Self-Assessment

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(Sheffield Hallam University)
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The Assessment and the Expanded Text Consortium is a project directed by the English division at the University of Northumbria. It involves collaborating with colleagues who teach English courses at Sheffield Hallam University, Staffordshire University and the University of East Anglia.

We came together three years ago to build on existing relations between our various institutions, relations which often developed from the role of the external examiner and as a result of the Teaching Quality Assessment visits to our various departments in 1994/5.

We recognized from the very beginning that our work on assessment in English was particularly timely, given the changes in the English curriculum identified in the Council for College and University English’s report to the QAA (CCUE/QAA: 1997). Our focus on the expanded text was our recognition that the traditional curriculum had expanded to include, amongst other topics and subjects, aspects of cultural studies, literary theory and creative writing.

We wished to take the opportunity to clarify the role of assessment in our teaching and integrate it much more with student learning. This was often not so much a return to first principles, but rather a learning process which required us to be more explicit about our implicit expectations in the assessment of student work.

The result was four case studies in productive assessment practices for both traditional and newer areas of the curriculum.

Our case studies are designed for use by the tutor who wants to change and develop assessment practice to improve student learning. Each one aims to clarify what makes a successful match between the learning promoted by a diverse range of approaches to literary study and the assessment practices used.

Our selection was made carefully and, in many respects, was embedded in the findings of the English subject review exercise of 1994/5. For the first time, the subject community was asked to explain why it assessed in the way it did, and to evaluate the quality of that practice in relation to student learning. We determined, therefore, to be as explicit as possible in our assessment procedures and to identify and develop assessment practices which made student learning a central theme.

Since then, the Quality Assurance Agency has taken over the process of subject review and the assessment for learning agenda is even more clearly centre stage. New impetus is also filtering in from other initiatives.

The recent draft statement on benchmarking standards for English (CCUE/QAA: 1999), for example, identifies critical reading, engagement and self awareness as the key characteristics of an English degree. While these outcomes may be reached by a variety of routes, the benchmarking document simultaneously states that: ‘assessment inheres in and informs the learning process: it is formative and diagnostic as well as summative and evaluative, and the process should provide students with constructive feedback.’

It is clear that this benchmarking document both supports and defends our agenda and that assessment continues to be an important issue for the subject. It is both an interesting and contested area, requiring imminent clarification and resolution if we are to match exciting developments in the curriculum with evolving assessment practices which further student learning.
All the case studies in the Towards a Productive Assessment Practice series are designed to guarantee that:

- assessment enhances the process of student learning
- the purpose of assessment is clearly understood by students
- effective feedback is an essential part of the assessment and learning process
- assessment methods arise out of the specific learning objectives of the discipline
- thinking about assessment contributes to good teaching practice
- a well-balanced programme of assessment comprises a combination of the traditional and the innovative, the formative and the summative
- assessment processes are equitable and transparent, and encourage active involvement on the part of learners.

Increasingly, colleagues teaching English become involved in paper trails (more accurately paper chases), teaching larger and larger groups of students and simultaneously finding themselves, and their work, more and more accountable to an increasing range of academic and administrative managers.

The material produced by the project is directed at these colleagues. From the beginning it was agreed that each guide would contain: an introduction showing the relevance of the individual case study to the overall project mission statement; a narrative of the assessment method in practice; details of impact on staff and students and appendices containing examples of any materials handed out by tutors to students or examples of student work. Within these guidelines, the authors were given the freedom to develop their case studies in their own way. All the material included has been tried and tested by various staff, working in a variety of conditions, to various student constituencies.

If you would like to cut and paste our examples, to adapt them for your own individual contexts, you might wish to access the project’s Web page at http://www.unn.ac.uk/assessingenglish. All four case studies can be downloaded as PDF files, and some of the materials for students are viewable as Web documents. The site also includes a sample demo of computer assisted learning for assessment. Furthermore, there is a searchable collection of other productive assessment practices which have been collected from across the higher education English subject community.
In 1994 subject reviewers noted the practice of using a self-assessment sheet in the English division at Sheffield Hallam: ‘students’ self-assessments of their unit assignments enable them to participate in the teaching and learning process’ (HEFCE: 1994). Staff asked tutees to assess their own essays before submitting them, then used the same form to provide feedback.

In this case study we develop this practice to improve the match between the criteria included on the form and the learning outcomes of traditional core curriculum units assessed by essay. Previously the criteria were generic, linked solely to the general criteria for degree marks. We use self-assessment to encourage students to reflect actively on subject-specific learning outcomes associated with the study of literary genres. By becoming more reflective, we believe students are better able to judge the effectiveness of their own performance and become aware of improvement in a particular skill, or set of skills, over time.

We chose to use self-assessment to improve student understanding of the academic essay for a traditional area of the curriculum because the essay is still considered to be of central importance to English Studies. Indeed, essay writing is a ‘fundamental part of their [English students] learning experience’ (CCUE/QAA: 1999).

This work has resulted in the production of:

- a tool for self-assessment
- guidance for students on how to self-assess their essays
- a guide for students on writing the literature essay, designed to help students improve the interpretative and critical substance of their essays.

We consider student self-assessment to be valuable because:

- it encourages students to become actively involved in the assessment process
- it develops their critical understanding and independence.

In the case of students who are just beginning their undergraduate courses, we have found that their initiation into the process of self-assessment:

- helps them to make the transition to higher education
- increases their confidence and competence in writing literature essays.

The materials we have developed to support students in assessing their own work (the self-assessment sheet; guidance on self-assessment; the essay guide) help to make clear, by explanation and by practical demonstration, the features that make a good literature essay.

These materials have been tried and tested at Sheffield Hallam University. They can be used in a number of different ways and can be adapted to suit the specific requirements of particular institutions and courses.
The nature and scope of the project

To pursue our related aims of improving students’ skills as essay writers and as self-assessors, we first of all undertook pedagogic research which involved:

- The examination of a sample of marked essays in order to identify the academic staff’s marking practices and criteria, and the range of student approaches to the various aspects of essay writing.
- The distribution of questionnaires to first year students to find out about their previous experience of assessment, and to discover their perception of the assessment processes which they experienced in their first term at university.
- Making clear to students the criteria used in the assessment process, by listing and explaining the main features which tutors take into consideration when assessing an essay’s quality.
- Asking students to take an active part in the assessment process, explaining how they can do so and offering them detailed advice, with illustrative examples, on the process of writing the literature essay.

The self-assessment sheet

The self-assessment sheet provides students with a structured way of reflecting on, and critically evaluating, their own written work. It breaks the essay down into its constituent parts and invites students to assess their performance in each constituent part. Accompanying each of these listed categories are explanations of what constitutes stronger and weaker performance in that category. These descriptions have been created as a result of careful analysis of student essays and tutor feedback. They use the common terminology of assessment (e.g. ‘persuasiveness’, ‘argument’, ‘originality’) and explain it in well-defined language that is intelligible to students. This helps students to look analytically and critically at their own performance. The sheet also provides space for them to make a general comment on their work in their own words, and invites them to estimate a percentage grade. When the self-assessment sheet is handed in with the essay, tutors tick the boxes and make their own comments on the essay. Thus they use the sheet as the main form of written feedback, or to supplement existing material.

The sheet is accompanied by a short guide for students on how to self-assess their work.

Student guide to self-assessment

If you are asking students to practise a new type of skill, such as self-assessment, for the first time, it makes sense to start with some explanation. Asking students to complete a self-assessment sheet will not, in itself, improve learning. If self-review is to become a central part of the learning experience, students need realistic practical advice about why and how to self-assess.

The guide highlights the main benefits of self-reviewing work. It also talks students through each section of the self-assessment form.

A copy of the self-assessment sheet and the student guide to self-assessment can be seen on pages 10 – 21 of this case study.
Writing essays: A guide for literary studies students

'Writing Essays: A guide for literary studies students' is an online and hard copy resource which encourages students to continue the practice of self-review fostered by the self-assessment sheet. It complements the self-assessment sheet by adopting a structure that corresponds to the categories on the sheet and offers detailed advice on how to approach each category. Focusing specifically on the literature essay, the guide makes extensive use of examples from actual undergraduate essays in order to illustrate more and less effective performance in relation to each aspect of the essay. Three complete student essays are included; the online version also features short examples from other undergraduate essays, to provide further illustration of student performance. The guide is non-prescriptive in that it does not advocate a particular blueprint for writing an essay. Rather, it aims to encourage close and well-substantiated argument, and a methodical and precise approach to preparing an essay, whilst at the same time stressing the importance of the student's individual response. It deals with the interpretative and critical substance of the essay, and deliberately does not deal with matters of presentation, which are already covered by existing skills approaches.

