

Student Hub Live Bootcamp - day 2, part 3

[MUSIC PLAYING]

KAREN FOLEY: Anyway, we've got a lot to cover. We have to look at note-taking and essay writing. And joining me today is Nicky Harlow. Nicky, welcome.

Now, you're not only a writer, but you're also an Open University tutor. And you are going to tell us all about note taking and essay writing, which are two very, very popular topics. Now, Nicky has developed a quiz for you guys. OK?

So on your widget screen, you should be seeing a little quiz, which is about taking notes. Now, we don't know the answers to this. We just know the general answers. So have a go at it and see how many you get right. And we'll be feeding those into the session. You can just click through and let us know what you think about each aspect.

So, Nicky, note-taking then. Why is this so important? And somebody said earlier, am I going to be taking notes through this session? And they said, no, because they don't know how to take notes.

So how can people take notes through this? And what about what we say is actually important?

NICKY HARLOW: Yes, a lot of questions. And it's bigger. As you go through in your studies, it becomes bigger and bigger.

The main thing about taking notes is that you have a resource there that you can go back to to write essays or to revise for examinations. That's the main thing. It's an aid memoir. And it's to help the information go in.

So you may want to take notes from your module books. And I have brought-- if that's all right. I have brought a module book. This is one of the modules I teach on, which is the voices and texts, and material culture book. And this is Ideas of Authority, which is the very first book in the module.

And I was thinking, if I was reading the first chapter for the first time and thinking of going into an exam or writing my first essay, how would I get the information in that first chapter into my head?

Now, this is very low tech compared to your last session, I must warn you.

KAREN FOLEY: That's OK. We can do low tech especially if it's got stationary involved.

NICKY HARLOW: Well, it's got very messy stationary, which has been folded up on the train.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant.

NICKY HARLOW: So the very first chapter in that book happens to be the idea of authority. And all I did was go through the chapter--

KAREN FOLEY: Let me hold that one for you.

NICKY HARLOW: I go through and look at the different subject areas in the chapter and write a few notes, a few keywords on each of those. And that is a very easy way. It's just getting it in my head.

And then when I go back, I will look at the various things, like, what is a religious text in translation? How does that refer to the theme of authority? Do I understand it?

And really it's about active reading and asking yourself, do I understand this? I was guilty of this when I was a level one student. I would sit and diligently pore through books.

KAREN FOLEY: Oh, I used to do that. And I used to write loads and loads. And then I'd end up with a 40-page chapter with 20 pages of notes, very nicely written.

NICKY HARLOW: And I did have a very lovely student last year, who actually just copied out the book. And that was her notes. But that's not going to help it go in your head at all. What you need to do is ask yourself questions all the time.

And one way to do this is to skim read your chapter first, so a quick sort of rushing through it. And pay special attention to headings and anything in bold. And you might want to underline some bits, although I'm very old-fashioned. I don't like marking books still. But you might want to do that.

You might also want to look at some visuals that are explaining different theories. And diagrams, have a look at those. And then read it again. And then that's when I would do this sort of thing. Scribble. Scribble notes. And it doesn't have to be Post-it Notes. It can be in any way.

And try and summarise in your own words, a bit like your caller mentioned earlier about explaining it to a friend. Summarise in your own words what that chapter's about. Could you explain it to somebody else? And then try and create a list of keywords.

And then you might want to self-check all the time, trying to work out-- if I just saw that keyword written in isolation, would I understand what it meant?

So that would be a good way to take notes from a module book.

KAREN FOLEY: OK. Excellent. Now, we know then that the books are part of the OU range of materials as well. And we also know that a lot of our students here are at level one today. And I also wanted to talk about the differences between levels.

So note taking isn't just relevant to people who haven't taken notes. Our notes change a lot-- don't they?-- as we move on.

But firstly, when are people taking notes? And you've mentioned on a chapter, and that's obviously a sensible place to take notes. But say you're watching a video or say you're

engaging with an activity or a forum, or whatever, when should you be taking those notes? And I guess, how do you then make sense of where they all are in context of this module chapter? How do you store and manage all of that?

NICKY HARLOW: Well, there's different ways. And as you say, as you go through, at different levels-- at level one, you're going to be talking a lot about initial concepts, glossaries, understanding what the different words mean that you're going to come across.

At level two, you'll be going into a different area. You might want to store your work in tables or diagrams, so you can actually link through, for instance, something that's in a DVD. You could link through to something that's in a book or something that you've heard in a lecture. So you might want to produce a nice, neat table, which I haven't done today, I'm afraid. But you can produce a table linking different concepts.

KAREN FOLEY: OK. Now, what would the point then of making it into a table as opposed to a format like that be?

NICKY HARLOW: Well, if I got a question on an idea of authority, and I happened to watch a film about, say, Anne Bronte, and I think, well, how does she link to authority? I could then look back to the definition of authority, what I've learned before about the canon in literature of authority and link her back, and then link aspects of her text.

