

**MONASH TRANSITION TO TERTIARY WRITING PROJECT  
PART ONE**

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*The Monash Transition to Tertiary Writing Project seeks to produce a web-based resource for first-year students to facilitate their transition to the kinds of thinking and writing valued at university. The background research on which the project is based centres on three main areas. First is the evidence provided by Year 12 teacher observations about the likely difficulties teachers expect students to experience in making the transition, and also by an analysis of the kinds of texts which are valued at year 12 level. The second area concerns first-year students' comments about writing their first assignment and how well-prepared they felt themselves to be. The third involves lecturers' comments written on student assignments and in interview. These three areas yield a number of insights about sources of confusion for students making this transition, which is both a vertical one (school to university) and a lateral one (moving from one discipline specialism to the next). The remainder of the paper outlines the nature of the resource and how it attempts to address these sources of confusion.*

**Introduction**

Transition research suggests that many students experience a range of academic adjustment difficulties when they commence their university study, many of which relate to the challenges imposed by new types of writing (Candlin, 1998). In undergraduate education, there is a need to find ways - both new ways and ones that are supplemental to any existing *good* practices - that make explicit for students the types of writing and researching that are required of them in their courses. The *Monash Transition to Tertiary Writing Project* aims to develop a web-based writing resource as one way of addressing the uncertainty and confusion born of these difficulties.

In this paper we provide first an outline of the background research into Year 12 practices, first-year students' writing experiences, and institutional response. We then present the resource itself in its current state of development, along with discussion of some of the ideas underpinning its structure. Let us begin, however, with a brief discussion of a conceptual model of university writing that has informed the design of the resource.

**A model of university writing - texts, processes and practices**

Within the language and academic skills field, it has been well-understood that there is a need for literacy pedagogy(ies) to provide for students a fuller contextual account of writing(eg Halliday, 1978; Johns, 1997), including an understanding of the processes by which it is constructed, as well as the social purposes and conditions that shape this construction (Swales, 1990).

Candlin (1998) lays out three "perspectives" that need to be drawn on to understand the nature of writing in the tertiary domain, each suggesting its own research methodology:

## *Sources of Confusion*

- *textual structures* - involving “linguistic descriptions” of the genres of student writing: essays reports etc.
- *discursive processes* - involving students’ understandings of the participant relationships that obtain in the academy between student-writer and tutor-reader, expressed in “ethnomethodological accounts” of the ways that students go about researching and composing their work (generated from student interviews)
- *institutional practices* - involving “ethnographic accounts” of those elements of the process that have become conventionalised and valued in the discipline (generated from a range of sources, including lecturer interviews, feedback on assignments, assignment guidelines, disciplinary style guides).

Although Candlin’s model was developed in the first instance for applied research purposes, it is our view on the *Transition to Tertiary Writing Project* that these three perspectives (and their associated methodologies) are relevant to the development of a discipline-based writing pedagogy.

For many students, the university situation represents a marked contrast to their secondary school experiences, where institutional practices and participant roles were clear: expectations were codified comprehensively in the form of quite specific assessment criteria and sub-criteria. At the university however, these practices and roles are not clear: expectations are often expressed as vague exhortations. The key concept of “critical analysis” is a case in point. Students are told frequently that they must adopt a “critical” attitude to their research, yet as Candlin (1998) points out, “disciplines are often unclear and inexplicit about what [this analysis] consists of” (p. 6). This point is taken up by Chanock (2000) who investigated lecturer and student interpretations of the term “analysis” as it is used in assignment feedback to students. Chanock found that there was a significant mismatch in the understandings of the two groups, but also surprisingly that lecturers felt there was little call on them to elaborate on the concept in their teaching.

Related to this lack of understanding about expectations and approaches is a lack of knowledge of the nature of university writing, of the valued textual structures. For students new to the academy, the problem often stems from a lack of access to appropriate generic models. They find themselves having to rely on, on the one hand, the “formative” genres of their secondary education (over which they have gained some mastery) and on the other hand the “expert” genres that make up the reading content of their course (which are clearly beyond their present abilities). Between these two poles, it can be difficult for students to find an appropriate novitiate discursive voice, one fashioned by an understanding of the textual structures, discursive processes, and institutional practices of their new writing context.

### **Aims of the project**

The project targeted ten first-year subjects: History, Literature, Philosophy, Sociology (Faculty of Arts), Commercial Law, Economics, Management and Marketing (Faculty of Business and Economics), Perspectives on Learning (Education), and Legal Process (Law). The objective was to develop a web-based module for each subject.