The guide takes the student through every aspect of preparing an essay and can be read as a single comprehensive narrative. However, its various sections are discrete and can be used independently of each other to focus on particular aspects of essay writing. A hard copy version of the guide is available as a Microsoft Word document file and can be downloaded from http://www.unn.ac.uk/assessingenglish.

The full Web version of the guide is available at http://www.shu.ac.uk/schools/cs/english/enter.htm. This format enables students to work through the guide at their own pace, tailoring the material for their own needs. It also includes additional examples of effective and less effective writing.
### SHEFFIELD HALLAM UNIVERSITY  BA ENGLISH STUDIES  SELF-ASSESSMENT SHEET

**Section 1**

**STUDENT:** Please list what you feel are the strengths and less satisfactory aspects of this assignment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strengths: positive aspects of your work</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Aspects of the work you were dissatisfied with/difficulties experienced**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What would you do differently in writing the next literature essay (from your experience of doing this one)?</th>
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</table>

**TUTOR’S COMMENTS**

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</table>

Please give the assignment as a whole a mark:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STUDENT’S ESTIMATE: %</th>
<th>TUTOR’S GRADE: %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-39% = Fail</td>
<td>40-49% = Third</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-59% = II.2</td>
<td>60-69% = II.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70 and above = First</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Section 2

Please give your assessment of this piece of work using the following scale:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1=fail</th>
<th>2=below average</th>
<th>3=average</th>
<th>4=good</th>
<th>5=excellent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

The descriptions in the boxes below indicate some of the characteristics of poor and good essays.

**Interpretation of and response to the essay question**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Weak essay</th>
<th>Your rating</th>
<th>1 2 3 4 5</th>
<th>Tutor's rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The essay does not identify critical issues which are referred to or implied by the question. Discussion of the text(s) does not engage with these issues; points made in the essay lack relevance to the question being asked.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stronger essay</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The essay has identified central critical issues which the question appears to be asking about. Discussion of the text(s) is always focused on these. The particular aspects of the text and range of subjects discussed address the critical issues identified from the question.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Structure of the essay**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Weak essay</th>
<th>Your rating</th>
<th>1 2 3 4 5</th>
<th>Tutor's rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The argument is not easy to follow; related points about the text(s) are not grouped together; it is not clear why paragraphs follow on from one another; the essay does not develop an argument</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stronger essay</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The argument is straightforward to follow; critical observations are organised into paragraphs, which follow on from one another for a clear reason; an argument is developed through the essay</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Persuasiveness of interpretation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Weak essay</th>
<th>Your rating</th>
<th>1 2 3 4 5</th>
<th>Tutor's rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interpretations are not valid (e.g. assertions are not argued or explained; points are made briefly without discussion of the supporting text) AND/OR there is a lack of familiarity and critical understanding of the text (e.g. the essay gives a description or narrative account of the text rather than being critically focused on certain aspects of it)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stronger essay</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Persuasive and valid interpretations (e.g. assertions are explained, points are developed and substantiated by reference to specific features of the text(s)); a high level of familiarity and critical understanding with the text is displayed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

11
**Use of appropriate critical terms and concepts in analysing the text(s)**

**Weaker essay**

The quality of the essay's analysis suffers from the lack of use of critical terms and concepts; OR where these are employed, their application is not productive (e.g. used inaccurately or unnecessarily, to try and impress the reader)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Your rating</th>
<th>Tutor's rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Stronger essay**

Relevant critical terms and concepts are used accurately and productively (i.e. with a full understanding of what they mean) to express ideas about the text(s) and support the essay's analysis; jargon is avoided where it is not required

**Use of secondary critical materials**

**Weaker essay**

The lack of reference to other critical perspectives affects the quality of the essay's analysis of the text(s); OR reference to secondary sources is unproductive, not advancing the argument (e.g. unthinking reproduction of critical material rather than active engagement with it); AND/OR there is a failure to acknowledge secondary sources consulted in writing the essay

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Your rating</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Stronger essay**

Reference to other critical perspectives is made at appropriate points and serves to enhance the quality of the analysis and advance the essay's argument. Essay engages and debates with the critical material rather than simply reproducing it. Secondary sources consulted in writing the essay are properly acknowledged

**Understanding and use of relevant contexts (e.g. literary; historical)**

**Weaker essay**

There is a lack of reference to contextual information which would be relevant to the question being asked and would serve to improve the critical substance of the essay; OR contextual information is used but does not contribute to the essay's argument (e.g. it is not relevant to the question)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Your rating</th>
<th>Tutor's rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Stronger essay**

Reference is made to relevant contexts (e.g. how the text relates to other texts/literary tradition; the cultural and historical context of its production) and leads to a better critical understanding of the text(s) being discussed in the essay

**Use of close textual reference**

**Weaker essay**

The essay does not pay sufficiently detailed attention to specific features of the text(s) being discussed; assertions are not supported by direct reference to particular parts of the text(s); OR where there is close reference to the text(s), it is not relevant to the point being made and so does not back it up (e.g. material is quoted without any critical commentary)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Your rating</th>
<th>Tutor's rating</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2 3 4 5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Stronger essay**

The essay focuses on and discusses specific features of the text(s) being studied in such a way as to advance the argument (e.g. reference to the text is made to substantiate the critical argument). There is critical engagement with the material quoted from the text(s).
Student guide to self-assessment
Introduction

You are strongly encouraged to fill in the self-assessment sheet for every coursework assignment that you complete on the literature part of the course. Although the sheet has been designed to be easy to use – to get the most from both the self-assessment process and the tutor feedback you receive on the sheet – it is recommended that you read this document and refer to it on the first few occasions you use the sheet to review your work.

General advice on self-assessment

Why do I need to self-assess my work?
Thinking critically about what you have done in coursework assignments is always useful – you may do it already to a certain extent. The main benefit of reviewing your work, both while you are writing it and after it is finished, is that it helps you to identify your own particular strengths and weaknesses in doing assignments of this kind. Having this awareness, together with the feedback that you get from the tutor, allows you to develop your understanding of what the task requires and to plan accordingly for the next essay that you write.

It helps if you have some idea of how to go about evaluating your own work. The self-assessment sheet provides you with a ready-made structure for doing this: it tells you which aspects of your assignment to assess, and gives some idea of standards of work (i.e. what counts as strong and weak performance). By listing a number of aspects of the essay which both you and the tutor are required to evaluate, it also gives you some idea of the basis on which the tutor marks your work.

When should I assess my own work?
It should not just be something you do a couple of minutes before you hand in the essay! You need to spend a bit of time completing the self-assessment form for the process of evaluating your own work to be productive.

If you really want to get the most from self-assessment, it needs to be something you do at regular intervals while you are writing the assignment, as well as after it is finished. Getting into the habit of reviewing your work-in-progress at regular intervals means that if you do identify areas where it is weak, or lacking, you have time to try to do something about it before you hand it in.

From a practical point of view, the timing of your self-assessment is important. Do not try to evaluate the quality of your work just after you have been working feverishly on it – you will find it very difficult to make a fair, ‘objective’ judgement. It helps to put some critical distance between yourself and your work, so get away from it for a while; make a coffee or go for a walk to clear your mind, and then try to assess what you have done. You should have a clearer perspective on it.

Will my assessment of the quality of my work affect the final mark that I get for it?
What you write on the self-assessment sheet will not influence the mark that you are given for your essay. No marks will be deducted if you over-estimate the quality of your work, nor will the tutor reward you for being overly...
How can I judge the quality of my work accurately?

Clearly, you won’t be able to mark your work in exactly the same way that a tutor would. After all, they have a level of expertise in the subject you are writing about which you have not yet reached. Nonetheless, it is important that you try to make a personal assessment. Doing this as you progress through the course will help you to develop a sense of your own achievement. You might find it difficult on your first few attempts, but there are a number of ways that you can get a better idea of the quality of your work:

- Use feedback from tutors. By looking at the written comments the tutor has provided, and their rating of your work, you can get an idea of what you are good and less good at in writing the essay, and also develop an understanding of the kinds of things tutors are looking for.
- Discuss your work with tutors.
- Read through your old work, looking at tutor comments and thinking about its strengths and weaknesses. If you are a bit more distant from it, you should be able to be more realistic about its quality.
- Discuss your work with other students.
- Read work written by other students (but you must be careful to not borrow material or ideas from them: this would count as plagiarism).

