

PRIMARY TEACHING

EDITED BY

CATHERINE CARDEN

LEARNING
& TEACHING
IN PRIMARY
SCHOOLS
TODAY

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CONTENTS

<i>About the editor and contributors</i>	ix
<i>Editor's preface</i>	xv
<i>Foreword</i>	xvii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xix
<i>Guide to your book</i>	xx
Part 1: Understanding primary teaching	1
1 What is teaching? <i>Catherine Carden and Virginia Bower</i>	3
2 What is teacher training? <i>Karen Kilkenny</i>	23
3 What are the realities of being a teacher in the UK today? <i>Janet Oosthuysen</i>	47
4 Who are our 21st-century children? <i>Jan Grinstead</i>	61
5 What matters in early childhood? <i>Zenna Kingdon and Ioanna Palaiologou</i>	77
6 What do student teachers need to know about child development? <i>Ioanna Palaiologou</i>	93
7 How do children learn? <i>Sean MacBlain</i>	111
8 How can I bring evidence-based practice into my classroom? <i>Mark Boylan</i>	133
9 Does curriculum really matter? <i>Paul Killen and Avril Rowley</i>	149
10 What are we good at anyway? An international comparison <i>Geraldine Magennis</i>	167

- 11 What drives primary schools today? 187
Michael Green and Bonnie Kerr

Part 2: Essential principles for teaching 203

- 12 Why is teacher professionalism important? 205
Glenn Stone
- 13 How do teachers plan effective learning episodes for children? 221
Deborah Wilkinson and Lorna Earle
- 14 How might we frame 'behaviour' in primary schools? 243
Mark Sackville-Ford
- 15 Talk and communication: couldn't they just sit down and shut up? 263
Kate Allott and David Waugh
- 16 What is assessment? 279
Mary Briggs
- 17 What can teachers do to raise outcomes for children with special educational needs and disabilities? 299
Jonathan Glazzard

Part 3: Developing skills for teaching 319

- 18 How can I work to ensure a positive primary school placement? 321
Cara Broadhurst
- 19 Thinking outside the box: How can you maximise the potential of the learning and teaching environment? 337
Genea Alexander and Julie Sutton
- 20 How can questions, pace and delivery promote deep learning and thinking? 355
Jonathan Doherty
- 21 Does an enquiry-based approach to learning still matter? 371
Deborah Wilkinson and Linda Cooper
- 22 How can we build positive relationships with children and parents? 381
Noel Purdy, Jill Dunn and Diane McClelland
- 23 How can opportunities beyond the classroom maximise learning outcomes? 393
Elaine Skates

24	How do we ensure that our classrooms are truly inclusive? <i>Deborah Langston</i>	411
25	Is data the whole story? The data-led accountability of teachers <i>Darren McKay</i>	425
Part 4: Teaching now		443
26	What are the issues surrounding teacher workload? <i>Michael Green</i>	445
27	Why bother with digital technology? <i>Kelly Carabott and Amber McLeod</i>	459
28	What is the true power of reading? <i>Louise Johns-Shepherd</i>	473
29	What is the potential of a primary STEM curriculum? <i>Alan Cross</i>	485
30	What effect is mastery having on the teaching of mathematics in primary schools? <i>Claire Morse</i>	499
31	A broad and balanced curriculum? <i>Susan Ogier</i>	521
32	Why do teachers need to know about child mental health? <i>Sarah Adams, Michelle O'Reilly and Khalid Karim</i>	535
Part 5: Building a career		553
33	What next? Beginning teaching and moving forward <i>Lucy Barker</i>	555
34	Continuing professional development: what does it really mean, and how can teachers best engage with it? <i>Mary McAteer and Conor McAteer</i>	571
35	How can I become part of a network of colleagues who will support and challenge me? <i>Sway Grantham</i>	583
36	Is engaging with and in research a worthwhile investment for teachers? <i>Cat Scutt</i>	595