The project aimed to facilitate a more critical orientation to tertiary literacy for the students undertaking those subjects, with the following anticipated outcomes:

1. Students should be better positioned to understand what was required of them in their writing at university level, including knowing how to interrogate an essay topic in order to answer it fully.
2. With respect to lecturer expectations, it would be clearer to students how subtle changes in the use of language and structure can affect the success of a piece of writing. The lecturer feedback would be presented so as to provide maximum useable benefit for the student, based on current local research into how students respond to written feedback.

3. A “mentoring” experience would be provided, with the student able to draw on other students’ experience of the personal organisation necessary to the essay-writing process, and thus on alternative approaches to writing tasks.
4. Some of the benefits of a one on one discussion with an academic skills or subject lecturer would be provided in the resource’s focus on task/subject specific issues.
5. Students are often perceived as only “describing” when they should be “analysing”: the resource will give students visible evidence of what terms such as “analysing” in their subject mean.
6. The development of transferable thinking strategies may be encouraged as students are being encouraged to reflect on their learning.

To inform our development of the web modules, we also carried out research into the Year 12 writing experience and the first-year writing experience.

### **The Year 12 writing experience**

In order to elicit a *developmental* perspective on the precise nature of students’ difficulty - and thus, confusion - in these subjects, one of the project’s first tasks was to conduct a series of focus groups with a total of 25 teachers of cognate Year 12 subjects at five schools in Victoria. This was of particular relevance as students undertaking Year 12 in 2000 would be undergoing different writing experiences from those encountered in previous years under the CAT (Common Assessment System) system. Under the CAT system, students were encouraged to research assignments by engaging in additional reading and then to develop the assignment through a series of drafts. Students entering university in 2001 and thereafter will undertake school-assessed coursework (SACS), “designed to reduce workload”, which must be completed mainly in class within a limited timeframe. The implications of this change raises a range of issues for these students, particularly in terms of research and writing experience, but for the present paper, let us turn to the more perennial confusions which teachers anticipate for their students as they move from Year 12 to first-year.

In semi-structured focus groups, teachers were asked a short series of questions about the problems they thought students faced in adapting to university writing requirements. It is noteworthy that, as some first-year lecturers bemoan the lack of preparation of new first-year students, so Year 12 teachers declare themselves not in the business of “preparing kids for uni”. Their responsibility is to ensure their students learn in such a way as to complete the requirements for their subjects and get the best marks possible. Looking ahead - and knowing their students well - they felt that they would have little idea how to use a university library, would be unlikely to know how to select texts, to determine what is most relevant, or how to skim read. Because of the ubiquity of the “set text”, there was naturally a lack of exposure to different examples of disciplinary discourse in Year 12, and teachers believed students would not be aware that there were differences. In Year 12, students were not encouraged to browse the internet, and except for certain subjects, were not given any guidance as to how to evaluate sites. In contrast to previous secondary years, Year 12 students were either told specific sites to consult, or advised that internet research was “optional”. With respect to writing, the teachers identified the following areas as potential problems.

### *Understanding expectations*

Expectations for Year 12 writing continue to rest upon specific criteria to which marks are attached (eg Criterion 1, 10 marks; Criterion 2, 10 marks; Criterion 3, 4 marks). Teachers assist students to identify where they have not met criteria. The question is treated as a springboard to talk about the topic. Students are often asked for “their opinion”, and acknowledging sources is treated by them in a very “cavalier” fashion. They are taught referencing at every year level, but will tend to “play dumb” whenever they are asked about it: students will plagiarise and believe that it is OK if you can get away with it. For students, it was “sophistry” that they did not have to bother with. With respect to their audience, students are often told “explain as if the reader doesn’t understand”, so they perceive that it is important in writing to show what you know. Other than for the top students, there is a

## *Sources of Confusion*

tendency to agree with propositions in preference to grappling intellectually with issues raised (“they want to play parrot”).

### *Drafting and editing*

In many subjects in Year 12, there is little experience of expanding, elaborating, feeling one’s way. Word counts are strict; the teacher is there to give instant feedback. Some students are likely to approach university tasks by going to the other extreme and “over-playing” their writing, thinking that verbosity is what is required to be acceptable. Writing, in a number of Year 12 subjects, is treated as a transparency: for subjects such as Economics, teachers are instructed “if students are getting their message across, don’t penalise them”. Working on an assignment often involves getting the content right and not bothering about the form of words.