Part 1: Commenting on your work

The first part of the self-assessment sheet gives you the opportunity to make written comments on your work and the experience of writing it. As well as encouraging you to think critically about both the process and product of essay writing, this gives you space to voice your concerns and anxieties about this kind of assignment and/or literary study more generally, which the tutor can then respond to in their written feedback. It also gives the tutor an insight into your level of awareness regarding this form of assessment; the kinds of things which you think count as ‘good’ in an essay.

However, you do not need to agonise about exactly what you write. There is not a ‘right answer’ that you should be giving. It is more important that you write something on the sheet – your thoughts, impressions etc. – than spending a long time composing a response or leaving it blank.

This first part of the sheet is divided into three sections and you are asked to list what you feel are the strengths and less satisfactory aspects of this assignment.
**Strengths:** positive aspects of your work

List what you feel is good about your finished work (not necessarily those parts you found easiest to do). For example, you might want to refer to certain critical points which you made: interpretations that you thought were insightful or ‘original’ (based on a personal response to the text(s) rather than drawn from lecture notes/secondary reading). You could also comment on more general qualities of the essay (e.g. that it answered the question well).

But what if I can’t think of anything good to say about my work?

You might not feel comfortable or confident in saying positive things about your work. This could be because you are too involved with it to be able to judge it impartially. Go and do something else for a while, then return to your work and see if you feel differently about it. Think about the basic things that you have done in the essay: how you have approached the question; the different aspects of the text(s) which you have written about; your particular interpretations; the argument that you have presented and so on. Which parts of it were you satisfied with, however ‘unimportant’ you imagine these might be?

**Aspects of the work you were dissatisfied with/difficulties experienced**

You might want to include here any things that you felt unhappy or dissatisfied with in the final work that you submitted, and/or difficulties or problems that you had in the process of writing the essay (e.g. structuring all of your ideas; understanding the text(s); knowing what the question meant etc.).

What would you do differently in writing the next literature essay (from your experience of doing this one)?

This could include things that you thought you did well in this essay, which you would like to try to develop in the future (e.g. you used certain critical terms, concepts or theories in analysing the text; you did a certain amount of background reading, read other texts by the same author, or read other comparable texts from the same period). Equally, you might want to write down a few things you thought you did not manage so well, which you would try to rectify next time (e.g. spend more time analysing the question and working out what it meant; do more background reading; try to structure the essay’s argument more effectively).

When you are writing your next essay, you might find it useful to look at this section of the self-assessment sheet alongside the tutor’s feedback, so that you have some idea as to which aspects of your work to improve.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STUDENT’S ESTIMATE: %</th>
<th>0-39% = Fail</th>
<th>40-49% = Third</th>
<th>50-59% = II.2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TUTOR’S GRADE: %</td>
<td>60-69% = II.1</td>
<td>70 and above = First</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At the end of this section of the self-assessment sheet you are invited to estimate the mark which you think this essay will receive. You might find it very difficult to do this the first few times, but once you have had a few essays marked and returned to you, you should have a clearer idea of approximately what standard your work is. Whatever you decide the essay is worth, you should be able to explain and justify why you think it deserves such a grade. The comments you write in the strengths and weaknesses boxes should go some way to providing this.
Part 2: Rating the quality of various aspects of your work

The second section of the self-assessment sheet lists various qualities of the essay that are amongst those which the tutor will evaluate in determining the work’s final overall mark. These are the principal criteria by which your work is assessed. For each aspect of the essay given on the sheet, you are required to give your opinion of its quality on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 being a fail, 5 being excellent). The tutor will give their assessment of your work using the same scale.

Some of the characteristics of what counts as a ‘good’ or ‘poor’ response are suggested for each of these criteria. You should try to use these when deciding what rating to give each aspect of your essay. However, it needs to be remembered that these descriptions only indicate some of the possible characteristics of particularly strong or weak essays. You should refer to the tutor’s written commentary on your work to see the specific ways in which it is good or lacking.

It should be emphasised that, although each aspect of the essay listed on the self-assessment sheet is significant in determining the overall mark the work receives, they are not equally weighted. It is not the case that 10 per cent of marks go on interpretation of the question, 10 per cent on structure, 10 per cent on presentation etc.. It is not possible to describe the marking scheme which tutors use in this kind of way because there is no single model, or blueprint, of what makes a ‘good’ essay. Rather, an essay can be regarded as good in many different ways (e.g. one which makes very productive use of historical context; or offers a detailed reading of a certain part of the text, looking at how form affects meaning; or compares several texts by different authors, etc.).

While the various categories listed on the self-assessment sheet provide a useful way of talking about elements of the essay, they should not be regarded as the components which constitute an essay. You will not be thinking of these categories separately while you are writing the essay, nor will the tutor when marking it. The overall quality of the essay is more than just the sum of its parts. This is something that can only be learned over time, through writing essays.

Interpretation of and response to the essay question

- What this means
  - Does the essay identify the critical issues referred to or implied by the question?
  - Is discussion always centred on, or framed within, the context of the question that is being asked?

- Questions to ask yourself
  - Have you analysed the essay title or the question?
  - Do you feel confident that you have identified the main critical issues in the text(s) which the question/title seems to refer to or imply?
  - Do the points you make about the text(s) relate in some way to these main critical issues?
  - Have you selected the most appropriate aspects of the text(s) to write about (i.e. those which enable you to engage with the main critical issues foregrounded in the question)?
Structure of the essay

What this means
- Are the critical points made about the text(s) organised in a way that makes the critical content of the essay straightforward to follow, and the argument/central idea to develop as the essay progresses?

Questions to ask yourself
- Are the points you are making grouped together in paragraphs?
- Do paragraphs follow on from one another in a logical way? Is the reason as to why each paragraph follows the previous one readily apparent to the reader?
- How easy would it be for someone who was reading your work to follow the argument that you were putting forward? (This will have some bearing on how persuasive the argument you make in the essay is.)

Persuasiveness of interpretation

What this means
- How convincing and tenable are the interpretative points/assertions which the essay makes about the text(s)?
- Are these points adequately argued and supported by specific evidence, rather than being unsubstantiated generalisations?

Questions to ask yourself
- Is every assertion that you make about the text(s) sufficiently argued/explained/substantiated (e.g. through reference to specific parts of the text(s) and/or from your secondary reading/class notes)?
- If there were any parts of the text(s) where you were unsure of the meaning or significance, have you consulted a secondary source (e.g. a dictionary; footnotes; a critical text) to make sure that you have not made any major misinterpretations?
- Have you attempted to critically analyse specific aspects of the text(s) in keeping with the question being asked, rather than just summarising or giving a narrative account of the text(s)?

Use of appropriate critical terms and concepts in analysing the text(s)

What this means
- Have critical terms and concepts been used in discussing aspects/features of the text(s)?
- If so, have they been employed accurately (i.e. it is evident that the writer of the essay understands what is meant by them) and productively (i.e. does their use lead to a better critical understanding of the text(s) and issues being discussed in the essay)?
- If there is little or no use of critical terms and concepts, does the quality of the essay’s analysis suffer as a result?
Questions to ask yourself
- Do you know about any of the main critical terms/concepts associated with the particular text(s), genre or literary period you are writing about (e.g. from your secondary reading and/or lecture and class notes)?
- If you have made reference to any of these terms/concepts in your essay, do you feel confident that you have used them accurately? Is their use productive (i.e. it contributes to the critical points which the essay is making rather than being there to try and impress the reader)?
- If you have not used critical terms/concepts in your essay, do you think this might affect the quality of your analysis of the text(s)?

Use of secondary critical materials
- What this means
  - If use is made of secondary critical sources in the essay, how productive is this (i.e. does it lead to a better critical understanding of the text(s))?)
  - If there is not any evidence of secondary reading, or an awareness of other critical perspectives on the text(s), does this have a negative effect on the quality of the essay?
- Questions to ask yourself
  - On each occasion you have quoted from, or referred to, a critic, can you say why you have done so?
  - Have you attempted to engage with, and discuss, the points made by critics which you have quoted in your essay, rather than using them to replace your own thinking about the text(s)?

Understanding and use of relevant contexts (e.g. literary; historical)
- What this means
  - If reference is made to contextual information, how productive is this? How far does it support and advance the critical content of the essay?
  - If there is a lack of reference to contexts, does this have a negative impact on the quality of the essay's analysis?
- Questions to ask yourself
  - How relevant is the contextual information you have used to the essay question being asked? Is it included in order to support/substantiate a specific critical point that you are making?
  - Do you feel that contextual information is used in an appropriate way in the essay? (e.g. It is not usually advisable to rely on biographical information as a means of interpreting the text, or to view the relationship between a text and the historical context of its production as being necessarily straightforward.)
**Use of close textual reference**

- What this means
  - Does the essay pay sufficient detail to specific features of the text(s) in discussing them?
  - Where there is close reference to the text(s), is it relevant to the essay question being asked?