Contents

Appendices	611
1 Academic assignments for Initial Teacher Education <i>Rebecca Austin</i>	611
2 The Teachers' Standards for England	623
3 The Northern Ireland teacher competences	629
4 The Standards for Registration: mandatory requirements for registration with the General Teaching Council for Scotland	639
5 The professional standards for teaching and leadership for Wales	651
<i>Index</i>	657

APPENDIX 1

ACADEMIC ASSIGNMENTS FOR INITIAL TEACHER EDUCATION

Rebecca Austin is the Primary English Team Leader at Canterbury Christ Church University. She joined the university in 2001 following over a decade working in Kent primary schools. Teaching on Primary English courses across a range of initial teacher education programmes as well as at Master's and Doctoral level, Rebecca also provides staff development for schools.

- WHY DO I HAVE TO DO ASSIGNMENTS?
- WHAT ARE ASSIGNMENTS ALL ABOUT?
- WHAT KIND OF ASSIGNMENTS WILL I DO?
- HOW WILL I BE ASSESSED?

- WHAT ARE THEY LOOKING FOR?
- FREQUENT MISTAKES
- STUDY SKILLS
- GETTING FEEDBACK
- DEALING WITH A FAILED ASSIGNMENT

KEY WORDS

- Assignments
- Academic
- Research
- Understanding
- Criticality
- Argument
- Source
- Reference
- Assessment
- Feedback
- Study

WHY DO I HAVE TO DO ASSIGNMENTS FOR MY TEACHER EDUCATION COURSE?

For many student teachers, it is the practical experiences in the classroom where they feel they do the most important part of their learning. The assignments that their course requires can sometimes seem to be an unnecessary additional burden, or even just a hoop to jump through. It is important, however, that you reflect on the purpose of assignments and their significance for your professional practice.

A truly reflective practitioner will have good reasons underpinning their every move in the classroom – they will be able to explain and justify everything from the seating arrangements to the approach they use to teach any aspect of the curriculum. A reflective practitioner can only do this if they have engaged with a range of possibilities from which they can make their choice. Those possibilities are found in the scholarly writing and research that you are asked to read as part of your course and, inevitably, as you prepare for assignments.

The assignments that you undertake will have been designed to help you understand the breadth of primary education. Your assignments will help you to explore how the school context has been constructed and played out over many years, influenced by thinking from several diverse fields and disciplines. It is not random chance that has led primary education to its current state – there are historical, cultural, societal, political, ideological and philosophical elements at play, which are all in a constant state of flux. What we know about teaching and learning in primary schools has been influenced by thinking from the fields of education, psychology, sociology, anthropology, and more. The way in which primary schools are shaped and the expectations of those who teach in them is not something that can be easily and simply explained – it is the result of a complex interplay of a range of disparate components. Be wary of simple solutions – you can't fit teachers and the children they teach into boxes – there is no one size that fits all.

The issue, of course, is that almost everyone you meet has been to school – they have experienced education and therefore have personal and experiential knowledge on which they draw to outline their own beliefs about good teachers, good schools and a good education. Education is far bigger, however, than individual experiences and those individual experiences themselves are all rooted in the contexts and influences I outlined above. They are not neutral, objective experiences, but situated, unreliable instantiations of education in practice. The person who says 'learning my tables off by heart never did me any harm' is generally oblivious to wider arguments about the need for understanding alongside memorisation and is probably not someone who had any kind of difficulty in remembering them! Just because it worked for them, doesn't mean it will work for everyone. It is not good enough for a teacher to justify what they do in the classroom with 'well it worked for me'.

WHAT ARE ASSIGNMENTS ALL ABOUT?

Critical reflection is, quite simply, the sustained and intentional process of identifying and checking the accuracy and validity of our teaching assumptions.

