, say – it is at least possible that you had been given an untypically high number of very good or very poor ones, or that almost all of them happened to deserve the same mark. But the probability is that you have not yet struck the happy balance that lies somewhere between the parsimony of Ebenezer Scrooge and the all-forgiving nature of Mother Teresa. There really is no alternative but to take a second and closer look at the essays, paying particular attention to the criteria on which your initial judgments were based.

PATTERNS OF GRADES

a.   b.   c.

The grades shown follow the marking scheme, illustrated earlier in this chapter in *figure 3*.
A, B, C and D are pass grades; E, F and G fail grades.

Figure 7

Yet however carefully you approach the task of marking, there may be one or two very hard nuts to crack: an essay that is a bizarre mixture of the very good and the downright bad, handwriting that even a GP would blush at, or nagging doubts about whether a student might have dabbled in plagiarism. These are not issues to be resolved by you alone. In such cases, you should seek the advice of the course leader or whichever member of staff has the formal responsibility of supervising your work as an assessor.

Figures 7a, b and c show the patterns of grades notionally awarded to three groups, each comprising 20 students. These different grade patterns **might** *have arisen by chance, of course, but which of the three is more likely to be valid?*

Commenting

Part of the feedback which students get on their written work is the mark or grade itself. This provides a necessary reference-point, signalling the overall standard which has been achieved. In higher education, however, coursework marks are always accompanied by more direct feedback in the form of written comments. These comments normally take the form of general comments on the assignment as a whole (which are usually made on a separate sheet), and specific comments in the body of the text on everything from spelling to clarity of expression or the accuracy of a particular fact or quotation.

Strategies for making specific comments on essays are to some extent a matter of individual preference. My personal quirk is never to use red ink because of its associations with stringent criticism, but the green felt-tip which I once opted for (rather too high-mindedly, perhaps?) has now given way to a soft pencil, so that students can rub out any offending comments later if they wish. Nor am I too bothered by errors in spelling, punctuation or grammar, provided these are occasional rather than all-pervading. I tend simply to circle or underline the error in passing, though I recognise that for some of my colleagues – especially those teaching English, Linguistics, or foreign languages – this would not suffice.

But whatever your own preferences are, style and tone are of paramount importance. For no matter how accurate or valid a tutor's comment may be, if it is couched in dismissive or bitingly critical terms it will leave the student feeling hurt or angry rather than receptive. Phrasing specific comments in the form of questions (as, for example, in *figure 8*) is one way of encouraging students to respond positively to feedback.

General comments

General comments tend to be of two interrelated kinds. How well did the student tackle this particular assignment – the topic or question set, the subject-matter concerned, and the form in which

COMMENTS ON AN ASSIGNMENT

Would it help to draw a (Why) does this occur?
sharper distinction between
this second question of
'why' and the earlier   Posner has made a distinction between automatic and attentive
question of under what   (parallel or serial) processing. He hypothesises that the
circumstances?   consequences of this attentive state is that it consumes a portion
                              of the "limited resource capacity" of the system, which, in effect,
                              places constraints on the amount of processing that can be carried
                              out at that given moment by another modality. He postulates further
                              that this induces "inertia" into the processing mechanism. The
                              attentive state of the dominant modality is self-perpetuating as it
You're right to see this   takes time and effort to switch from one modality to another.
point as a crucial one –   Turvey (1978) has summarised it thus:_ "With respect to the inertia
but how would YOU   induced by the mode of attentive (serial) processing, Posner et al.
have summarised it?   (1976) have recently interpreted the peculiar phenomenon of visual
                              capture as being indicative of an asymmetry between switching from
                              vision to another modality, and switching from another modality to
                              vision. When the information for vision and another modality are in
                              conflict, vision is the likely victor" (Turvey 78 p. 206).

                              As previously mentioned, if a person is not 'set' to vision, he is
                              at a disadvantage when it comes to switching in terms of time.
Why hopefully?   (Hopefully) it could be hypothesised that, for survival reasons during
                              the evolutionary process, human attention has become set to vision
                              (e.g. it was more advantageous for homo erectus to run when he saw a
                              sabre-toothed tiger, rather than wait about to hear him roar or feel
                              his fur a few feet away). Turvey has called this bias 'soft-ware'
                              as opposed to 'hard-ware', this is explained by saying that if
                              prismatically distorted vision accompanies haptic exploration (and
                              vision is set to attend) then the haptic system undergoes adaption;
                              but if it is the haptic system which is attended to then vision is
                              'recalibrated' (Kelso, Cook, Olsen and Epstein, 1976). In the
                              absence of purposeful 'set' of any one modality, vision is attended
                              to by choice.