- Questions to ask yourself
  - Are the critical points which you are making in the essay supported by direct reference to specific parts or features of the text(s) you are writing about (rather than being generalisations which are not backed up by textual evidence)?
  - Where you have quoted from the primary text(s) you are writing about, have you made sure that the material chosen relates to the critical point you are making?
  - Have you tried to engage with material quoted from the text(s) (i.e. provided some kind of commentary on it)?

**Technical accuracy**

- What this means
  - Is the essay of a sufficiently high standard in terms of spelling; grammar; vocabulary; referencing; bibliography; proof reading?

- Questions to ask yourself
  - Have you checked the spelling and grammar (e.g. using the appropriate functions on a word processor)?
  - Are you confident that you have been accurate in your choice of vocabulary throughout the essay? (i.e. does it all make sense?)
  - Are all quotes from/references to primary and secondary texts used in writing the essay fully referenced in a consistent way, using a bibliographic system that is approved of on your course?
  - Have you provided a bibliography which includes all of the texts that you made use of in researching and writing the essay? Is it set out in an academically-accepted way?
Prose style

- What this means
  - How well-written is the essay? (e.g. How well are ideas expressed? How straightforward is it to read? Is language used effectively?)

- Questions to ask yourself
  - Have you read through the work thoroughly before handing it in?
  - Have you tried to write with an awareness of the particular audience for whom the essay is meant?
  - Have you attempted to make your essay engaging to the reader (e.g. through variety in vocabulary and sentence structure), without unnecessarily striving too hard to impress them (e.g. through use of pretentious language)?

Presentation (neatness, legibility)

- What this means
  - Is the essay well-presented? How legible and neat is it?

- Questions to ask yourself
  - If you have word processed the essay, does the style and size of the text font you have used make the work easily readable?
  - If the essay is hand-written, is your writing always legible? Have you avoided crossing out words on the page?
  - Have you numbered the pages?

When you have completed the self-assessment sheet, please attach it to your work and place it in the appropriate box in the English department. You will get the sheet back, complete with tutor’s comments, after the work has been marked. It is a good idea to keep completed copies of the sheet in an accessible place, so that you can refer to them when writing subsequent essays.
Writing Essays: a guide for literary studies students (Sample)
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Student essays
Introduction

New undergraduates often experience difficulties in adjusting to the demands of university study, and particularly in doing assessed work. We have written this guide to help you understand what it is that tutors expect in literary studies essays and to provide practical guidance on how to approach the essay. The key features are:

- Checklist of things to think about when writing an essay.
- Examples from student essays showing effective, and not so effective, ways of putting into practice the things listed in the essay checklist.
- Examples of complete student essays.

How should I use the guide?

If you have already completed a self-assessment of an essay we suggest you look closely at the feedback the tutor gave you and then refer to the relevant categories of the checklist to see how you might improve these aspects of your essay writing. Each section includes questions to help you to do this.

The main body of the guide makes extensive reference to three essays written by first year undergraduate students in order to illustrate good and not so good ways of going about putting into practice the things listed in the essay checklist. These essays are reproduced in full (with tutor’s comments) at the end of the guide. All of the examples of student work in the guide are taken from first year undergraduate units on poetry (1550-1750), drama (1550-1750) and prose fiction (1690-1830). The three complete essays were all written in the students’ first term at university. If you are just about to write your first essay for the degree programme we suggest you read the complete essays first. Annotated excerpts from these student essays appear in each section.

On line guide

There is an on line version of the guide which provides further examples of more and less effective student writing, drawn from a large number of first year undergraduate literary studies essays (these essays are not reproduced in full). You can access this guide at any stage in your degree at: http://www.shu.ac.uk/schools/cs/english/entre.htm. We suggest you do so after you have written your first essay and completed your first self-assessment.

Please note

This guide is not offering a blueprint or template for the literary studies essay; a literary essay should always be a personal response to the task in hand. What the guide offers is a set of principles and practical methods for improving essay writing skills.

The essays which are presented in this guide are not being offered as models of excellent critical performance, as is clear from the tutor’s critical comments: each has certain strengths and short-comings. They have been selected for inclusion in this guide on the grounds that they usefully illustrate more and less effective approaches to the process of writing the essay.
Essay checklist

This checklist indicates the main things which tutors consider when they are marking your work. It provides you with a set of questions to ask yourself when writing and re-drafting your work, and before handing work in for marking. The categories match those on the self-assessment form.

Interpretation of and response to the essay question

Q. Have you analysed the essay title or the question?
Q. Are you confident that you have identified the main critical issues in the text(s) which the question/title seems to infer?
Q. Do the points you make about the text(s) relate to these main critical issues?
Q. Have you selected the most appropriate aspects of the text(s) to write about (i.e. those which enable you to engage with the main critical issues foregrounded in the question)?

Structure of the essay

Q. Are the points you are making in the essay grouped together in paragraphs?
Q. Do paragraphs follow on from one another in logical way? Is the reason as to why each paragraph follows the previous one readily apparent to the reader?
Q. How easy would it be for someone who was reading your work to follow the argument that you are putting forward? (This will have some bearing on how persuasive the argument that you make in the essay is.)

Persuasiveness/validity of the interpretation

Q. Is every assertion that you have made about the text(s) sufficiently argued/explained/substantiated (e.g. through reference to specific parts of the text(s) and/or from your secondary reading/class notes)?
Q. If there were any parts of the text(s) where you were unsure of the meaning or significance, have you consulted a secondary source (e.g. a dictionary; footnotes; a critical text) to make sure that you have not made any major misinterpretations?
Q. Have you attempted to critically analyse specific aspects of the text(s) in keeping with the question being asked, or is your essay more a narrative summary of the text(s)?

Originality/quality of personal interpretation

Q. Does the essay show that you are attentive to the details of the text(s), and have your own ideas and perceptions about the text(s) which you are developing?
Q. Although the points you are making in the essay may well be informed by material from lectures/secondary reading, do they originate primarily from your own reading and critical response to the text(s) being studied?
Q. Have you tried to avoid the uncritical reproduction of lecture/seminar notes and secondary source material?

NB: You should not feel overwhelmed by the concept of ‘originality’: it does not mean that you have to try to say something about the text(s) that no one else has said before.
Use of appropriate critical terms and concepts in analysing the text(s)

Q. Have you used critical terms and concepts when discussing features of the text(s)? If so, have you used them accurately (i.e. it is evident that you understand what is meant by them) and productively (i.e. do you think your use of critical concepts helps you towards a better critical understanding of the text(s) and issues discussed in your essay)?

Q. If you have not used critical terms and concepts, do you think the quality of analysis in your essay suffers?

Use of secondary critical materials

Q. If you have used secondary critical sources in the essay, how productive has this been (i.e. has it led to a better critical understanding of the text(s))?

Q. If you have not shown any evidence of secondary reading or an awareness of other critical perspectives on the text(s), does this affect the quality of the essay?

Q. Whenever you quote from or refer to a critic, can you say why you have done so?

Q. Have you attempted to engage with and discuss quotations from critics you include in your essay, or would you say they replace your own thinking about the text(s)?

Understanding and use of relevant contexts (e.g. literary, historic)

Q. If you refer to contextual information, how productive is this? How well do you think this material supports and advances the critical content of your essay?

Q. If there is a lack of reference to contexts in your essay, does this have a negative impact on the quality of the essay’s analysis?

Q. How relevant is the contextual information you have used to the essay question being asked? Is it included to support/substantiate a specific critical point that you are making?

Q. Do you feel that contextual information is used in an appropriate way in the essay? (e.g. It is not usually advisable to rely on biographical information as a means of interpreting the text, or to view the relationship between a text and the historical context of its production as being necessarily straightforward.)

Use of appropriate close/detailed textual reference

Q. Does your essay pay sufficient detail to specific features of the text(s)?

Q. Where there is close reference to the text(s), is it relevant to the essay question?

Q. Are the critical points which you are making in the essay supported by direct reference to specific parts or features of the text(s) you are writing about (rather than being generalisations which are not backed up by textual evidence)?

Q. When you quote from primary text(s) have you made sure that the material chosen relates to the critical point you are making?