Brookfield (2017, p. 3)

This is what research and assignments are all about. As you embark on assignments, you are being asked to engage with a bigger picture. You are, being asked to move away from your own experiences and reflect on the reasons why certain aspects of primary education are, as they are and to consider what possibilities there are for practice that will offer the best chance of success for the children with whom you will work. In a thirty-year career, you might work with a thousand children or more – every one of whom will have different needs and make different demands on you. The work you put into your assignments will be an essential ingredient in your ability to understand how you can respond to each child in the very best way possible. You cannot rely on your personal experience and consequent beliefs without finding out whether there is the weight of scholarly work and research-based evidence to support what you do.

WHAT KIND OF ASSIGNMENTS WILL I DO?

When teacher training courses are designed, those who write them consider the key elements that students need to know and understand to be effective teachers in the primary school. They then consider the best ways in which the student teachers can demonstrate their knowledge and understanding in the assessment process. Each university will have regulations in relation to the kinds of assignments, the length of assignments and the number of credits they carry, and the criteria they use to assess them. There are national benchmarks in relation to the level of the assignment (which year of a degree you are in, or whether your work is being assessed at Master's level) and there is a robust system of external examining.

RESEARCH ASSIGNMENTS

You are likely to be asked to undertake an assignment as part of your training which requires you to go and collect empirical data. The purpose of such assignments is to foster your developing understanding of the way in which research evidence informs and develops practice. Research assignments will also demonstrate to you that 'research' is more than just giving something a go in the classroom – Stenhouse (1975) describes research as 'systematic enquiry made public' – the need to be systematic, thoughtful, rigorous and informed when undertaking research is something that you need to understand as you move into your career. You are making a contribution to knowledge, albeit in a small-scale way, and you must ensure that your contribution is valid.

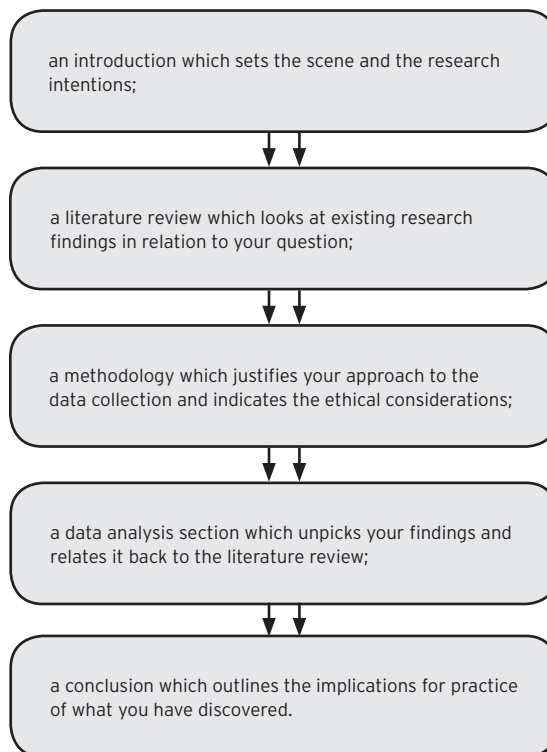
Research assignments will involve devising a research question and a corresponding approach to collecting data that will enable you to explore the answers to your question. You will then be required to draw on a particular structure in the writing up of what you have done.

REFLECTIVE WRITING, ASSIGNMENTS, ORAL PRESENTATIONS, POSTERS AND OTHER ASSESSMENT FORMS

One of the particular challenges for student teachers is that they are asked to engage with a very wide range of kinds of writing and assignments. You might be asked to write reflectively about practice; you will need to write essay-style pieces; you might need to produce rationales to support a particular approach to teaching. You

might be asked to undertake oral or poster presentations – or even make a film! Each time you are faced with a new assignment, consider what style you need to use – a reflective piece is going to be more likely to draw on your personal experience and examples – and then how you are going to make it your own through the way you express yourself.

The structure is the same as that used in many journal articles that report on empirical research:



For further support with undertaking such assignments, take a look at Austin (2016), *Researching Primary Education*.