A punch line like this   { To all intent and purposes, research seems to indicate what Hugh
may be hard to resist.   Heffner knew all along – 'man is a visual animal'.
But how confident are you that you've said enough by way of conclusion?
Do you really feel you've done justice to all your earlier observations on the research literature?

Figure 8

it was expected to be submitted? And how well did the student meet the requirements of academic discourse in this discipline at this level – e.g. by setting out a distinctive interpretation or argument, plausibly supported and coherently presented?

General comments on an assignment are most likely to be helpful to a student when:

• a balance is struck between criticism of shortcomings and praise for what has been done well – not as easy as it sounds, since most of us have an inbuilt tendency to find fault rather than to applaud; as a corrective, you might try writing your general comments under two headings: "Good points" and "Could be improved"[9;]

• broad-brush observations – e.g. about the structure of the essay or the student's use of quotations or references – are explicitly linked to specific comments in the body of the assignment, thus illustrating for the student precisely what you mean;

- you refer a student to other resource materials (a guide to essay-writing in the subject concerned) where her or his work has serious shortcomings such as a lack of grasp of argument, the use of evidence or confusion about the functions of introductions or conclusions.

In some undergraduate courses, it should be noted, general comments are being replaced by or complemented with assignment 'attachments' or pro formas of the kind illustrated in *figure 9*. These can provide a straightforward and economical way of giving feedback in a form which directly relates a tutor's observations to the criteria being used to evaluate the assignment. And since tutors normally retain a copy of each completed pro forma or attachment for their own records, it is a simple matter to survey these in order to gain a precise picture of the collective strengths and weaknesses of one's tutees – and thus to establish what additional guidance is likely to have the greatest impact.

ASSIGNMENT ATTACHMENTS: AN EXAMPLE[10]

Energy and Life Systems

Student's name: Assignment grade:

Itemised Rating Scale
(ticked when applicable)

STRUCTURE
    Essay relevant to topic   ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐   Essay has little relevance
    Topic covered in depth   ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐   Superficial treatment of topic
ARGUMENT
    Accurate presentation of evidence   ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐   Much evidence inaccurate or questionable
    Logically developed argument   ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐   Essay rambles and lacks continuity
    Original and creative thought   ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐   Little evidence of originality
STYLE
    Fluent piece of writing   ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐   Clumsily written
    Succinct writing   ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐   Unnecessarily repetitive
PRESENTATION
    Legible and well set out work   ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐   Untidy and difficult to read
    Reasonable length   ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐   Over/under length
SOURCES
    Adequate acknowledgement of sources   ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐   Inadequate acknowledgement of sources
    Correct citation of references   ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐   Incorrect referencing
MECHANICS
    Grammatical sentences   ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐   Several ungrammatical sentences
    Correct spelling throughout   ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐   Much incorrect spelling
    Effective use of figures and tables   ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐   Figures and tables add little to argument
    Correct use of units and quantitites   ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐   Some units incorrect

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Explanation and Comments

Tutor:

Figure 9

Follow-Up

Comments on assignments are not the only means of providing students with feedback. Indeed there are advantages in combining written or pro forma comments with some form of follow-up guidance, since many students – and particularly those with a heavy load of coursework – may be prone to see each assignment as an isolated task "with no past or future".[11]

There are various possibilities open to you. You could spend part of a tutorial giving a short 'post-mortem' on issues of wide relevance emerging from the marked assignments; or achieve the same end in the form of a handout; or encourage those who are keen to have further guidance to make an appointment with you. If you opt for a post-mortem, however, remind yourself firmly that you are not actually dissecting a corpse. You will kill off your students' enthusiasm if you castigate individuals in public or dwell on everyone's shortcomings. It is much better to focus on what was done well (and why), or to draw attention to the different but equally effective ways in which problems raised by the assignment had been tackled.

Finally, there is the question of record-keeping. It is of course essential to keep an accurate record of marks or grades, which will have to be passed on to the course leader or the departmental office. It is also a good idea (especially if a pro forma is not being used) to keep some record of your general comments. You may want to refer back to these at a later date, to check, for example, whether a particular student's work has been regularly dogged by the same shortcomings – and thus whether special action may be needed to bring about real improvement.

No less importantly, reviewing these records at a later date may help to bring home to you what your tutees were able to do in their written work by the end of the course that they could not accomplish when it began. This is a valuable reminder of the point made at the beginning of this chapter: assessment is about learning as well as grading.

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