So you might have different headings, such as, what is your concept? Which is authority. What is the author, and what the piece of work is, and how it demonstrates that concept. And you could have it under different headings that are easy to reference back.

KAREN FOLEY: What if things aren't there? What if you get something, and you think, right, I'm looking at three different examples of various things. I can fill these in, but actually this is really lightweight on certain bits. What use with that table be then in terms of highlighting, I guess, what isn't there?

NICKY HARLOW: What isn't there, you can always go back to your original text, your original concept and look. And what isn't there is often as important as what is anyway. And that can often be a very good point to put in an essay-- why this particular piece of work does not demonstrate that concept.

KAREN FOLEY: Absolutely. We'll be talking a bit about that sort of technique and how identifying those gaps is important for critical thinking. And we're doing that next week.

OK. So note-taking, different strategies, things that work. Post-it Notes isn't going to work well for everybody. A lot of our students out there might use mind maps. They might use a whole range of ways of doing things on the computer with OneNote, et cetera. So people are using different tools for note-taking. How important would you say it is to find your own way? And if you've found it, is that it?

NICKY HARLOW: It will develop, and it will progress as you go along. This is mine. These are the sort of notes I write. And this is a real piece.

I was at a panel during the summer with Sophie Hannah, the author Sophie Hannah and S.J. Watson. And those are my notes. My way of doing it was to go through when they were speaking and just put what I thought was the most important bit of each bit of speech.

KAREN FOLEY: Well, you're very organised.

NICKY HARLOW: And I've got little bits of quotations that I managed to scribble down as well that I thought might be useful for an essay later on.

KAREN FOLEY: Gosh. See, my notes are all scribbles. And I write all over the page. I think in shapes and bits. So I can't have a linear thing. That would just freak me out. I have to have bits everywhere. And then I'll draw bits between them. Isn't that interesting how different people's notes can say different things? I guess it's how you think as well. Isn't it?

NICKY HARLOW: It is. It is. And it's different.

But this isn't the end product anyway. These are notes, which I took on that particular panel. But I went back to them. And unfortunately, I can't find the document. But I actually slotted those in with some other ideas that I had, that I thought they'd be interesting as examples of.

KAREN FOLEY: OK. Brilliant.

I'd like to talk a little bit about proportional note-taking as well, because I think this is something that we need to acknowledge. These chapters are often of a similar length. Often they have maybe five sections or so. So the actual chapters from OU materials have some sort of format that people will get used to within their discipline area.

Now, sometimes the author is explaining something, and they can do that in quite a wordy way, because they're explaining quite an important concept. Sometimes there'll be something really, really important that is very, very small. It's only a paragraph or so. But actually, that can be quite a pivotal point. And it can really impact on something that you're trying to do within their wider context.

So you could have a few hundred notes here and something really important here. How do you then address that in terms of note-taking? How do you recognise what's important and what may be wordy and explanatory? And once you get it, that's a take-home point in just one-sentence notes. And how do you then, I guess, weight things yourself in light of what you're reading?

NICKY HARLOW: I think the weighting has got to be-- you have to work out, what is an example of a concept? What are you being asked to learn here? What's the point of this particular chapter? And once you have the concept, then a lot of the other wordy pieces in the chapter may well just be examples. And you don't need to remember all those examples-- one or two will probably do.

And as you progress through your studies, you will also get to a point where you'll be able to find your own examples. A recent lovely one is I was teaching English language on this module. And there was a whole section on dialect and accent. And there's lots of things in the books about it, but this one student was able to go back and look at how his accent has impacted on his career and how he feels he was actively discriminated against.

And it was great to see a student coming away from a module book and looking to find examples in his own life. And that's when you're starting to think out. That's showing your real development as a learner.

KAREN FOLEY: Excellent. 59% of our audience are saying that they type their notes up, which is quite interesting. How often do you think people are actually using digital tools or word processing packages to type things up? And do you think they're then planning on cutting and pasting those into an essay?

NICKY HARLOW: I think it's highly likely.

KAREN FOLEY: I do.

NICKY HARLOW: It's highly likely, yes. And I think, again, it's increasingly. As our students or people are more and more used to using technology, they're bringing iPads and laptops into lectures and into seminars and typing up as you're there. And yes, I'm sure they do just cut and paste it.

KAREN FOLEY: No, no, no. But you know, sometimes it's that important thing, I guess, of being able to write and reconstruct things in your own words that matters here, because when you start taking notes, it's very, very easy to be looking at something-- because that's what you're taking notes from. Isn't it?-- and then to be, I guess, paraphrasing. And it can be very easy to inadvertently plagiarise, which has dire consequences, as we've--

NICKY HARLOW: Yes, it does.