HOW WILL MY ASSIGNMENTS BE ASSESSED?

When you are being assessed, your tutors are looking for you to be able to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the focus of the assignment. Whilst it is an overused epithet, the importance of ‘reading the question’ – understanding what it is that is being asked of you – cannot be understated. If in doubt, ask! Understanding what is not being asked of you can be equally useful. When reading assignments your tutors are *not* looking for:

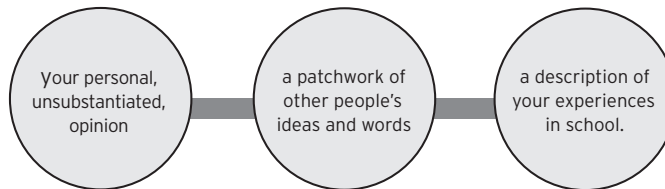
INFO A1

In your academic assignments for initial teacher education your tutors are **not** looking for:

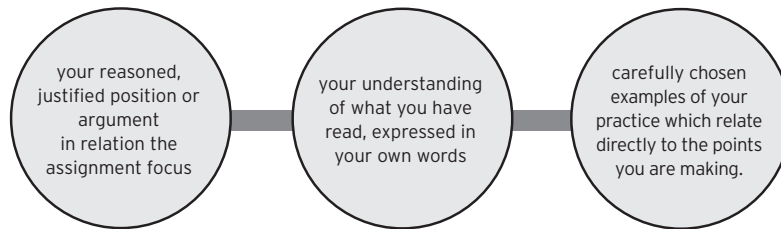
- your personal, unsubstantiated, opinion
- a patchwork of other people's ideas and words
- a description of your experiences in school

They **are** looking for:

- your reasoned, justified position or argument in relation the assignment focus
- your understanding of what you have read, expressed in your own words
- carefully chosen examples of your practice which relate directly to the points you are making



What they are looking for is:



This is summarised in Figure A1.

When I have tutorials with students to support them in the resubmission of a failed assignment, the first thing I ask them is, 'Did you understand what you were writing/talking about?' A significant majority respond with 'No, not really.'

Viv Wilson's chapters in *Researching Primary Education* (Austin, 2016) provide valuable support for those engaged with writing academically – recognising that 'for quite a few people entering higher education, this type of writing is difficult and off-putting' (p. 113).

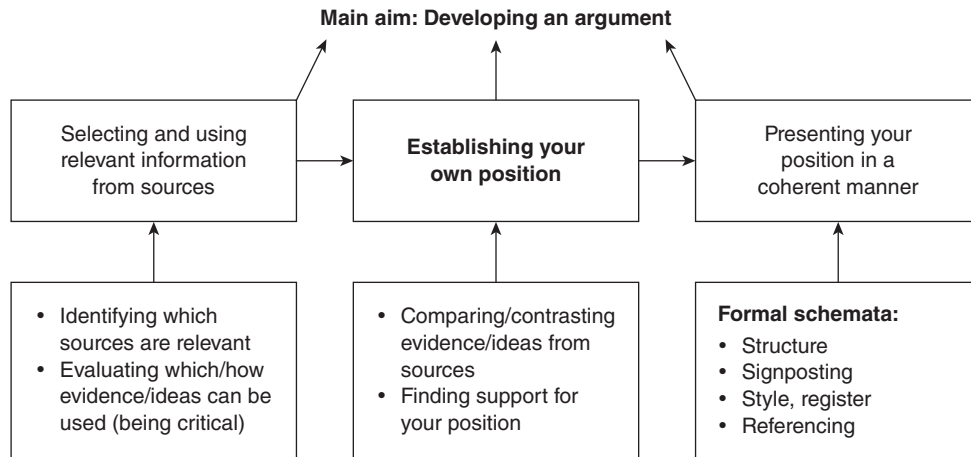
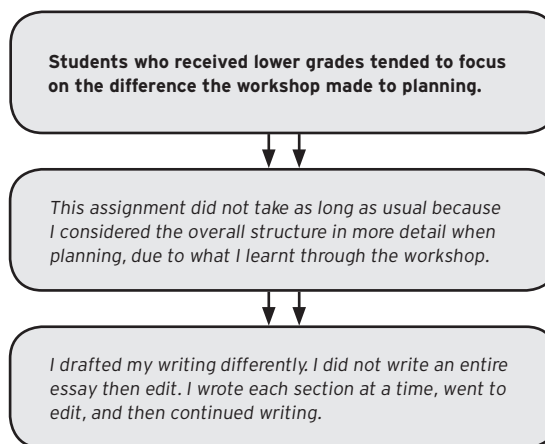