### *Writing at length*

Under the CAT system, students wrote longer pieces, often up to 2,000 words. Under the SACS system, there is the occasional 1,500 word assignment, but most are 800-1,000 words. In any case, the previous experience of drafting longer pieces was still different in that deadlines were carefully managed and supervised; students were told when to begin, reminded when work was due; they discussed their work and received comment on it in class; and they talked with their peers about it out of class. According to teachers, students fresh from Year 12 would have no idea how to set out the work and how to reference and format an assignment unless they were told. In most Year 12 subjects, students are told what they need to learn, and there is little point in (reward for) “reading around” a topic or taking off on a different tack; Year 12 writing gives exactly what is asked for and no more.

The majority of this strikes us as so much received wisdom, but it is still interesting how uniform the teachers’ views were across schools. Interesting too how teachers’ predictions suggested that a lot of the bother they believed students would find themselves in occurred precisely because libraries, essays, topics, deadlines were going to *look* the same, but they were not the same.

Our understanding is that while some topics in VCE are more directive, sometimes it is the teaching strategies that may make them *appear* directive to students. For example, with DISCUSS questions, students are often encouraged to set up a strong line of argument on one side as a way of dealing with them. As one teacher explained:

Certainly, I taught my students to set up a contention in relation to the topic, and encouraged them to see it as an argument in which they were trying to convince me of their point of view on the text. Without that kind of direction, they tend to just waffle without really saying anything.

In this way, students entering university are likely to have a perception that “there is a specific question requiring a definite and determined stance” from them. As a further example of this potential source of confusion for students, let us consider a set of small extracts (here out of context), which appeared in three acceptable Year 12 Literature essays:

Sample 1: “Shakespeare shows through this play the good and evil, mainly in the characters [good and bad characters and their qualities are then listed]... These qualities are the motivations of the good characters”.

Sample 2 (a): “Language is used to suggest lack of control. The idea of language as power is represented”.

Sample 2 (b): “Lear does many such things in scene 1 that show examples of his folly”

Sample 3 (a): “Shakespeare also uses symbolism to enrich his idealism and in turn the idea of forgiveness”.

Sample 3 (b): “The scene is also put in to show that all characters are not evil and dishonest”.

These statements attracted no comment from the teacher, and would, no doubt, be put down to the unsophisticated pen of the students. Let us review some of these from the point of view of a first-year tutor. The approach of the first-year tutor would probably involve concerns in number one whether qualities, good or bad, can *be* motivation; wondering whether the “*mainly* in the characters” parenthesis was the beginning of a metaphysical observation or lack of thought. In 2a, the question would be whether it is appropriate to think of Shakespeare setting *Lear* up to demonstrate folly, etc; in 3a, whether it is helpful to think of Shakespeare getting out the bag of symbolist tricks. These would not remain as isolated observations on the part of the tutor, but would seriously undermine their sense that the student had an appropriate grasp of the creative writing process, and of the way poetic drama might work. In this way, what a Year 12 teacher might overlook as merely infelicitous expression can evoke a negative institutional response on the part of the first-year tutor, creating confusion in the student.

### The first-year writing experience

The kinds of adjustment problems cited above relate to what might be called the “vertical transition” - that is from school to university. There is, however, also the “lateral” transition that students must negotiate as they move from one discipline specialism to the next, each arguably with its own distinctive discursive mode, “variations in knowledge structures and norms of inquiry, different vocabularies, differing standards of rhetorical intimacy” (Bhatia, Candlin & Hyland, 1997). In the literature on adjustment into academic culture - in both its vertical and lateral dimensions - a common metaphor for pedagogic processes is “the apprenticeship” (see for example “cognitive apprenticeship”, Lave & Wenger, 1991). In such processes, the lecturer (or disciplinary expert) is thought to provide mentoring for the “apprentice” through processes of: i) modelling, to make tacit knowledge explicit; ii) coaching, by supporting students’ attempts at performing new tasks and then iii) fading after having empowered the students to work independently (Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989).

It is fair to say, however, that within undergraduate education, these types of “apprenticing” activities are often more desired than actual. Candlin (1998) reports, for example, that students do not perceive themselves to be tutored in this way: “there is simply not the close contact with experts on real-world problems that the term apprenticeship conventionally implies” (p. 21). In Peel’s (1998) transition research, his student informants express concern about:

- a lack of provision in courses of “a transition stage” in which the development of the skills of independent inquiry, research, writing and analysis might be addressed;
- a lack of available advice and assistance in assignments and learning difficulties (due mainly to increasing academic workloads, funding cuts etc.);
- too much “unexplained” assessment of written work, where university teachers fail to explain what is required in a particular assignment and also do not indicate to students how their work could have been more successful (Peel, 1998: p. 6).