KAREN FOLEY: So what would your tips be in terms of how to deconstruct some of that, in particular, if people are using word processing tools that make it a little bit easier, I guess, to copy chunks of things?

NICKY HARLOW: Yeah. Well, always try and use your own words. And again, the person who wrote in had it absolutely spot on. He was saying, could he explain-- or she-- could she explain something to somebody else? Could they explain it? And that's what you need to be able to do.

Could you explain a concept to someone else without going into the book or pasting anything? And once you can do that, then you're on the line to being a real independent learner.

KAREN FOLEY: Excellent. OK. So some of these concepts though that we are taking notes on, they're infinitely sensible. And they often have definitions and terms that we can't maybe write in our own words. So it might be a glossary definition that we may be needing to use. And there might be some very big ideas that we don't really feel we can put in our words, because it's a theory or something.

So how can we deal with those sorts of things and take notes? And how would you recommend people try and include referencing and sourcing and acknowledgement of the author's domain, as opposed to their interpretation of that? What would your advice be?

NICKY HARLOW: Well, that's absolutely fine. You can quote directly, as long as it is a quotation and it's obviously a quotation, which is correctly referenced. You might use an in-text citation, or you might reference it and it's included in the bibliography at the bottom.

KAREN FOLEY: Excellent. OK. Most people write their essays a couple of days after, which is a good sign, I think, because then you have that natural space-- don't you?-- when you've written something, and then you can do that. But there is also, I guess, a bottleneck in terms of where you've been reading, and then you have to submit your TMA. So that would be very natural. Wouldn't it?

NICKY HARLOW: It would. It would. Yes, you would be reading a lot. And really most of it is going to be reading. Most of note-taking is reading and understanding and using the grey matter. You shouldn't be scribbling and scribbling and scribbling for hours and hours, because you're wasting your energy. Use this to understand rather than to write.

KAREN FOLEY: Excellent. Annie and HJ, on the hot desk, how's it all going? Have we answered people's questions about note-taking? And are they now able to take notes on what we're saying?

ANNIE: Yeah. So Luigi actually said that she struggles remembering dates and names when she's doing her note-taking. So is there any advice on how she can remember, or any tips?

NICKY HARLOW: Well, my daughter's got this fantastic tutor, who makes songs up about everything. So if you're any good at making songs up, and you can get-- say it is World War II. If you can get the basic dates into a song, it's a brilliant way of remembering.

ANNIE: Fantastic.

HJ: I think we've had some great tips on note-writing as well. And I always love these tips that people give in. But some people are like me, and they have terrible handwriting. So George suggests typing up your handwritten notes as soon as possible to get over the reading your illegible writing problem. So I'll have to try that one.

And Debbie writes her notes quick and scruffy, and then rewrites them neat into a notebook. I like that, because that's sort of like reviewing what you're doing and making sure you're going through stuff.

And Davin finds very helpful flashcards. And he writes questions on one side and the answers on the other. And he goes through, which is really good, because some modules-- I found my economics module had a lot of new words and definitions I had to remember. So writing them on flashcards or using different programmes-- and people suggested some flashcards are really helpful for that sort of thing.

I like these ones. Really useful.

ANNIE: I'm definitely going to take these onboard.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah, and I've had some level one students starting off with a glossary as well. That can be really nice idea so you get those terms. And I guess, Davin, like you say, those would be really useful as you're going through, especially if you're using them on the

train or to study for exams, especially with subject specific areas. You would have a lot of concepts and terms that could be very useful as you're going through. So brilliant idea, sir. Excellent.

Nicky, we're nearly out of time. Is there anything else that we can include about note-taking before we start looking in a little while at essay writing?

NICKY HARLOW: I think one last thing I'd like to say is you need to be able to distinguish between what is a fact, what is an opinion, and what is an example. So in your notes, the facts are important. The opinions may be important if you're writing a thing about-- I don't know-- Louis Pasteur, and you need to quote his opinion on something. Then fine.

But just be aware that you don't mix them up-- a fact with somebody's opinion. And then the examples, as I said before, are something which are just illustrating this fact. And sometimes you can find your own examples.

KAREN FOLEY: Excellent. Now, would you advise students do that? If they get an example in the module material, and they can think of another example, would that be useful when you're taking notes and trying to process things?

NICKY HARLOW: I think it would, because it would help you understand the concept. It's making it all go in. But obviously, you may well be asked an essay question on the example in the module material. So disregard it as well.

KAREN FOLEY: I often find it interesting, in particular, I think, for level two students, and when you're starting to do a little bit more critical thought in things, if you can start thinking, well, how much of that example, when I step away from it, how much does that example really tell me about this concept? What does it and doesn't tell me? Because often we can think, yes, those too match very nicely. Thank you very much.

But sometimes it's about saying, actually, that does and doesn't explain certain things about this example. And one example can't necessarily cover everything to do with a concept or theory. Can it?