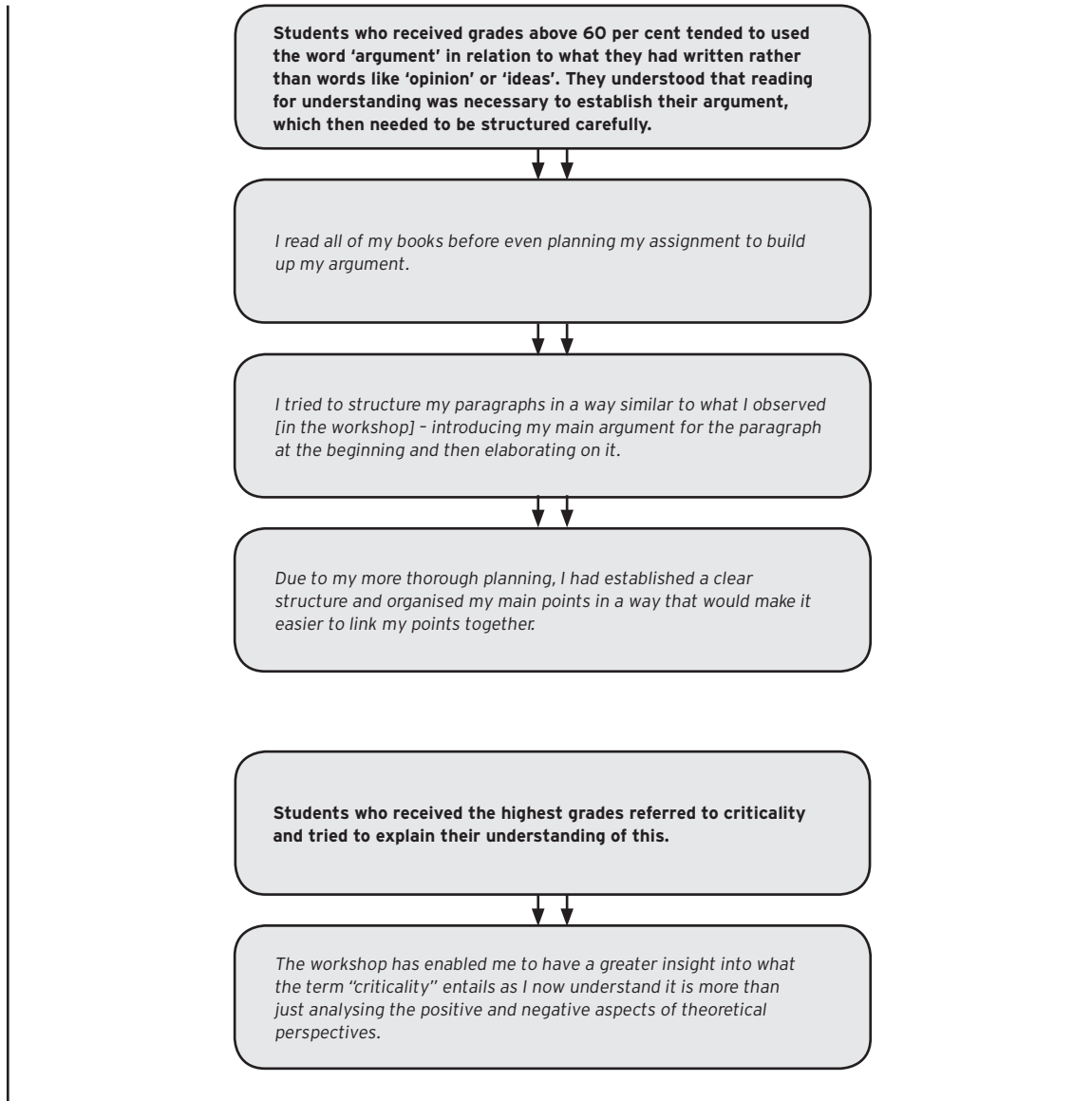
Figure A1 Essay writing framework (Wingate, 2012, p. 153)