Q. Have you tried to engage with material quoted from primary text(s) (i.e. provided some kind of commentary on it)?
Technical accuracy
Q. Have you checked the spelling and grammar (e.g. using the appropriate functions on a word processor)?
Q. Are you confident that you have been accurate in your choice of vocabulary throughout the essay? (i.e. Does it all make sense?)
Q. Are all quotations and references to primary and secondary texts you have cited referenced in a consistent way, using a bibliographic system that is approved of on your course?
Q. Have you provided a bibliography which includes all of the texts that you have made use of in researching and writing the essay? Is it set out in an academically accepted way?

Prose style
Q. How well-written is the essay? (e.g. How well are ideas expressed? How straightforward is it to read? Is language used effectively?)
Q. Have you read through the work thoroughly before handing it in?
Q. Who is your essay written for?
Q. Have you attempted to make your essay engaging to the reader (e.g. through variety in vocabulary and sentence structure), without unnecessarily striving too hard to impress them (e.g. through use of pretentious language)?

Presentation
Q. Is your essay well-presented? How legible and neat is it?
Q. If your essay is word processed, does the style and size of the text font that you have used make the work easily readable?
Q. If your essay is hand-written, is your writing always legible? Have you avoided the excessive crossing out of words on the page?
Q. Have you numbered the pages?
Interpretation and response to the essay question

Different types of essay question you might encounter

Essay questions are worded in a variety of different ways. It’s important for you to realise that each question requires some kind of analysis and interpretation, in order to determine an appropriate way of responding to it. Here are some of the different kinds of essay question which you might encounter:

A direct question:
- Is Dr Faustus a morality play without a moral?
- To what extent does Richardson manage to preserve in his novel Pamela the guilty pleasures of reading someone else’s letters?
- Do you consider the love poetry of this period to be misogynistic?

A critical proposition and an invitation to discuss it:
- ‘Satire, in order to succeed, must give offence.’ Do you agree?
- ‘Morality structure provides a dramatic form for the exposition of a moral argument.’ Discuss with reference to Everyman and/or Dr. Faustus

A direct instruction to examine a particular subject/issue (inviting you to think about the place of something specific within the larger text):
- Discuss the importance of the device of soliloquy in one or two of the Renaissance tragedies you have studied.
- Compare the ways in which two of these novelists use ‘out-of-doors’ scenes: Fielding, Shelley, Austen, Charlotte or Emily Brontë.
- Discuss the representation of women in the poetry of this period (1550-1750).

A general question which specifies a text, author or genre for you to write about, but which does not indicate any particular issue to look at:
- Write an essay on Milton’s Paradise Lost.

As you can see, some essay questions tell you what you should be looking at in your essay, whilst others leave it to you to decide. The first two types of question suggest specific issues which your essay will need to discuss. They also indicate critical points of view which you need engage with.

In contrast, questions like the one on Milton are more open-ended. They require more initial thinking on the subject and scope of your essay.

In each case you need to analyse and interpret the question before you can commence writing the essay. Do not assume you know what it means and rush into giving an answer.
Analysing the essay question

You need to be thorough in analysing the essay question. If you spend time at the beginning working out what the essay question means, and identifying the subjects, key issues and ideas which you are being invited to discuss, your essay will be more sharply focused on what is relevant for that question.

If you are given a list of essay questions to select from, it is worth looking at all of them and thinking through what each one seems to be about – even if they relate to subjects or texts that you weren’t planning to write about. By reading essay questions you will get a feeling for the way they are phrased, and will develop your abilities to interpret and ‘decipher’ them. This is also good practice for exams, where you have to analyse and interpret questions quickly (and you may have a more restricted choice of questions to answer).

It is also useful to re-write the essay question. As you put the issues into your own words you will be able to identify terms or ideas you are not sure about and clarify them (e.g. through talking to your tutor or other students; reading your notes; consulting critical texts). You will also see links between the subjects and issues which the essay question is focused on and those covered by your classwork and/or background reading.

Writing about more than one primary text in a single essay

Students frequently ask how many texts they should refer to in an essay. What counts as a suitable number of texts depends largely on the question that you are answering, the length and complexity of the texts in question, and the particular approach that you want to take in the essay. Some essay questions tell you how many texts you should write about, others leave this to your judgement.

The key issue is the depth of critical analysis which your essay offers. If the essay jumps from text to text too rapidly and does not consider any at great length, your ideas will not have the required space in which to develop. You will end up stating the most obvious things about the texts in question and risk ignoring the main issues highlighted by the question.

When you are referring to more than one primary text, it is a good idea to be highly selective in what you look at. You could focus on a few specific characteristics or thematic concerns which the texts share (in line with the question being answered).

If you are answering a question which relates to a literary genre or historic period, you can fall into the trap of using too few texts. With this kind of essay tutors are looking for evidence of your having some awareness of the genre or period in question – so for instance, a 2,000 word essay on the subject of the Renaissance sonnet which only looked at one poem would be marked down for not having considered the topic broadly enough.

If you are unsure as to the number of texts to use in your essay, ask your tutor. As you gain more experience of writing essays you will become better at judging the number of texts appropriate for each task.

Once you start writing your essay, you will need to decide the degree to which you are going to compare and contrast the texts directly within the essay. The fact that you are writing about certain texts together, strongly implies that they are comparable to each other in some way. To ignore this entirely and write about each one completely separately, as if you were writing a number of unconnected ‘mini-essays’, would probably affect the final mark received. However, the extent to
which you analyse each one in the light of the other(s) is for you to decide. Obviously, if the essay question instructs you to ‘compare and contrast’, you need to devote a significant part of the essay to this task. Your decision is important because it will determine how you structure your essay.

Activity
1. Identify an essay question you are thinking of responding to.
2. Reword the question in your own words.
3. List three further, smaller questions which you think it would be productive to deal with in the course of answering the overall essay question.

Other Links
The persuasiveness, validity, originality and quality of your interpretation will depend, in part, on how well you interpret and respond to the question.

Effective analysis of the essay question
Example 1
In this extract the student analyses the question ‘Dr Faustus is a morality play without a moral.’ Discuss. This is the introduction to the essay:

In forming an answer to this question there are two aspects which must be considered. Firstly we must decide whether Dr Faustus is a morality play; I will do this by discussing the play’s form, content and subject matter in an attempt to categorise the play. I will also offer an alternative argument by saying that the play is in fact a tragedy. Secondly we must decide whether or not it has a moral; to do this I will consider the tone of certain parts of the play, in particular the Chorus’ speeches as well as the speech of other characters.

Q: Why is this effective?

Tutor’s Reply
Firstly, this introduction gives a clear picture of how the student has interpreted the essay question. Secondly, it appears to have been reworded as ‘In what ways does Dr Faustus conform to the conventions of the morality play, and how far does it break with them?’. Thirdly, the essay question appears to have been broken down into manageable chunks as follows:

- What is a morality play?
- Which features of the morality play does Dr Faustus appear to share/not share?
- Does Dr Faustus have a moral in the same way that a conventional morality play might do, or is it rather doing something else?
- In the light of the above discussion, how valid is the statement that Dr Faustus is a morality play without a moral?
Example 2

In this second extract, the student analyses the question, ‘Metaphysical poetry values intellect above emotion.’ To what extent have you found this to be the case? The extract is taken from the opening section of the essay:

The idea of metaphysical conceit is prevalent amongst the poetry, a metaphor which strikes the reader at first as being highly inappropriate and un-obvious, which then needs to be established intellectually by proving the comparison. So successful reading of metaphysical poetry necessitates a temporary separation of feeling from intelligence. This has led to criticism of the metaphysical style, for being inventive purely for its own sake, merely to flatter the intellect of the author, rather than to produce an effective poem. Similarly, the genre seems to have its faults in that it is needlessly obscure, restrained by the intellectual imagery therefore failing to communicate the spontaneous emotion of the poet.

However, the use of intellect does give a certain refinement or respectability, intensifying the meaning of the poem, thereby producing and making possible an even greater sense of emotion through highly complex and intellectual theories. Intellect and emotion are nearly always viewed as separate entities, one concerned with strong instinctive or spontaneous feeling, sensation or passion, the other being the faculty of reasoning, knowing and thinking, quite opposite and distinct from feeling. In this essay, I plan to show that these two factors can, and do work in tandem to produce the effect of metaphysical poetry, and such distinctions are a rather simplistic generalisation of the genre.

Q: Why is this effective?