In our research for the project, we wanted more specific comments from first-year students about writing, and how prepared they felt themselves to be. We collected information from students in two ways: through a written survey conducted during tutorials for nine of the subjects (excluding Sociology due to time pressures); and through audio-taped interviews with individual students. In the survey, students were asked, *inter alia*, to rate how well they felt their year 12 assignment writing had prepared them for writing their current assignments. In order to get an accurate assessment of the students’ *perception* of their preparedness, the survey was given to students prior to marks being released.

The quantitative results of this survey are not overly surprising: on a scale of 5, where 1 is not very well prepared and 5 is very well prepared, the average across the disciplines was 3.2. Averages do tend to sit in the mid-zone; nevertheless, this result should not be taken alone, for when we examine the explanations the students gave for their rating, some interesting points

## Sources of Confusion

are revealed. Those students who felt that year 12 prepared them very well, with a rating of 4 or 5 out of 5, tended to view writing in terms of what they called “the basics”: the mechanics of writing, such as paragraphing, structuring an essay, writing effective introductions and conclusions, being concise, focussing an argument, referencing, and so on. In contrast, those students who felt that year 12 had not prepared them well at all, with a rating of 1 or 2 out of 5, tended to view writing in broader terms that incorporated approach to the task as well as “the basics”. These students commented on the lack of guidance about what content to include; the fact that university essays required independent thinking; and that students had a greater freedom to interpret questions, to provide opinions, to seek out appropriate sources, and to create their own arguments. These students emphasised the formulaic nature of VCE writing, the fact that there were very strict guidelines as to what could be written. One student described writing essays in VCE as “filling out a form”. Another wrote, “you don’t learn how to write, only copy a set of guidelines”.

The individual audio-taped interviews with students emphasised these same distinctions between writing in year 12 and university, and how well-prepared students felt. The students felt that, in addition to having fewer written guidelines and advice about what content to include, the questions themselves were “broad” and “less specific” at university, and that this was a fairly challenging change. To illustrate this point, let us examine a topic from the English subject, Reading Literature, on *Jane Eyre*, a novel that some students had recently studied in the VCE:

Mr. Rochester describes in Vol. 3, chapter 1, the circumstances in which he was married to Bertha Mason, and how he came to incarcerate her in the attic at Thornfield. What do we learn about him from this and how far does the novel endorse his claim that he has acted for the best?

One student indicated that she had great difficulty answering this question, particularly in deciding what to include. She explained that in VCE, she would have been given a passage from a text and asked a set of directed questions:

They expected you to just answer the question that they had put forward and then answer the next question, and you can do this certain amount of detail, but you can never really deviate from the question... Whereas at university ... you have a lot more room to [decide] what you want to include and don’t want to include, and I think in this way it brings out the complexity of the novel more than just being expected to answer a certain question.

Our understanding is that the aim of these focussed questions is to test the students’ ability to read literary texts closely, and that these questions would often be followed by a more open question. It is a staged pedagogical process. However, at university this ability to read closely is often taken for granted, and the expectation is for students to move straight on to a larger argument, and engage with the discourse as presented.

The second difficulty experienced by the Literature student related to the nature of the topic, in that it was asking *how far* the novel endorsed Mr. Rochester’s claim. The student felt her answer to the question suffered because in the past she had been “generally expected to take a view for or against”. The nature of this topic made this difficult to do, and she had trouble incorporating elements that did not fit with her argument. The student knew that she could have a qualified answer, but “didn’t really know how to fit it together to do that” and as a result her conclusion was comprised of a set of contradictory statements about the character. Another student had similar difficulties with this topic and suggested that if the topic were presented in VCE it would read as follows:

Mr. Rochester describes. . . . *Provide evidence from the text to show* that Mr. Rochester acted for the best.

## Sources of Confusion

The student's reformulation of the question illustrates well the point made earlier that, through exposure to prescriptive topics and to teaching strategies that assisted them to limit the scope of their answers, students often *perceived* questions to require a definite, unequivocal stance. As a consequence, many students felt unprepared for writing essays at university that required them to determine for themselves what content to include, and to construct a more complex and qualified argument. This finding is, of course, not surprising for those of us who work with students on these very issues. Nevertheless, it is useful for us to understand exactly where the sources of this confusion lie.