CASE STUDY

Success in academic writing - learning from other students

Final-year undergraduate initial teacher education students took part in a workshop that modelled the process of planning an assignment and structuring an argument. This was part of a research project about developing students' academic writing. They were then asked to feed back about how they felt it had helped. The key findings were:





Most universities have marking criteria – often in the form of a grid or rubric – that will be divided into sections that outline generic criteria in relation to the assignments. These will vary from university to university, but will be a valuable guide to the expectations for different grade boundaries. It is sometimes worth having these grids in front of you, along with the assignment title, as you work. It can keep you focused on the elements that your marker will be looking for.

SO WHAT DO I NEED TO DEMONSTRATE THROUGH MY ASSIGNMENTS?

Your assignments are an opportunity for you to demonstrate/evidence/show your skills and knowledge. Your tutors are looking for:

Knowledge: Have you read the right books/texts? Have you understood the focus/scope of the assignment and engaged in the reading you need to understand the key issues? Have you articulated the key areas that relate to the assignment focus?

Understanding: Have you demonstrated your understanding of what you have read? Have you understood what the key issues are – why they are issues? Do you understand what is contested (where there is disagreement)? What is given? Have you expressed *your* understanding? If you have extensively drawn on quotations or near paraphrases or repetitions of what you have read, then your reader will not know whether *you* understand. When you are taking a driving test your examiner will want to know that you are using your rear-view mirror – many people demonstrate this by turning their whole head towards the mirror rather than just taking a sideways glance. In a way, demonstrating understanding in assignments is rather like this – you may well understand the quote you have just used – but you need to show the marker you understand – so add a sentence to reinforce the point the quote is making. I once had a student say to me that she thought it was patronising to her tutors if she explained points that seemed obvious to her and that she knew her tutors already understood. I appreciated her dilemma to some extent, but an important thing to remember is that it really is immaterial what tutors know and understand – you are demonstrating what *you* know. There are no hard-and-fast rules and as you develop a written style you might find ways to demonstrate understanding that move beyond ‘This means ...’ – for example, using an instance from your practice to illustrate a point. Keeping focused on the title of the assignment might also help; if the assignment is about behaviourism in the classroom, you need to be sure that you have demonstrated a solid understanding of behaviourism. So you might say: ‘There are different ways of responding to children in the classroom, such as the behaviourist approach of using extrinsic rewards for good behaviour.’

Criticality: A frequent error assignment writers make is mistaking criticality for criticising. You are *not* being subjectively critical, but objectively so. It is the difference between saying that homework is awful and damages children, and a more measured response that looks at the different kinds of homework provided by schools, its different purposes and the different ways in which it is enforced – all linked to reading. You can then substantiate an argument which might say that most homework at primary school does not have a significant impact, but that there are nuances about the reality of its implementation.

Analysis: This is where you offer a ‘so what?’ stance – often linked to a critical perspective. So where you have understood what is meant by learning styles and the suggestions that there are some limitations to the ways in which they are adopted by some schools, you might go on to demonstrate that you understand the implications of this.