NICKY HARLOW: No. And that's a good thing segueing into the essay writing session. That's a very good distinction to make and something that you can use in an essay.

KAREN FOLEY: No, exactly.

NICKY HARLOW: Is someone drying their hair?

KAREN FOLEY: It does sound like a hair dryer. Doesn't it?

ANNIE: I absolutely love the popcorn maker. I had to bring it in, because I thought, well, it's going to be better than a microwave. I'm really sorry, but--

HJ: It's a little loud. Isn't it?

ANNIE: It was very necessary. Sorry, guys. But we had to have the popcorn in the studio today. And making it fresh is just the way to go. Here, have some.

HJ: That's very kind.

ANNIE: Yeah. All the talk of popcorn on the chat is just making me hungry.

KAREN FOLEY: I don't believe you guys. Honestly, Annie, I thought you'd be-- I thought, OK, Sophie, math student, a bit unpredictable. Fair enough.

We had complaints about the popcorn.

ANNIE: Sophie brought the microwave in, and I brought the real machine in. So I can be let off this week. It's the right way to do it.

KAREN FOLEY: It does smell really nice actually. I wish I could come over. We've got to do make do with cake. Would you like some tea?

NICKY HARLOW: Please.

ANNIE: That's getting you back for not letting us have the cakes. We get the popcorn.

KAREN FOLEY: Well, I suppose fair's fair. isn't it? I wonder what everyone's eating at home. I wonder if they're outdoing us. I wonder how those lunchboxes are doing that we've seen on Twitter.

Right. Well, enjoy your popcorn, guys. We're going to talk about essay writing now.

KAREN FOLEY: This is not just entertainment. This is all about building a community and learning some skills. Actually, we do have-- there are these brilliant books, which are available online. This is a hard copy of one, but you can't get hard copies anymore, because they're a lot better online, where you can get them as PDFs.

This one is on reading and taking notes. And it's got loads and loads of helpful advice on here that you can work through. There's a range of these booklets on OU study skills. And we've got the links to those on the resources section of the website. So do take a look, because it does cover everything, and it gives you some really lovely examples about how to do note-taking and different options that you can use. So make sure you get a copy of that if you want to find more. And there is, as I say, a range of other ones there, such as thinking critically and planning your assignments, et cetera, that would come in really, really handy.

OK. Let's talk essay writing. So we've done our notes. And we wanted to think now about from taking notes and things to formatting those in an essay. We've seen from our students in the quiz that they have been doing those a few days afterwards. And also, at home, we have another little quiz for you about essay writing. So it would be very interested to know your thoughts on those questions that you can do as you go through.

How daunting would you say it is, Nicky, for students during their first essay? And often the first essay isn't the first assignment. We gear people up, particular at level one, towards that. But essay writing is a skill, nonetheless, that people need to get to grips with. It's an important academic skill. It is what it is. And we need to be able to figure a way of navigating that and navigating it well as a skill that is learned.

So what would you say some of the main things, the main anxieties, I guess, that people have about coming back to university and going, oh no, I've got to write an essay now?

NICKY HARLOW: I think it's structuring the essay from the beginning. I think they worry about inadvertent plagiarism. I think they worry about looking stupid and not being clever enough for university. And I think that's probably the most frightening thing about it.

Once you're putting your thoughts on paper in an essay, you're giving yourself away. You're showing that you haven't or have understood something. So it's very important to allay everybody's fears. And essay writing, like everything else, is a skill that can be learned. And once you've learned it, you'll do it almost in your sleep-- almost.

KAREN FOLEY: Good old English literature department, reassuring us on that. It is a skill, as you say. And I know a lot of students who come to our first tutorial who have said, I'm really worried about writing an essay. I haven't been to school in years. And now, I'm going to have to write an essay. And often they don't, as I said before.

One thing Georgina and I talked about earlier is that a lot of the time skills will be structured within the study planner. So depending on which level people are at-- and we know that a lot of students here are doing arts and social sciences, for example. So they may have to write essays perhaps a little bit more than maybe science students, studying STEM subjects.

But there are a range of different types of assessment. So essay writing, in particular, students will be skilled up to learn some of those processes. But as you say, it's something that everybody can still continue to develop.

How do you know then when you're writing a good essay? How do people know, should they be watching this part of the programme or not?

NICKY HARLOW: Well, first of all, a good essay will answer a question. A good essay is an argument. And one of the main things that I tell every student is read your question before starting, because so many students don't. And I still have-- and often, you'll get a choice of three subjects, for instance. And a student will answer a question on one subject. They'll answer the wrong question about the right subject to me. Or they'll answer just something completely different. But they might even produce a good essay about a different topic altogether.

So read your question. And make sure you understand your question. And if you don't, ask your tutor. That's what we're here for. So make sure you understand exactly what's being asked of you.