### Researching disciplinary writing practices

The third area of research for the project was the way in which university disciplines present their literacy practices and conventions to students. This representation occurs across a range of modes – including for example specific instructions from lecturers in class; information in course handbooks, assignment tasks, documented assessment criteria and the like. From discipline to discipline, and from subject to subject, there would appear to be considerable variety in the information provided - both in its comprehensiveness and comprehensibility. In this section, we discuss briefly some of these information sources and the types of messages they might convey to students about disciplinary literacy practices. We draw on examples from two disciplines: History and Philosophy.

The first source of information considered was assessment criteria used to mark the main essays in first year subjects in the two disciplines. On the evidence of students' secondary education experiences, it would appear that assessment criteria have an important influence over the way students conceive of writing practices. What struck us about the criteria from History and Philosophy was that, save for a number of terminological differences, there was overall a surprising degree of correspondence between them (Table 1). From the two lists, a reasonably consistent view of tertiary writing emerges, which we can characterise thus: students need to present neat work (criterion 1), written in grammatical and clear language (criteria 2 & 3), that draws on a range of sources, correctly documented (criteria 4 & 5), that is well structured (criterion 6), that presents an identifiable argument (criterion 7), that is clearly related to the question posed (criterion 8).

Table 1. Essay assessment criteria (Philosophy and History).

PHILOSOPHY	HISTORY
1. legibility & layout	presentation
2. spelling, punctuation & grammar	expression - <i>grammar</i>
3. clarity	expression - <i>clear/concise</i>
4. bibliography & citation	format - <i>has bibliography, notes if required</i>
5. comprehension & exposition of sources	depth - <i>has quotations, drawn from appropriate sources</i> accuracy - <i>has correct names, dates etc</i>
6. logical development	structure
7. argument & originality	intellectual engagement - <i>makes an argument</i>
8.	relevance - <i>answers the question</i>

From these two sets of criteria, students could reasonably conclude that there is not much to distinguish an essay in Philosophy from one in History, and that there need not be a

## *Sources of Confusion*

substantial difference in their approach to the two. But, this would appear not to be the case. To borrow from an expression, the discursive “devil” is in the detail.

When we investigated additional sources of information, some crucial differences between the two subjects began to emerge. To take the simple issue of how much reading a student should do for an assignment, the History handbook provides the following unequivocal information:

*The essay should be properly documented and footnoted. ESSAYS BASED ON TWO OR THREE SOURCES ONLY, OR NOT FOOTNOTED WILL BE FAILED (original emphasis).*

But from philosophy comes a very different perspective. The equivalent document in the Philosophy subject provided no specific information about this point. In interview, however, the subject lecturer responded thus:

*Generally for Philosophy essays, it's enough just to look at the course readings and lecture notes. Surprisingly in Philosophy extra reading can make an essay worse. So it is not really a good idea to go to the library and just take a book off the shelves – it may be an inappropriate text – not really a Philosophical one. ... So what's a reasonable number of texts to read for an essay? It will depend on the essay topic, but often it will be just one or two or three.*

Thus, for a student doing first year History and Philosophy subjects, for the former they will do well to spend time in the library; for the latter they may be advantaged by staying away from it. This is an intriguing difference that probably makes sense when one considers the epistemological bases of the two disciplines. It is nevertheless a potential source of confusion for students – especially for those who imagine one of the keys to tertiary study is to read widely for their work.

Further contrasts emerged around our investigations of the notion of argumentation (Criterion 7). The History handbook stipulates the following:

*Broadly an essay is the exposition of your argument, supported by appropriate evidence - with rigorous documentation and footnoting*

In the list of assessment criteria for Philosophy, argumentation was linked to the notion of ‘originality’. In interview, the Philosophy lecturer was quizzed about this point:

“Originality” can come out in just one or two critical comments the student makes about ARGUMENTS THEY’VE READ. Or it might come out in the examples they draw on to demonstrate a point – We are impressed when a student comes up with an example of their own devising - ONE THEY HAVE THOUGHT OF ENTIRELY THEMSELVES (emphasis added).

Again in these statements we have intimations of two quite disparate rhetorical domains. In History, students are expected to construct their own argument; in Philosophy it is principally the arguments of others with which they must engage. With respect to evidence, in History students must rigorously document much of the propositional content they include in their work; in Philosophy which deals often not with actual events, but with hypothetical scenarios, students are invited in effect to ‘invent’ their evidence. These are, if not sources of confusion, certainly sources of significant divergence - ones that suggest a need for disciplinary writing practices to be conveyed to students in a systematic way.