Tutor’s Reply

Firstly, the essay question has been analysed in a thorough and appropriate fashion, as this introductory section of the essay demonstrates. Secondly, the question appears to have been rephrased as ‘Does the ‘intellectual’ nature of metaphysical poetry mean that it cannot express emotions?’ Thirdly, the question seems to have been broken down in the following way:

- What way(s) can metaphysical poetry be seen to value ‘intellect’ rather than ‘emotion’? What are the characteristics of poetry in this genre? Are there any reasons as to why intellect might be placed above emotion (e.g. the subject matter of the poetry)?
- What effect does the ‘intellectual’ content of the poetry have on the reader?
- Can the ‘intellectual’ approach of metaphysical poetry be seen to heighten the ‘emotional’ effect of that poetry, rather than negating it? If so, how does this occur? Is the statement quoted in the essay question a valid one?
Less effective analysis of the essay question

In this extract the student analyses the question ‘Tragedies portray societies which are caught between conflicting value systems.’ Discuss with reference to one or more plays.

The extract is taken from the introduction to the essay:

Conflicting value systems are always around, especially where death is involved. So in the tragedies of Everyman, Doctor Faustus and Hamlet there are many conflicts to face. These include personal moral conflicts with individual characters of the plays and also opposing values between the different characters in the play...Conflicting value systems may even stretch to how the audience interprets the play and the beliefs and culture at the time.

These are excerpts from the main body of the essay:

In Everyman, we can see that the character ‘Everyman’ faces a moral dilemma as God summons Everyman by offering Death to take him as his own. This creates conflicting value systems. [...] Even the characters have conflicting value systems.

Q: How could this be improved?

Tutor’s Reply

Firstly, in answering this essay question, the student does not really get to grips with what is meant by ‘conflicting value systems’ – or at least does not show that they understand what is meant by the phrase, either in the introduction or the main body of the essay. (The fact that they repeatedly use the phrase ‘conflicting value systems’ implies that it is not really understood.) It is important to ‘unpack’ the question more at the outset, and to define the main terms (in this case, ‘value systems’) so that you can be focused in what you write about, rather than being general and vague. A possible re-wording of the question might be: ‘How far are tragedies the result of conflicting value systems at work in the society depicted?’ The question could then be broken down as follows:

- What ‘value systems’ can be seen to be in ‘conflict’ in particular tragedies?
- How are these value systems, or systems of belief (moral, political, religious) represented in the play(s)? For example, are they represented through, or embodied in, particular characters?
- How does the conflict of these value systems relate to the tragic events which take place? Does it appear to cause them?
- In what other ways might the tragic events of the play(s) be accounted for? Are there any ways in which the conflicts of belief systems depicted within tragic dramas relate to the societies in which they were written?
- How valid is the point of view quoted in the essay question?
Ways of using the materials

All of the materials have been tried and tested at Sheffield Hallam University. There is a range of possibilities and contexts for their use. They can be adapted to suit the particular needs of individual courses and units.

How the self-assessment sheet can be used

At Sheffield Hallam University, students are required to attach a completed self-assessment sheet to their literature essays, it is then used as the main mechanism for providing feedback.

The self-assessment sheet, as a whole, can function as an aide-memoir when offering the student oral feedback.

The two sections of the self-assessment sheet can also be used separately:

- The section which invites students to write a general commentary on their performance can be used on its own to provide material to which the tutor can respond.
- The tick box section can be used in a workshop or seminar in combination with a student essay, as shown below.

Workshop using the self-assessment sheet


In this workshop students are given copies of a student essay written on a topic related to the unit of study (in this case Renaissance drama). The name of the student author and the tutor’s annotations and comments will have been erased. The students are asked to read the essay and decide individually what mark they would award it. Having compared the various marks they have awarded, they divide into small groups to discuss the criteria on which their various judgements have been made. The results of these discussions are then shared by the group as a whole with the participation of the tutor. The students are then invited to re-read and re-assess the essay with reference to the categories listed on the self-assessment sheet.

The exercise initially engages students in a critical and analytical process. They have to make a judgement and find reasons to justify it. Then, in comparing their marks and their reasons for awarding them, students become aware of the possibility of different perceptions and interpretations of particular features of the essay; and the discussion that follows involves them in closer observation and description, and in more intricate analysis and argument. The tutor’s contribution draws their attention to features that may have been overlooked, and in particular to the positive qualities of the essay and how these can be developed and improved. The tutor is also able to show students how their own perceptions, expressed in their own words, are formulations of concepts and ideas that they will have met in more abstract and academic terms. In this respect, the workshop helps to clarify the categories that are listed on the self-assessment sheet. While focusing attention on the essay and on the features that make a good essay, the workshop simultaneously sharpens the students’ thinking about the literary text that is under discussion.
How ‘Writing essays: A guide for literary studies students’ can be used

- The guide can be given as a complete booklet to students at the start of their course.
- The discrete nature of the guide’s structure means that it can be distributed in sections, to focus attention on one or more particular features of the essay as required.

Material from the guide may be used in a skills seminar, as shown below.

Workshop using ‘Writing essays: A guide for literary studies students’

**Materials required:** typical essay questions; the essay guide.

In this workshop, students are given a proposition about one of the literary texts that they are studying on the unit (sixteenth and seventeenth-century drama). The proposition is comparable to the kind of question they confront when writing course essays. Students divide into small groups to discuss the proposition and to write a short paragraph which defines and explains it. The class, as a whole, then discuss each group’s interpretation. Each group is then given the first section of the guide (Interpretation of and response to the essay question) to examine the advice and the illustrative examples that it contains. In the light of this, individual groups then re-examine their initial paragraphs and decide whether and how to revise them. The class as a whole then shares its findings.

This exercise involves students in the careful examination of the proposition. The tutor’s contribution can be to clarify its meaning, to make sure that its implications have been comprehensively examined, to show that it can be approached in more than one way and, if necessary, to show that it is there to be challenged. The material from the guide encourages the process of analysis by providing advice and comparable examples of student approaches to interpreting the proposition.

Similar workshops can be devised in which students follow any one particular part of the process of preparing an essay in response to the proposition, making use of the relevant section of the guide (for example, Structure of the essay or Persuasiveness/validity of the interpretation).

These workshops break down each stage of the process of writing an essay into particular parts in order to provide careful, detailed experience of a methodical approach. As a result, students become aware of the importance of, for example, generating ideas in response to the proposition; of the organisation of these ideas into a coherently developed argument; of the selection of quotations and/or references from the text; and of the importance of analysing them in order to substantiate the argument. In developing this methodical approach to essay preparation and stressing the importance of a clear, logically developed, closely argued essay structure, the workshop also sharpens students’ understanding of the text they are discussing.

**Sample essay questions for this workshop**

These essay questions are taken from a unit on sixteenth and seventeenth-century drama.

‘The Spanish Tragedy shows that the demands of personal ambition and private grievance are stronger than the public concepts and institutions of justice.’
Discuss.

‘Dr Faustus is a morality play without a moral.’ Discuss.

‘Hamlet is centrally concerned with problems of seeming and being.’ Discuss.

Discuss As You Like It as either a pastoral comedy or a comedy of romantic love.

Consider the relationship between the world of the court and the world of Eastcheap in Henry IV Part One.

‘Jonsonian comedy is centrally concerned with society and good behaviour.’ Discuss.

‘A condemnation of the country and of wives.’ Consider this view of The Country Wife.
Impact on staff and students

In the process of developing these materials, we tested their usefulness for students by a number of methods, including questionnaires, interviews and workshops. We have also benefited from the comments and suggestions of the teaching staff, who have examined and approved the materials.

Student response to the self-assessment sheet

In the process of evaluation, we have found that students like the way in which the self-assessment sheet divides the essay into its component parts:

‘It provides a good breakdown of what essays are about. It’s been a while for me, as a mature student.’

Students find the requirement to award a precise mark to their own work challenging:

‘It asks for your estimated mark, but you think, well, how the hell do I know? What do I do, put down what I’d like to get?’

However, they also find that the descriptions of stronger and weaker performance improve their confidence in evaluating their own work:

‘The descriptions of what’s stronger and weaker are really helpful, otherwise you might only put yourself down as average, but this shows you a bit more.’

Responses to the self-assessment sheet and the accompanying guide as to its use indicate that the glosses on the different categories have significantly enhanced students’ understanding of those categories:

‘The categories on this self-assessment sheet are quite helpful – I’ve learned better how to do essays from these.’

Student responses to workshop using the materials

As part of the process of evaluating and revising the materials, we held a number of workshops. In one of these, students were asked to read and assess a student essay and to re-assess it using the self-assessment sheet. This process of reflecting on and evaluating another student’s writing gave them insights which they considered would influence their own writing practices.