And look at the process and the content words. So if you're asked to discuss something, make sure it's a discussion. And look at the content. What content are you being asked? If it's about the idea of authority, as we were discussing before, make sure you mention that word in your essay and use that idea of authority.

And then do your research. Make sure you do your research. Now, I don't know about you, about going about essays, how you start an essay, Karen.

KAREN FOLEY: Oh, don't ask me, because I probably have a really bad way of doing it.

NICKY HARLOW: Well, I've done a funny thing here. I have pretended-- because this is a topic on everyone's lips these days-- that we have been asked to write an essay about Brexit.

KAREN FOLEY: I do it like that. I would definitely sellotape things together. And I'd definitely do it scribbled.

NICKY HARLOW: Our question here is Brexit will create greater economic prosperity for the UK. Discuss.

OK. So I was thinking, because I'm not a historian, and I'm not a politics student, or anything like that, how would I go about this? All the different subjects are involved. Now, I would do something like this to start off with. And this is a splurge. What do I know immediately about this idea of Brexit?

And so I've got all sorts of ideas here. I'm looking at our place in Britain, in Europe, and the world, and looking at the idea of immigration, looking at economic policy, looking at the politics of an island nation. And then I've started to go back.

So if you go into economic policy, we could look at the austerity that we've all been living under recently. And then that brings me to Adam Smith and Keynes and people like that, the economists. And then you might want to look at Marx and Engels. You might want to look at the North-South divide in this country.

Or you could go in a really different way and look at-- what's that one?-- the history of our involvement with Europe. And then you might end up, how did we manage coming out of Rome? How did we manage coming out of the Church of Rome? How did Henry VIII do that? piece of PR and by the UK, or done by England in those days, coming out of Europe.

So those are just some ideas. And that's what my initial essays would look like-- a big splurge with everything in my head. But you would have to focus down. And I'm being asked about greater economic prosperity there. So I need to look.

So obviously, the bit on the economy is going to be the interesting bit. So probably the only really relevant bit of that now is that bit. And then we can start focusing down further.

KAREN FOLEY: I love this. And this is what I do, because I like having things on a tangent. And they're important, aren't they, because even if you're not writing about them, sometimes you'll have read about them in a chapter. And you think, even though some of this isn't relevant, it might be worth a sentence, or it might be worth some broader mention in the introduction that we're sort of saying, OK, these are some of the things here. But what really matters is this.

So it's important, I guess, to go through this process so that you're identifying what matters in terms of the essay question without having to necessarily limit some of those things that could perhaps bump you up into the B or A with a little bit more critical thinking around the subject area and how things might apply. But as you say, focus is really important and understanding the question.

Did you want to use this anymore?

NICKY HARLOW: No.

KAREN FOLEY: So understanding the question is absolutely vital. Now, tell me then-- we give students a lot of information with assessment, in particular at level one. So they'll get an assignment guidance, and it'll say, this is your question. This is how you should approach it, et cetera.

Now, I know some students approach this to the letter. And other students go, that's all very interesting. Man, this is an interesting subject. I'm off. And they'll go and research something and, as you say, perhaps write a really good essay on a slightly different subject, which makes it challenging to mark. How do students then work with that guidance to create an essay that addresses the question?

NICKY HARLOW: Well, again, look at the question, and look at where the information you've been given leads you, because these-- the OU, I cannot praise-- I know I work for it, but I cannot praise the module materials enough. And the answer will always be in the module materials. And this is at level one particularly.

At level two, you will be starting to do your own research. You will be given books. And you'll be given reading lists, where you can start to look out. And level three, far more, you'll be becoming independent and looking at your own research.

But look at the question. And look at, what can I do to answer that question?

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. Well, 71% of our students are at level one. So this is obviously going to appeal a lot more to them. And we do have 51% of our students doing arts and social sciences. So again, this is the sort of subject that may be very, very relevant to them.

So they get this assignment guidance. And they're starting to unpack some of those things to do with the essay question. When they've done that, the writing process then. Can you tell us a little bit about that? And a little bit about how much-- it seems like a lot of work goes into the preparation, I guess. But often, I think-- or I know a lot of students think-- I'm writing an essay, I'm writing the introduction, time starts now, and then that's it. I'm writing the essay. What do I put? And then I spend an hour writing 200 words. And I've got nothing, no plan, no nothing.

So tell us then about this essay writing process and about how much of that is preparatory and how much is actually writing.

NICKY HARLOW: Well, I would say, a large percent of it is preparatory. A large percent of it's going to be reading. It's going to be thinking. And you might not do that even at a desk. Often I'll be sitting on-- the train, I think, is amazing for thinking. Often I'll be thinking of a question, and then it will pop into my head. Oh gosh. And I read that about this. I can use that example.