Argument: This is the heart of it – this is the whole point of your assignment! In your argument you take an informed position and put your case to your reader. This is not the ‘unsubstantiated personal opinion’ that often makes students fearful of using ‘I’ in their writing, nor is it a ‘balanced view’ that merely describes alternative points of view. This is where your understanding, criticality and analysis meets your

considered opinion. You believe that children in Key Stage 2 should read picture books – not because it seems like a good idea, but because you have read, understood, analysed and evaluated the arguments around the issue and re-created them in your own, personalised assignment.

Structure/organisation: As you construct your argument you will need to be sure that you have presented it in such a way that your train of thought is evident to your reader. You will start with the premises you wish to explore and build up a series of points through to an overall conclusion. Each point will link to the one before and each point will have its own paragraph (or two) which ensures that it is clearly articulated before moving to the next. Your plan (if you are a planner!) will consist of the main argument, broken down into points you wish to make. The ways in which you then support your points, with reference to the reading you have examined, will be crucial in underlining the robustness of the arguments you make.

Referencing: Referencing is not a hoop to jump through. It is fundamental to the ways in which you can demonstrate that you have engaged with the scholarly community and that you understand that who said what, when they said it and why they said it are highly significant. You are demonstrating that you understand that you are joining this community by acknowledging that you are standing on the shoulders of others who have been there and already thought about the things you are now engaging with. So referencing the work of others is vital – but referencing them correctly and accurately is also important. Your reader needs to be able to know where your ideas have come from and who has influenced your thinking.

Sometimes it might be that the reading you have done has contributed broadly to the way you think about something – so reading Vygotsky has made you consider the importance of the social aspect of learning. Where this is the case you might just put the author's/authors' names in brackets after a discussion about group work. In fact, you might list two or three or even more. What you are acknowledging is that this is not a new idea and that you have learnt about it in general terms from those you are referencing. You will need to reference the name of the author and the date that they were writing to help contextualise the ideas that you are referring to.

If the idea is very specific and identified in a particular place in one text or if you are using a direct quote then you should ensure that you include the page number too – so that this can be easily found by your reader.

Each university will subscribe to a particular form of referencing and they will provide guides as to the specific ways in which your references and reference list should be presented. There will also be guides within your university library and librarians are an excellent source of information too.

Style: There are two different elements operating here – your personal written/spoken style and the academic style to which you are being asked to conform. It might help to think of academic writing as a genre, with particular features which you are required to use. It helps if you are aware of those stylistic features. Just as when you teach children to write traditional tales, you outline the unique features of traditional tales that they will need to include and the kind of language and structures they might draw on. Voice is what comes through when you read one of those stories and immediately recognise which child has written it.

Voice: When you write, you want something of you to come through. The voice in your writing is the way in which you inject yourself into the words and the argument. As above with children writing stories, can a tutor recognise you from your writing? When you are writing academically it is tempting to try to

project a neutral, unrecognisable voice, but this is not necessary. You can still be you! Where one student might write, 'I have always passionately believed that children's rights should be at the forefront of their education', another might write, 'I think that children's rights deserve due consideration when planning curricula' – do you get a different sense of what these two students might be like? That is voice.

FREQUENT ERRORS IN INITIAL TEACHER EDUCATION ASSIGNMENTS

The following errors frequently occur:

Stating the obvious: 'Children need to be taught well in order to learn effectively' – Well, yes. But what you are demonstrating in an assignment is that you know what effective teaching and learning looks like and why it is effective. It would be like saying: 'You have to write a good assignment in order to get a high grade'!

Overuse of the thesaurus: While the built-in thesaurus in Word can be extremely helpful it does not identify for you the nuanced differences in meaning of the different synonyms. Synonyms do not mean *exactly* the same thing and you need to be sure that the word you have chosen as a substitute for your first choice does what you want it to do in the context of the sentence. 'Effective teaching and learning' is *not* the same as 'Operative instruction and erudition'!