### **The Transition to Tertiary Writing web site**

As a way of addressing some of these issues, the *Transition to Tertiary Writing Project* was conceived. The project team was a large one, consisting of the various participants implied in the Candlin methodologies above. These included: language and academic skills staff who worked one-on-one with subject lecturers from the ten disciplines selected. Between one and three first-year student volunteers were selected to participate from each of the discipline areas above. Also involved was the educational developer, who made a major contribution



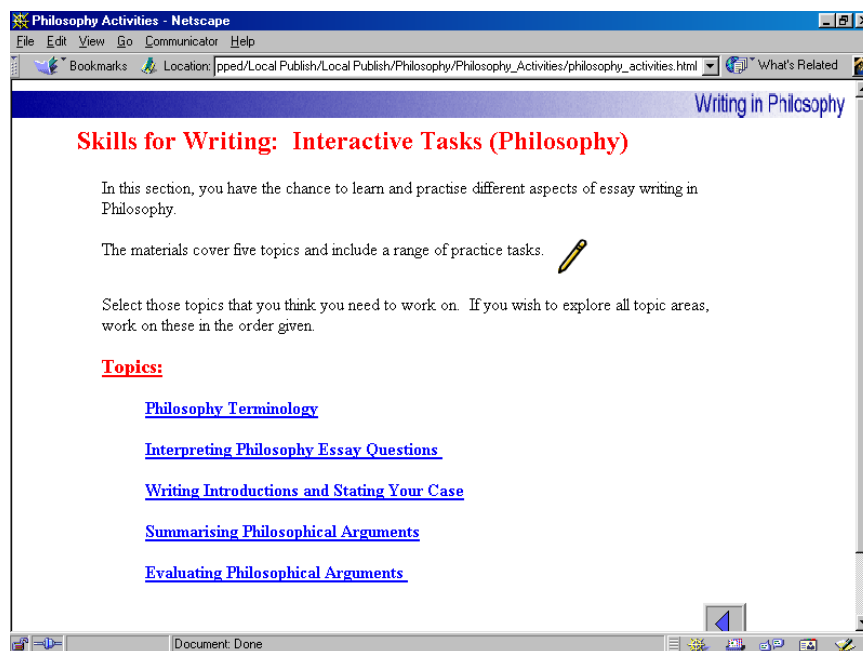
particularly to the functionality of the template, the web designer and the multi-media graphic designer.

The web-based resource is made up of ten modules, one for each of the first year subjects listed. Students access the modules by selecting a subject/discipline from the Index page. The module then divides into three sections: Writing in [Subject Area] FAQs; Skills for Writing; and Sample Assignments. The key component of the module is the sample assignment(s) produced by the student participants.

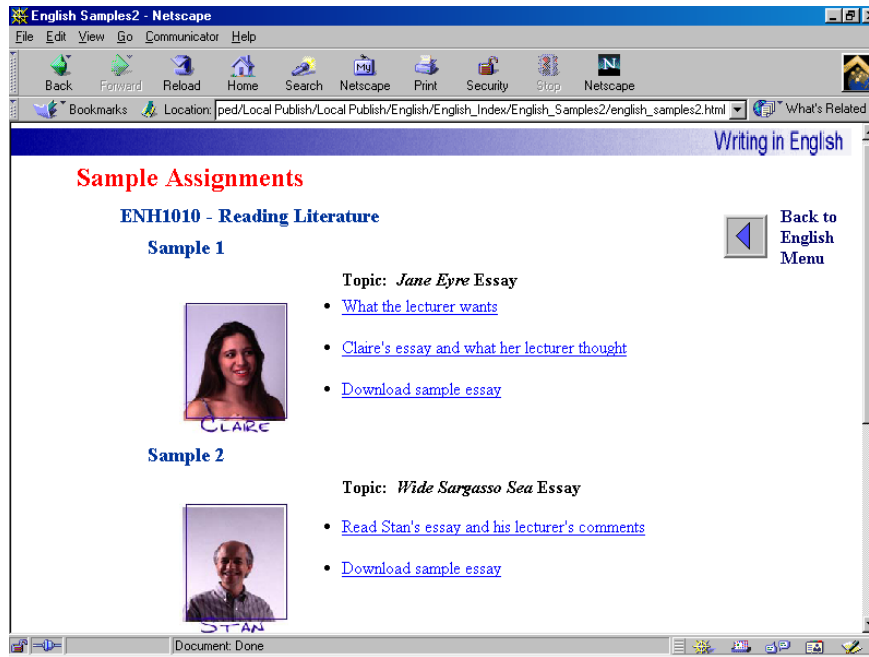
The first section of each module has as its focus the “institutional practices” of writing in the discipline, using the subject lecturer as informant. The list of Frequently Asked Questions, along with a summary of the main types of writing difficulties experienced by undergraduates, includes elaboration of key concepts such as the meaning of “analysis” in the particular disciplinary context, as defined by the lecturer and refined for web consumption by the LLS lecturer.