And good idea. Always, always have notebooks with you, always. I mean, I'm talking about stationary fetishes. I have a terrible stationary fetish. But I carry these notebooks around with me all the time. And thoughts that pop in, I'll write down. So personally, I would say I probably spend 20% of the time writing, if that. The rest is the reading and thinking stage.

KAREN FOLEY: OK. So when you're writing then, do you need to be in a mood to write? I mean, you might say this is a writer yourself. But sometimes people think, I'm not in the flow of it or it's just not happening for me right now. Bear in mind, we give our students a week or so in the study planner to do the assessments. How important is it to be in a writing mood?

NICKY HARLOW: It isn't. You have to hit the wall, and you have to go through it. I'm sorry.

KAREN FOLEY: Well, that's fine. Get on with it.

NICKY HARLOW: --true writer.

KAREN FOLEY: OK. So you start writing. What do you do? What bits do you do first?

NICKY HARLOW: Well, I've got a very good friend who's a lecturer. And he explains an essay-- the beginning, middle, and end, or introduction, the bulk of the essay, the conclusion-- as at the beginning you tell them what you're going to tell them. In the middle, you tell them. And at the end, you tell them what you told them. Which is a very simple way of breaking down your essay.

Generally, it's a good idea to write something in your introduction. So what are you intending to do with this essay? What are you writing? What's it for? What do you want to show the person who's reading it? So in your beginning, that's all you do. This essay is to do this.

And then you do it in the middle bit. You show what you want to demonstrate here. And at the end, you give a summary of your main arguments.

And you must remember that an essay is an argument. And it should have a flow going through it. It should be a natural seamless from one paragraph to the next. They lead to each other.

KAREN FOLEY: 37% of our students say that they do the introduction first. When I'm writing essays, I will often do the body of the essay first, because until I know what I want to say, I find it very difficult to tell the reader what I am going to say. So often what I'll do is I'll plan it, and then I'll start writing the body of the essay and the paragraphs. And then I'll think about that and write the introduction.

So is there a right or a wrong way of approaching this?

NICKY HARLOW: There isn't. There generally isn't. But probably even if you're writing the body of the essay, you must have an idea what you're going to be writing about.

KAREN FOLEY: Yes, but I never feel I can say it that well right at that moment. I find it really stressful starting to write the introduction, because I feel it should be really profound sometimes. And until I've got the profound bits later on, I sort of feel a bit daunted by it myself. So I find it a lot easier. But I think maybe that's just me.

NICKY HARLOW: Well, I think one of the very helpful things about the introduction is, in some way, you need to rephrase the question of the essay. In the introduction, if you can do that in some way, if you just put it in your own words, that will help you focus on what you're

trying to do in the rest of the essay. And that really is all I will do to start off with. I'll write the body. And then I'll go back to my profound introduction, she says.

KAREN FOLEY: So how much should you tell them, the reader of the essay, about what you're going to say? What sort of things have to go in this intro?

NICKY HARLOW: Well, it's your main argument. I'm going to prove this argument. I'm going to prove that Brexit is not right for this country. So that's what I'm going to prove. And I'm going to use perhaps two main resources. I'm going to use a Guardian Newspaper article, and I'm going to use something in a module chapter. And that is going to prove-- and that's when I rewrite the essay title. And that's basically the introduction.

KAREN FOLEY: OK. What about setting up parameters in terms of what you're going to discuss? How important is that? I mean, this whole issue that you've come up for this essay question, that could be a million word essay, or it could be 1,000 word essay. And obviously, the length that you've got will dictate to some extent how much detail you can go into. So how important is it within the introduction to set those parameters?

NICKY HARLOW: It's very important. And again, it's all about focus. What particular aspects of this topic are you going to focus on? And that needs to be in your introduction. You can't have Henry VIII in there and everybody else in there. You have to just focus on one aspect, because often at level one, essays are 1,000, 1,500 words. On that big sheet that I did before, that's probably a book if you went into all those topics.

So you've got 1,000 words. What can you achieve in 1,000 words that's going to make sense?

KAREN FOLEY: This is an interesting point, because often you've got guidance. And often students will think, well, there's not much room to go here. But when you're marking them, there is room. People will interpret things in very different ways.

And one student will say, actually, I really want to focus on this theory, because it is so much more important and da, da, da, da. And if they add that weight in that introduction, you think fair enough. I can see where you're coming from, because you're sort of saying, well, this is all very interesting, but really here is where I'm going to discuss this. And as long as you're addressing the essay question, that's absolutely fine.

NICKY HARLOW: It is, except often module teams are particularly drawing you in a direction, because you're on a module. There's a learning process. So perhaps you really do need to focus on a particular topic, because you're going to need to know about it for the next topic. So it is important, and it is. It's all focus. It's all about drawing your eye where it should go.

KAREN FOLEY: OK. And definitions then. How important are they to include? Are they something that should be in the introduction? How important is it to define the terms that we're actually referring to?

