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IOE Academic Writing Seminar Series

**#IOEWritingSeminar**





# UCL

Subject tutor feedback on student writing: communicating qualities of 'writtenness'.

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**#IOEWritingSeminar**



## Overview

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- Qualities of 'writtenness' valued by subject tutors
- Subject tutor expectations
- Helping students understand expectations





## Data

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- 52 feedback scripts
- Summative comments
- 15 different markers
- 4 PG modules / disciplines
- L1 and L2 student writers
- Russell group university
- Assignments awarded fail to distinction
- Module handbooks & marking criteria

## Writtenness

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‘...marks the value of the text itself, the communication of the content rather than the content itself’ (Turner, 2018, p.23)



## Marking Criteria Descriptors

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### Presentation

Communication of ideas & consistency with the conventions of writing & presentation for the profession &/or academic discipline

Grade A *accomplished, fluent, fully consistent*

Grade B *clear writing, appropriate style*

Grade C *effective clarity, acceptable style though not fully consistent*

Grade D *inappropriate style*

(M-level Marking Criteria; Psychology/Social Science PGCE)



# Marking Criteria Descriptors

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## Structure, Communication & Presentation

Grade A *Exceptional clarity, focus and cogency*

Grade B *Clarity, focus and fluency*

Grade C *Basic clarity, focus and competence*

Grade D *Poorly organised and unfocused*

(MA Dissertation: Applied Linguistics & TESOL)

## Frequency of comments categorised 'writtenness'

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### Example of coding units

1. An accurate and fluent writing style, capable of supporting complex arguments
2. Your writing is clear and easy to follow
3. [your essay is] lacking in a smooth narrative flow
4. Ensure ideas are articulated clearly
5. Clearly and fluently written, just occasionally a little wordy or repetitive.



## Challenging the 'deficit' discourse

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'Writtenness usually only emerges as a topic in a negative light, when the perception is that a text has been badly written' (Turner, 2018 p.19)

'Language use is only marked when it is perceived as being faulty, and unmarked when the message is apparently clearly delivered' (Turner, 2010 p.6)

## Qualitative assessment ascribed to comments

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1. An accurate and fluent writing style, capable of supporting complex arguments *[positive]*
2. Your writing is clear and easy to follow *[positive]*
3. [your essay is] lacking in a smooth narrative flow *[negative]*
4. Ensure ideas are articulated clearly *[negative]*
5. Clearly and fluently written, just occasionally a little wordy or repetitive. *[mitigated]*

*55% ascribed a negative evaluation / 34% positive / 11% mitigated*

## Qualities valued by subject tutors

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1. *Clear, clearly, clarity, clearer, unclear* 26 (146)
2. *Succinct, succinctly* 4 (16)
3. *Articulate, inarticulate, articulation* 6 (12)
4. *Easy to follow, difficult/hard to follow* 5 (10) / *Fluent, fluently* 8 (8)
5. *Precise, precision, precisely* 7 (8)
6. *Vague* 4 (8)
7. *Nicely / well / poorly written* 7 (7)
8. *Wordy* 3 (3)

## Smooth read ideology

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1. Your writing is clear and easy to follow
2. [your essay is] lacking in a smooth narrative flow
3. Your essay is nicely written, and it is easy to follow from one point to the next

## Smooth read ideology

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1. And make sure that the arguments have a coherent narrative flow, using 'signposting' **to help the reader** to follow your ideas
2. Just ensure that you **don't ask too much of your reader** to understand your position
3. **The reader sometimes has to work hard** to understand why and how a certain sentence is following on from the previous one

'Rather than place the onus on the writer to provide a smooth read, the contemporary reader in international higher education needs to have the ability to cope with a rougher ride ... through a text.' (Turner 2018 p.13)

## Tacit knowledge

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‘teachers may recognize a good performance, yet struggle to articulate exactly what they are looking for because conceptions of quality usually take the form of tacit knowledge’ (Higgins et al., 2002, p.56)

## Explicit / non-explicit feedback commentary

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Feedback messages can be ‘accidentally communicated [...] and may not be consciously apparent to participants’ (Hyland, 2013 p.181)

‘Institutional practice of mystery’ (Lillis 1999 p.127)





## Taken for granted assumptions

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1. Keep sentences fairly short – one point per sentence only – to aid clarity.
2. Try to strip back your writing a little more so that you express yourself as precisely and succinctly as possible.
3. Writing style could be improved.

## Investigating the qualities of writtenness

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1. Collaborative approach – EAP and subject specialists work jointly to explore what constitutes ‘good’ writing (Whong & Godfrey, 2021)
2. Use of Exemplars (Sadler, 1989; Carless & Boud, 2018; Maxwell 2021)
3. Subject tutors identify extracts taken from exemplars that demonstrate e.g. clarity or lack of clarity
4. EAP practitioner unpacks the linguistic features or absence of them in each extract that enables the writer to achieve e.g. clarity
5. Provide consciousness-raising activities to students to demystify these aspects of academic writing.

## To sum up

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- Qualities of ‘writtenness’ act as a criterion across the academy
- Frequency of comments indicative of the value of ‘writtenness’
- Subject tutors do credit ‘good’ writing
- The ‘smooth read ideology’ also valued
- Need for collaborative projects

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