The second section is organised around a range of interactive tasks, aimed at facilitating students' understanding of the nature of textual structures in their discipline as in Figure 2 (Moore & Clerehan, 2000). These tasks are different for each subject and the topics are selected in consultation with the lecturer.

**Figure 1 Skills for Writing - Philosophy**



The focus of the third section is on “the student”, the “processes” involved in writing in the discipline; and the institutional expectations and response (see Figure 2 below). For each subject, there is at least one sample assignment (main essay or equivalent in each subject) where both student audio and lecturer commentary are available, in addition to the assignment itself and the lecturer’s annotations. In the case of the other sample assignments, users of the resource will see only the assignment, the lecturer’s annotations and the lecturer commentary which appears in a pop-up box. Students can print out the assignment to read if they wish.




**Figure 2 Sample assignment interface**

For the featured assignment, it was decided to suggest a sequenced approach (Figure 3 below). The first part, dealing with "What the lecturer wants" invokes both discursive processes and institutional practices as it presents the lecturer's explanation of what the topic requires (and descriptors for different grades), and invites the student to engage with how well the essay in question responds to these expectations. Students are, at this stage, presented with an unmarked essay. They are then invited to take a further step and think how the essay may have been improved. Finally, they are asked to view the annotated essay.

**Sample Assignments: *Jane Eyre* Essay**

**What the lecturer wants:**

 Claire is a first year English student. For her main essay in the subject, Claire chose from a list of six essay topics the following topic based on the novel *Jane Eyre*.

1. Look at the essay topic. What do you think a good essay on this topic would need to include?

**Essay Topic:**

Mr Rochester describes the circumstances in which he was married to Bertha Mason, and how he came to incarcerate her in the attic at Thornfield. What do we learn about him from this and how far does the novel endorse his claim that he has acted for the best?

2. Look at the lecturer's explanation of what the topic requires.

3. Now read Claire's essay .

- How well do you think the essay responds to the topic?

[Back to English Menu](#)


Figure 3 What the lecturer wants

At this point, the student users can click on the audio icons and listen to the essay's author tell how they went about researching and composing the sample assignments, beginning with their first engagement with the essay topic to their submission of the final piece of work (see Figure 4 below). The students also reflect on their broad approach to university writing, and also on what comparisons can be drawn with their experiences of secondary school writing. In accessing this section of the module, other students will have the opportunity to hear the voices of fellow students, in an interaction modelled to some extent on the notion of peer mentoring.

Figure 4 Claire's essay, introductory material

**Sample Assignments: *Jane Eyre* Essay**


**Claire's essay and what the lecturer thought**

 Claire is a first year English student. For her main essay in the subject, Claire chose from a list of six essay topics the following topic based on the novel *Jane Eyre*.

1. To hear about how Claire wrote her essay - and other comments she makes about writing in English Literature - click on the audio icons in the left margin.

2. To find out what the lecturer thought about Claire's essay click on the comments in the right margin.

**Listen to Claire's comments**

 Interpreting the topic - VCE vs Uni

**Essay Topic:**

Mr Rochester describes the circumstances in which he was married to Bertha Mason, and how he came to incarcerate her in the attic at Thornfield. What do we learn about him from this and how far does the novel endorse his claim that he has acted for the best?

**Click on the lecturer's comments**

*Jane Eyre* endorses the view that Mr. Rochester believes that he has acted for the best. Mr. Rochester is presented to the reader as a sympathetic character, so

[Back to English Menu](#)

There is a counterpoint to this page, with the students' *understandings* of the task considered in relation to the lecturer's *response* to it (see Figure 5), both in the form of annotation and also elaborated in pop-up boxes. We hope this will lead to a more informed and critical appraisal of what is involved in institutional expectations and what is involved in actually researching and composing an assignment in this discipline. At the end of the paper, the student's impressions of their completed essays will be juxtaposed with the lecturer's own final assessment.