‘We found it quite easy to say what was good and what was bad in someone else’s essay, but when it came to giving it a mark, that’s where we were stuck, or felt awkward. The first part, though, is good, because you can use it to relate back to your own work, and think, “Right, I did do that before, they have done that, and they’ve lost marks, I will make sure that I won’t do that again”.’

It was also clear that the process of assessing another student’s writing inevitably contributed to the students’ own literary development, in that it involved them in thinking through their own interpretation of the essay title and of the literary text under discussion.

Staff response to the materials

Tutors are aware that students do not fully understand terms such as ‘argument’, ‘persuasiveness’ and ‘originality’, which are commonly used in feedback on written assignments. They have welcomed the opportunity to explain the terms clearly to
students through the descriptions of stronger and weaker performance on the self-assessment sheet.

With this increased level of student understanding, tutors can be more confident that their written feedback is meaningful to students.

Tutors find that students’ commentary on their own performance provides a useful starting point for the tutor’s response to their work.

Changes to the self-assessment sheet have been welcomed and the revised version has been adopted across all literature units on the English Studies degree at Sheffield Hallam University. A revised version is currently in use at the University of Northumbria in response to the local conditions there.
Further References


About the authors

Ian Baker is a senior lecturer in the English subject group at Sheffield Hallam University.

Phil Bannister is an education researcher in the Learning and Teaching Institute at Sheffield.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank:

All those students at Sheffield Hallam University who have contributed to our project by allowing us to sample their work, taking part in voluntary workshops, evaluating materials, completing questionnaires and participating in interviews. The English Subject group at Sheffield Hallam University for their support and input.

Dr Kay Sambell for her advice and evaluation of our work.

The other members of the Assessment and the Expanded Text Consortium, for informed and stimulating discussions. And especially Dr Rebecca Johnson for her constant enthusiasm, encouragement and leadership.
Appendix (i)
### Example of completed self-assessment sheet with essay

**SHEFFIELD HALLAM UNIVERSITY**  
**SCHOOL OF CULTURAL STUDIES**

**LEVEL 1 ASSIGNMENT SUBMISSION SHEET : 1999/2000**

Please complete all sections and staple this sheet to the front of your assignment.

| Section 1 | INDIVIDUAL ASSIGNMENT  
(Please print your name and degree below): | GROUP WORK  
(Please list ALL members of the group and their degree): |
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<th>Section 2</th>
<th>I certify that this assignment is my own work. It does not reproduce anyone else’s work without proper knowledge. I confirm that I am aware of the possible sanctions that may be imposed as a result of plagiarised work, as detailed in the University’s Undergraduate Student Handbook.</th>
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| Section 3 | Unit Title: INTRO TO POETRY  
Credit Points: |
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<tr>
<td>Type of submission (eg. Essay, Seminar Report, Research Exercise, etc): ESSAY</td>
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<td>Assignment Title: DISCUSS THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN THE POETRY OF THIS PERIOD</td>
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<td>Unit Leader’s Name:</td>
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<td>Assignment Deadline Date: 15.11.99</td>
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<th>Section 4</th>
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<td>If yes, tutors will check the nature of this contract when marking this assignment.</td>
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Before you post your assignment in the box, please read the following notes:-

1. Ensure you have completed ALL the above and signed in the box - otherwise, processing of your assignment will be delayed.
2. Remember ONLY your Level Tutor (or Combined Studies Co-ordinator) can give extensions to the submission date.
3. Ensure all pages are firmly stapled (do not use plastic wallets/folders for submissions)
4. Remember that the deadline is 4.00 pm on the submission date, and that submissions posted after 4.00 pm will be logged as LATE
5. Post your work in the relevant submission box. These are located as follows: 
   - Paletter Lane - outside the Film, Media and HADAF Admin office, F Block/Fine Art Admin office, C Block/Design Admin office, B Block
   - Collegiate Crescent - in the foyers of Montgomery House and Mundella House
6. Any LATE work or WORK WITH AN AUTHORISED EXTENSION must be posted in the relevant late box in the above locations. THE LATE BOXES WILL BE EARTED AT 4.00 PM EACH DAY.

Office Use Only

Comment: 

Official Date Stamp: 

suem/stch/L1covshl
Name: ... Host degree and level: ... 
Unit: INTRO TO POETRY Seminar tutor: ...
Assignment title: DISCUSS THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN THE POETRY OF THIS PERIOD
STUDENT: Please list what you feel are the strengths and less satisfactory aspects of this assignment.

Strengths: positive aspects of your work
I used a secondary source and tried to criticise the work and voice my own opinion.

Aspects of the work you were dissatisfied with/difficulties experienced
I found it difficult as it was such an open question, particularly to write in detail about certain poems. Sometimes I felt I was simply doing an analysis of the poem, it did not have any relevance to the question.

What would you do differently in writing the next literature essay (from your experience of doing this one)?
Use several secondary texts and analyse the relevant poems in greater detail in order to select the relevant points.

TUTOR’S COMMENTS
This is a promising essay. You sustain a general argument and you discuss a range of poems. At your best you discuss poems in some detail. At other times some of your general statements need to be illustrated, supported with examples. And you should identify the source of your background material. It is a good essay: it is personal and direct: you seem clear than you have engaged personally with the poems.

A letter mark 7.

Please give the assignment as a whole a mark:

STUDENT’S ESTIMATE: % 0-39% = Fail 40-49% = Third 50-59% = II.2
TUTOR’S GRADE: % 60-69% = II.1 70 and above = First
Name: .................................................. Seminar tutor: ..................................................
Assignment title: ....................................................................................................................

Please give your assessment of this piece of work using the following scale:

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<th>1=Fail</th>
<th>2=Below average</th>
<th>3=Average</th>
<th>4=Good</th>
<th>5=Excellent</th>
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The descriptions in the boxes below indicate some of the characteristics of poor and good essays.

**Interpretation of and response to the essay question**

**Weaker essay**
Essay does not identify the critical issues referred to or implied by the question. Discussion of text(s) does not engage with these issues; points made in essay lack relevance to the question being asked.

**Your rating**

**Stronger essay**
Essay has identified central critical issues which the question appears to be asking about; discussion of text(s) is always focused on these. The particular aspects of the text and range of subjects discussed address the critical issues identified from the question.

**Structure of the essay**

**Weaker essay**
The argument is not easy to follow; related points about the text(s) are not grouped together; it is not clear why paragraphs follow on from one another; essay does not develop an argument.

**Your rating**

**Stronger essay**
The argument is straightforward to follow; critical observations are organised into paragraphs, which follow on from one another for a clear reason; an argument is developed through the essay.

**Persuasiveness of interpretation**

**Weaker essay**
Interpretations are not valid (e.g. assertions are not argued or explained; points are made briefly without discussion of the supporting text); AND/OR there is a lack of familiarity and critical understanding of the text (e.g. essay describes or gives a narrative account of the text rather than being critically focused on certain aspects of it).

**Your rating**

**Stronger essay**
Persuasive and valid interpretations (e.g. assertions are explained, points are developed and substantiates/references to specific features of the text(s)); a high level of familiarity and critical understanding with the text is displayed.

**Originality/quality of personal interpretation**

**Weaker essay**
The work is lacking in personal engagement with the text(s) and/or observation and interest. There is a tendency to rely on second-hand interpretations of the text(s); ideas and critical observations are largely derivative of secondary reading, lecture material and seminar discussion, rather than being rooted in personal experience of reading the text(s).

**Your rating**

**Stronger essay**
There is evidence of a personal engagement with and response to the text(s) studied. Ideas and critical assertions made about the text(s) may be influenced by secondary reading and material from lectures and seminars, but are not wholly dependent on these. There are insightful points of interpretation and comparison; fresh and lively observations are made about the text and its relationship to other texts and contexts.

**Use of appropriate critical terms and concepts in analysing the text(s)**

**Weaker essay**
Quality of the essay’s analysis suffers from lack of use of critical terms and concepts; OR where these are employed, their application is not productive (e.g. used inaccurately or unnecessarily, to try and impress the reader).

**Your rating**

**Stronger essay**
Relevant critical terms and concepts are used accurately and productively (i.e. with a full understanding of what they mean) to express ideas about the text(s) and support the essay’s analysis; unnecessary use of jargon is avoided.

**Use of secondary critical materials**

**Weaker essay**
Lack of reference to other critical perspectives affects quality of the essay’s analysis of the text(s) OR reference to secondary sources is unproductive, not advancing the argument (e.g. unthinking reproduction of critical material rather than active engagement with it) AND/OR failure to acknowledge secondary sources consulted in writing the essay.