Over-complicating the language as a substitute for expressing complexity: As a general rule in assignments, express your understanding as simply and clearly as possible. Many students' understanding is obscured by unnecessarily convoluted or complicated sentences. If your reader cannot understand what you are trying to express, they cannot possibly know what you yourself understand. I have a clear memory of a student beginning her assignment with the words: 'Notwithstanding absolute advocacy ...' – I spent some time trying to work out what it was she was trying to say and in the end had to resort to the kind of comment that most markers try hard to avoid: 'I don't understand what you mean by this.'

Muddling connectives: Therefore, nevertheless, so, whereas, and so on all mean very different things and will have an effect on your argument and how you present it. Make sure you have used the right word for the right meaning. There are several helpful online resources that list conjunctions and their function.

Cohesion: Using conjunctions carefully is one way to ensure that you are writing cohesively – in a way that holds together. Issues with cohesion can also appear in other ways. There are often times where students engage in a long discussion about a particular issue. The word 'this' will then appear: 'This shows that ...'. It is often the case that in the course of a longer argument, it is not clear what 'this' refers to.

Rhetorical questions: As you are writing and exploring an issue it is good that questions arise for you – it shows you are thinking about things in some depth. As you address those questions you will develop your understanding and can use it in your developing argument. What you should avoid, however, is simply stating the questions and not answering them. Rather than saying: 'Why is it, then, that so many schools continue to use stickers to encourage good behaviour?' You might write: 'Stickers are used to encourage good behaviour in many schools – this might be simply because it is familiar, embedded practice.'

Letting quotes speak for themselves: If you use a quotation from literature, either use it to introduce a point that you then go on to develop, or use it to support the point/argument you have already made.

Simply throwing a quote into an assignment without further discussion or development shows only that the author of the quote knows what he/she means.

STUDY SKILLS

Study skills is rather a broad umbrella term. It is likely that there is some support with study skills such as assignment writing, built into your course. This might be more obvious in degree programmes than postgraduate courses – because if you already have a degree it is likely that you require less support than undergraduates. Universities also provide support for study skills built into their package of student support – if you feel this is what you need, don't hesitate to take up what is on offer. Study support at university is not just for those who feel they are particularly weak at writing, either – students who want to improve their grades also seek support from the university.

GETTING FEEDBACK

Providing feedback on your assignments and awarding grades are aspects of our work that all tutors take very seriously. We understand how important it is to you: how hard you have worked on your assignments; how difficult it can be if you don't get as high a grade as you had hoped for; and that you want feedback that enables you to know how to improve your work for each assignment.

You should expect that the feedback that you get on your assignment provides what you need to know in order to understand why your assignment has been awarded the grade it has been given and how you can move forward.

There is likely some variation in the style in which tutors provide the written feedback – the way they phrase their comments, what they do and don't comment on and whether they write more in the general comment box or as individual comments on the script. All marking tutors' comments, however, will provide you with:

- an understanding of why you have the numerical grade you have been awarded (where relevant);
- an understanding of specific aspects of the assignment where you have done well;
- an understanding of what you can do to improve;
- an indication of where you have made errors in spelling, punctuation and grammar (however, tutors will not necessarily point out every error);
- an indication that special considerations have been applied where appropriate;
- comment about the content of your writing in relation to the title and learning outcomes;
- comment about the range of reading you have undertaken and its relevance to the assignment;
- comment about the way in which you have positioned yourself in relation to what you have read and how this informs your argument;

- comment about how well you demonstrate your knowledge and understanding of key concepts and issues;
- comment about your specific subject knowledge where appropriate;
- recognition of your engagement with the assignment focus, including how you relate this appropriately to your experiences of learning and teaching.

DEALING WITH A FAILED ASSIGNMENT

If you find yourself in the position of having failed an assignment, always take advantage of whatever help is offered to you by your university in the process of resubmission. Take time to read and digest the comments that the marker has provided, and be proactive in how you go about ensuring that you know exactly where you went wrong and what you need to do to put it right.

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