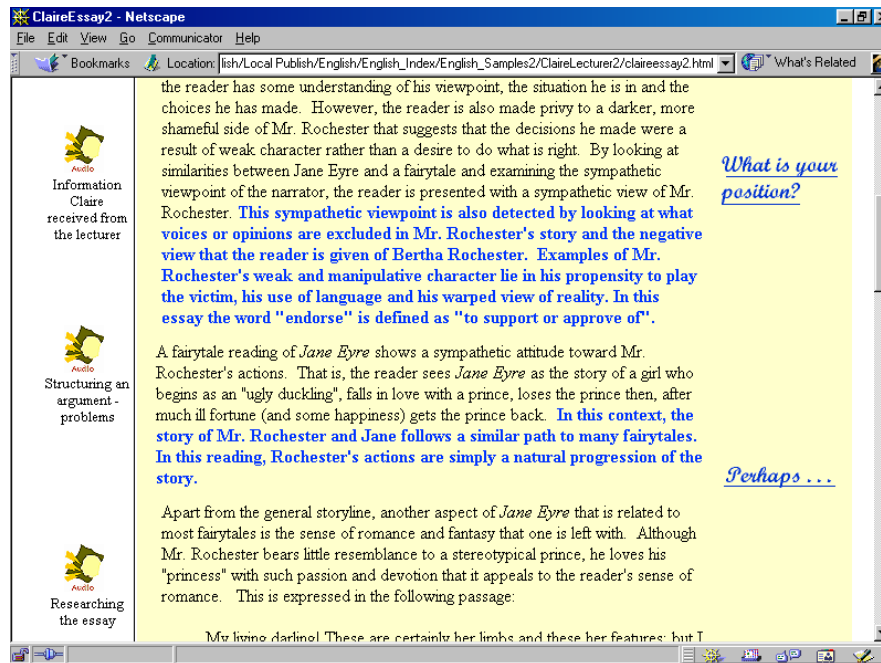


Figure 5 Claire's essay and comments

Even with a resource for which the purposes and use, we hope, are very clear, there are still possibilities of confusion for first-year students. For example, whilst the benefits of emulating a type of peer mentoring relationship are well documented (Peel, 1998), there is the potential, in an on-line setting, for the role of these peers to be misinterpreted. Student users may perceive these students as "exemplary", and think that the approaches to study they use should be copied. Thus, we have endeavoured to cast material in a thoroughly "descriptivist" rhetoric, with the aim of encouraging users to reflect upon their own practices and to draw whatever is useful from those *described* in the resource. A second strategy has been to recruit several student participants for each discipline, so that alternative approaches -- rather than a single "exemplary" one -- can be presented. Finally, we have avoided, as far as possible, selecting any disciplinary "prodigies" ie. those whose literacy practices might constitute an unattainable (and ultimately demoralising) ideal for others. Overall the project recognises that the student-to-student interaction has considerable instructional potential; but it is also understood that this interaction will need to be handled sensitively in the resource.

A second concern is that for student users of the resource, the texts, processes and practices involved in this task may not seem easily relatable to other writing contexts they must contend with. As Candlin (1998) found, the transfer of genre-specific information can be problematic. At any given point, the student user is enmeshed in their own discursive processes relative to their own quite specific learning situation. It is thus important in the resource to seek to contextualise as much as possible these specific writing tasks within the broad dimensions of disciplinary practice. It is for this reason that both the student and lecturer commentaries will move purposefully from the particular (about *this* essay) to the general (about writing *philosophy* essays). Similarly, there is an attempt to extrapolate from the sample essays those general features that distinguish the discipline as a discourse.

### Conclusion

The *Transition to Tertiary Writing Project*, still under development, attempts to de-fuse a set of confusions about tertiary writing. The research underpinning it in some cases exists as background: in others, it feeds directly into the resource materials. The Year 12 teachers' perspective is a valuable back-drop, highlighting the student confusion which may arise from restricted exposure to selecting and using sources, and from having experienced very different types of writing in Year 12. The baseline survey of first-year students in the targeted disciplines suggests that students who felt themselves to be most prepared conceived of writing in terms of the mechanics. Those who felt least prepared had apprehended that the task was asking them to exercise greater independence and freedom of thought than they had done before. Finally, the institutional expectations tended to be couched in broad terms which may mislead the students into thinking there is little difference between subjects, and thus approaches to them.

In attempting to de-fuse confusion, it is essential that the resource itself is useable, motivating, not overwhelming. The fact that it is founded upon our understandings of texts, processes and practices in the academy will, we hope, render these more transparent to our students.

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## *Sources of Confusion*

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