**Your rating**

**Stronger essay**
Reference to other critical perspectives is made at appropriate points; it enhances the quality of the analysis and advances the essay’s argument. Essay engages and debates with the critical material rather than simply reproducing it. Secondary sources consulted in writing the essay are properly acknowledged.
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Discuss the representation of women in the poetry of this period.

The Renaissance period (1509-1660) evoked a brand of creativity which contributed to the transformation of knowledge and understanding. One interesting concern in the poetry of this period was the representation of women; the female form was the inspiration of many of the generic forms of poetry.

The conventional Elizabethan sonnet focused on the ubiquitous concern of the mistress' physical appearance and its attraction to the male gender:

‘While thy beauty draws the heart to love.’

The female was a display to the male gaze, one may assume therefore that she was subordinated to men; indeed the legal and economic structures of this age ensured this:

‘But thy eternal summer shall not fade
... Posession of that fair thou ows’t.’

Here her beauty is personified as an ‘eternal summer’, idyllic, but not true, yet Shakespeare in his earlier sonnets conforms to the characteristics of the conventional sonnet. One may romanticise his blazons and hyperbolic language concluding it as a poem to woo his love.

Yet one can question a secondary meaning of the poetry and when linked to historical fact it creates a more reflective representation of women. For example the intimacy conveyed by poet and lover was often undertaken as an economic transaction. A spouse was chosen by family decision not at the whim of individual emotion. This coincides with the interconnection between finance and marriage; as the level of portion per dowry increased between 1600 and 1700. Hence the numerous economic metaphors of the era; Shakespeare classifies his love as a ‘possession’, ‘ornament’ or ‘account’ and in Crashaw’s ‘Wishes to his (supposed) mistress’ the lady is praised for “her store/of worth”. Also essential is the connection between a female’s external features and their inner qualities, the preoccupation with the lady’s appearance links to anxieties about her sincerity and true being. This is highlighted superbly in the chronological difference of tone and description in Shakespeare’s sonnets.

The mistress is personified by use of natural imagery as an idyllic goddess: ‘beauty’s rose’, ‘summer’s day’ and ‘darling buds of May’. However as the poet’s experience of the female form influences his writing, she is then represented somewhat differently, almost a paradox to his original representation.

One may suggest that the sonneteer has been hurt by a woman, ‘They have the power to hurt’, with this in mind the description becomes somewhat derogatory, bleak, yet ‘real’: ‘black wires’, ‘reeks’, ‘dun’, indeed sonnet one hundred and twenty nine summarises this very thought;

‘A blush in proof, and proved a very woe,
Before a joy proposed.’

Shakespeare has questioned the female’s sincerity and when compared, the sonnets highlighted his confusion of woman.

Indeed this contradiction may be a source of confusion not only for the male poet, but also for the female of the period. A woman’s desire was restricted, her central requirement being chastity to withhold her honour and virginity and thus her availability for marriage.

However, ironically, in selective poems the mistress is admonished for refusing sex, men called on women to abandon their coyness and this is more famously depicted in Marvell’s ‘To his coy mistress’.

This metaphorical poem focuses on the passing of time and carpe diem. Remembering a person’s lifespan was much shorter in the seventeenth century, Marvell wittingly utilises this statistic as a form of rhetoric, with the effect of scaring the female into having sexual intercourse. He
envisaged an eternal life; ‘Had we but world enough and time’, and by use of the declarative; ‘we would’ asserts his intention thus causing the female to question her chastity. If it would not be a ‘crime’ in an eternal life, why therefore now?

The argument is separated into three subdivisions; ‘had we’, ‘but’ and ‘now therefore’, each hoping to persuade the woman.

Ingeniously Marvell uses exotic imagery; ‘Indian ganges’ as an association with her, hopefully at this preliminary point to intrigue his ‘coy’ lover. Interestingly, Marvell includes ‘love’ as a verb and noun four times in the opening stanza in order to persuade his lover that this sexual encounter will be an expression of their love and afterward it will be developed; as the conceit highlights;

‘My vegetable love should grow’.

However, love is not mentioned in the second or third stanza, indeed the argument becomes more vigorous and passionate, possibly symbolic of the proposed sexual intercourse. This is conveyed by the baseness of the animal imagery; ‘amorous birds of prey’, the descriptive ‘sits on thy skin like morning dew’ which may depict the perperation created by the act, and the verbal language ‘sport’ which may be a euphemism for sexual intercourse.

However, although one may analyse this poem and categorise it as a form of rhetoric, Marvell’s superb use of language to persuade a lover to abandon her coyness, and indeed this is true. But what I find particularly interesting about the poem and many of the male love poetry, is the silence within it of the woman it is supposedly addressed to. She is presented as an object of desire and not as a speaking subject. Thus this highlights to a greater extent, how women were represented as the object. Indeed many writers have criticised poets of the Elizabethan age, for example Donne, of impressing other men and not the lady. Therefore the presentation of courtship poems was not to woo or persuade the woman, but to bring acceptance within the upper echelons of male society.

Therefore can one value the reliability of the representation of women in the Renaissance period? Surely the male poet will cast his female into many roles; mistress, coy lover, virgin and/or lamia as appropriate. Indeed the extremes are highlighted in Spenser’s ‘The Faerie Queene’. In stanza four the image of the lovely lady riding an ass is filled with religious meaning. It is a symbolic depiction of Mary riding the donkey into Bethlehem and thus is a symbol of virginal purity; this is justified by the simile of the ‘whiteness’, again symbolic of purity and her care of a white lamb; the sacrificial victim. However in stanzas 13-15, the lamia is represented; ‘A monster vile’, ‘halfe like a serpent horribly displaide’, Spenser’s alliterated adjectival list;

‘Most loathsom, filthie, foule and full of vile disdaine’

is somewhat onomatopoeic and fills the mouth with disgust.

This may be metaphorical of the whore, thus Spenser has created an antithesis of woman. In my view he has deliberately opposed the women for the purpose of the audience’s judgement of them. The contrast of the associated language conveys the female to which Spenser is in agreement of; the virgin.

Therefore how cruel of Marvell to persuade the coy virgin to become the whore, or was it cruel?

A second representation of women in this period was of their excessive libidinal nature which should have been kept under careful restraint. Marvell may have been appealing to the female’s restricted libido, he may not have cared for her honour, indeed the opportunist. Or he may have been afraid. The male was fearful about women’s sexual capacity, once aroused women might be difficult for men to satisfy. Aphra Behn was presumably responding to such masculine fears in her mischevious poem, ‘The Disappointment’.

The narrative responding to male impotence is an ingenious piece of work of its time for it is written by a female poet, included the direct response of Cloris, thus causing the female to become a speaking subject and not a desirable object, and may be classified as a response from a
female of a woman's representation. The didactic term for the female lover, 'Cloris, that loved maid', contrasts the more definite 'amorous' which premodifies the 'Lysander', thus indicating that the male's libido is more excessive than the coyness of the maid. Indeed 'Lysander' was the conventional name for 'lover', while 'Cloris' the conventional name for 'woman'. In my view Behn is teasing the reader into regarding the woman as pure, also indicated by the verb, 'defend', a possible assumption that she is under attack. However her language later opposes the original thought.

The pun of 'wants' and 'lacks' portrays the male's confusion and the female's control; she is teasing. He becomes subordinated to her; 'he lay trembling at her feet' and 'her hands his bosom softly met'. The oxymoron, 'silent as yielding maid's consent', highlights paradoxically the woman's control. She will not verbally admit to sex, but by teasing she will eventually consent, this is also conveyed by Cloris fleeing, she must conform to the female role. She is described in the pastoral poem as a 'shepherdess' yet I would symbolise her more as the lamb, the sexual act was prepared as a sacrifice, she was the victim. Her love like Daphne's was spurned, ironically she had the physical control, but the act could not be performed because the male had the final control in the form of his erection.

Behn may emphasise with Cloris, but she may also be stating that the female is still the inferior sex. However, female contemporaries worked to invent images of mutuality, for example Philips in 'Friendship in emblem, or the Seal' reworks the conceit in Donne's poem, 'Valediction to Mourning'. She makes it possible for the identity of the moving foot to alternate; 'Each follows where the other leans
And what each does, the other means'
thus celebrating the union of equals.

However although an image of equality is celebratory and a woman should be represented as so. I have found that this may not be so, primarily because of the social and economical constrictions of the era, but also because of the limitations imposed on his imagination by the world he inhabits.