

Reading and Writing History

Activity

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This is a seminar plan for a discussion-based session lasting 50 minutes. The session is aimed at first-year undergraduates. It is intended to help students understand what is required from university-level assessments and to introduce them to the marking criteria. It uses an essay as the sample assessment and is designed as a session for first-year skills modules, but could easily be adapted for other assessments, for modules using assessment types that students have not previously encountered, or to critique AI-generated assessments.

Context and aim

This seminar activity asks students to mark a student essay using departmental marking criteria. Putting students in the position of the essay marker helps them to understand what markers are looking for in essays. The session prompts discussion of how to develop and deploy relevant skills in the context of their own assessments. It is also a useful exercise to bridge any gaps in understanding between tutors and students – the group discussion is an opportunity to establish students' assumptions about assessment and so can help tutors to pitch future conversations at the appropriate level.

Preparation

For students:

Ahead of the session, provide students with a student essay and the departmental marking criteria. Ask them to evaluate the essay using the

departmental marking criteria, to note the strengths and weaknesses of the essay, and to arrive at an indicative mark.

For tutors:

Mark the essay and write feedback. If you are part of a teaching team, it is helpful for tutors on the module to undertake this exercise together. For the session itself, it can be helpful to bring a few print copies of the student essay and the marking criteria to ensure that any students who have been unable to complete the preparation are able to participate in group work.

Description of activity

Introduction: Large group discussion [5 minutes]

Re-cap the exercise for students. Ask students what mark they awarded the essay. There is often a high degree of variation.

Part 1: Small group discussion and report back [20 minutes]

Divide students into three groups and ask them to discuss the following aspects of the essay. Groups have ten minutes for discussion, and then ten minutes is available for groups to report back.

Group 1:

Does the introduction to this essay:

- State the problem/issue the essay will explore?
- Show the student's awareness of debates about the topic, perhaps summarizing how historians have approached it and where they disagree?
- Define key terms (if this is relevant)?
- Indicate (or 'signpost') the direction that the argument will take?

Group 2:

Focus on one paragraph from the main body of the essay (e.g. not the introduction or conclusion):

Does this paragraph:

- Tackle a single point or argument?
- Include supporting evidence for the central point of the paragraph?

- Begin with a 'linking sentence' which shows how the argument links back to the previous paragraph and to the overall argument?
- End with either a 'linking sentence' which leads into the next paragraph, or a 'concluding sentence' which summarizes the point of the paragraph?

Group 3:

Does the conclusion:

- Summarize the argument?
- Draw all the evidence together?
- Avoid introducing new material?
- Avoid performing a U-turn?
- Match up with the introduction?

Part 2: Large group discussion [10 minutes]

This part of the session opens up a discussion on essay-writing style. The aim is to emphasize the importance of effective communication in assignments and to reassure students that they do not need to develop an elevated or 'academic-sounding' style.

The exact content of this part of the session can be adapted to the specific essay that students have marked, but tutors can explore the following areas:

- Explain some of the key features of good essay-writing style, including precision; concision; backing up points with evidence; paraphrasing rather than always using direct quotations.
- As a group, you can rewrite some sentences from the essay to make them clearer.
- Extract some examples of direct quotation from the essay and ask the group whether these direct quotations are effective, or if the author of the essay should have paraphrased instead.

Part 3: Large group discussion [10 minutes]

This part of the discussion focuses on extent of reading, referencing and bibliography. It is an opportunity to ensure that students are familiar with the extent of reading expected, and with the importance of knowing *when* as well as how to reference. You can discuss the following areas:

Does the essay:

- Demonstrate that the student has read widely on the topic?
- Include references in all the necessary places (when a direct quotation is used, when factual information is included and when the ideas or arguments of another historian are paraphrased)?
- Include references in the appropriate places (at the end of the sentence and after punctuation)?
- Reference in the correct format (in footnotes and in bibliography)?

Wrap-up [5 minutes]

Return to the marks that students had given the essay before the session. Ask if they have reappraised the mark as a result of the discussion. You can also ask what areas they would focus on when giving feedback to the author of the essay.