NICKY HARLOW: It's extremely important. I mean, just that term, Brexit. Does anybody know what it really means? So you need to have a go at defining that in your introduction, because this is what I'm going to be talking about in this essay.

KAREN FOLEY: And of course, we do forget the colloquially. We might know what something means, but actually academically it could mean something very different. I mean, in social sciences-- Georgina was here when we were talking about DD102, this idea of inequality or difference means something in a very specific context to that, even though we can talk about that every day meaning something ever so slightly different. So it's important sometimes to say this is how we're referring to it in this discipline.

NICKY HARLOW: Yes, it is very important. And it is subject-specific, the way you write your essays. And a lot of it, your writing style matters. So one of the ways to write a good essay is practise writing. Practise how you say things. Use language. Fall in love with the dictionary.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah. I often think about essay writing, in particular paragraphs, which I'd like to move on now, in terms of almost like galloping like on a horse. And I like to think about da-dum, da-dum, da-dum, and getting some pace to it, and getting a flow to it.

And there are various techniques that we can use to construct paragraphs, but they need to be something contained and defined. What would you say is the most important defining thing about a paragraph?

NICKY HARLOW: A paragraph is on one particular subject. When you're going to change subject, you go to another paragraph. To make a paragraph interesting, try and vary the length of your sentences to give it some pace.

Hilary Mantel, the wonderful author of Wolf Hall,-- I think I'm stuck on Henry VIII today-- when she's editing her books,-- even though this is novels, it's the same with essay writing-- she talks about editing on the paragraph level. So she edits sentence to sentence and makes sure there's a rhythm in what she writes. The best essays will have a rhythm like that.

KAREN FOLEY: OK, lovely. But maybe is that something you pick up on later in the editing process?

NICKY HARLOW: Yes, this is later. I've galloped ahead a bit there.

KAREN FOLEY: You've galloped ahead. Right. OK.

So in each paragraph, what do we need? We need some piece of evidence or some point or something to do with the module material. Don't we?

NICKY HARLOW: We do, a module material or some other evidence. And it is a piece of evidence. So if your quoting or paraphrasing from something, for instance, in one of the module books, you need to make sure it's correctly referenced at the end or use an in-text citation.

KAREN FOLEY: So really you're looking for at least one piece of evidence accompanied by one reference, I guess, per paragraph.

NICKY HARLOW: Yes.

KAREN FOLEY: And then you'd need something, I guess, explaining how that's relevant to the essay question.

NICKY HARLOW: You do. And it's like having an argument. If I said to you, I don't like those cakes.

KAREN FOLEY: I don't like those ones. They're so sweet! They're horrendous. I don't know how they sell them.

NICKY HARLOW: You've given some supporting reason why you don't like the sweets. Just saying you don't like them--

KAREN FOLEY: Oh no. I do like the chocolate cake. That's lovely.

NICKY HARLOW: But it is. You've come up with an argument, and you support your argument. So I don't like-- what are those cakes?-- French Fancies.

KAREN FOLEY: Are these the French Fancies?

NICKY HARLOW: That does remind me of my childhood. But I don't like French Fancies, or French Fancies are very bad for you because--

KAREN FOLEY: They are. I think they're just full of sugar and lard, horrendous things.

NICKY HARLOW: Although, sugar and lard sometimes, in the middle of writing an essay--

KAREN FOLEY: OK. So paragraphs-- so we've got all our paragraphs. And there's various ways that people can link those paragraphs.

NICKY HARLOW: Yes.

KAREN FOLEY: Now, students can get a little bit hung up about that, because there's a lot to focus on here. We're saying, well, you need to do this, you need to do that, and da, da, da da. And while sometimes you can step back from it and say, OK, well, if we've got a piece of evidence, if we've got to relate that back to the essay question, there's a limit to, I guess, what we can include in each paragraph. Isn't there?

NICKY HARLOW: There is.

KAREN FOLEY: And then making some sense in a link to it. Is it a case then, I guess, of slotting all this together in your plan so that you're writing then as a joining up of that process?

NICKY HARLOW: In a way, yes. I've written essays which have started off in one way, and I've completely jiggled around all the paragraphs at the end, because I think, oh that doesn't flow very well. That's not an obvious thing to move onto after I've said that. So then I'll jiggle it all around afterwards in the editing process, which is very important.

KAREN FOLEY: Now, one of the things that we encourage students to do is write essay plans. And we ask them sometimes to submit those essay plans. And sometimes they do, and

sometimes they don't. And sometimes you think, you've used this or maybe you haven't used it, or it's not really evident that people have. And for some people, they can be really, really useful.

Now, I've only recently discovered the benefit of writing essay plans after many, many years of writing essays without doing so. And I think they can be incredibly useful to focus on. But sometimes they're not everyone's cup of tea. What would you say about that whole planning process and how you can actually start writing? Can you write an essay without a plan that is good?

NICKY HARLOW: I think it very much depends what you like. Some people do plan things to the nth detail and use Post-it Notes and things.

Other people, like me, are a bit more scatty. They'll get loads of Post-it Notes all over the room, make a big mess, and then just start writing, because, ultimately, writing's a process. And sometimes you discover in your writing process of the essay, you discover what you want to say as you're writing, which sounds very cockeyed, I know, compared to the essay planning way of doing things. But sometimes that will help you.

So really there's no right or wrong. An essay plan can be extremely helpful if you think like that. But--

KAREN FOLEY: It can be helpful if you're short on time. Although, I used to find that sometimes I'd explain concepts twice in an essay. And then I'd think, oh, that's a really nice sentence there. I'm not getting rid of that.

And then there's this whole thing where you think, I'm repeating myself. And maybe I'm sort of merging things so that I'm talking about two sides of one thing. But I thought they were so nice, I sort of thought I'd rather-- and I realise, with hindsight, the stupidity of this whole logic. But at the time, it can be difficult when you think, I've written that really well, and it seems like a really nice paragraph. How do you recognise then when you're doing that sort of thing if maybe you aren't using plans? How do you recognise when you're touching on similar areas or when you should be combining things into something that is a little bit more structured?

NICKY HARLOW: Well, you need to read your essay. And you need to ask yourself honestly, have I repeated myself? Have I said this? Have I explained that properly?

You only need to explain something once. There's a lovely concept used to write, called murder your darlings. And this is it. You murder the bits. Those repeated bits, which you think are beautiful language, often they're the things that just have to go. And often it's the bits you think are very utilitarian that will stay in, because they're doing the job that they need to do.

KAREN FOLEY: I'll tell you, I used to call them over matter. And then I used to cut and paste them, because I wasn't prepared to kill them immediately. And then right at the end, I had to just delete them. And then I felt better about it.

One thing I used to do, actually, was I used to try and identify what the point of each paragraph was, because sometimes, even though I would plan it and then write it, sometimes

when you're writing, as you say, you're discovering, and then that point can sometimes be less pertinent than you'd initially intended.

So how would you recommend people can sense check back? So they're planning for what they're writing. How can you sense check back that what you're saying in each paragraph is both contained and relevance?

NICKY HARLOW: Well, for a start, keep the essay question always visible on your screen. So when you're sense checking back, look at this. First of all, is it pertinent? Is it relevant to the essay question?

And then look at the paragraph. Are you repeating yourself? Have you supported your argument? You've said something. Have you proved it?

And then read it with the paragraph before and the paragraph afterwards. Do they link together? Is that a coherent argument?

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah, brilliant. HJ and Annie, is any of this making sense?

ANNIE: Definitely, it's very clear.

HJ: We've got this really good question, because everyone's about to start. And we've got people at different levels. So they're all getting their tips in. But I think one great question was Debbie. She's talking about any tips for level two?

And it might be interesting to know what does the OU expect. And what differences can we see in what they expect and want in assignments between the different levels perhaps?

KAREN FOLEY: That is such a good question. I'm glad you've asked that. And in fact, it's going to be one of the topics that we're going to talk about next week with the critical thinking, because there is a difference. You spoke about process and content words.

And often at level one, I guess, we're asking students to describe, or sometimes later compare and contrast. And then at level two, they're doing things like evaluating and being a little bit more critical or discussing. So there is a sort of hierarchy of process and content words. Isn't there?

NICKY HARLOW: There definitely is, yes.

KAREN FOLEY: How do students then deal with this very descriptive level one stuff, moving into level two, where they're no longer outlining theories and explaining those, but they're actually starting to pick them apart? How could students deal with that in terms of the essay writing? Because you're saying that it's all in argument. You're saying any essay is an argument. Are some more of an argument than others?

NICKY HARLOW: Yes. And as you go into level two, you will be finding more subtle arguments. It won't just be one. You might have several arguments in your level two essay. You might be pulling your research from various different places, not just from a module book. So you might be looking at websites. You might be looking at other books. And you will start to be looking at your question and analysing it a lot further.

KAREN FOLEY: And again, there's often some skill stuff that's built into the module. Sometimes we'll talk about different approaches. Like we'll have block approaches or we'll have zigzag approaches, where you can look at things differently.

So tell us then in terms of planning. Say you're looking at two different theories, and you're comparing and contrasting them at level two. And you've got these various structures to play around with. Sometimes students can feel a bit overwhelmed thinking, well, I've got all of this interesting stuff to say. All of a sudden, I now get to really get to grips with evaluating it. But you're telling me I've got to do this block or this zigzag thing now, in terms of an essay writing structure. So they've got all of this freedom on one hand and then some constraint in terms of how they conduct that process. What advice would you give those students who are starting at level two, where they're just getting into that side of different writing?

NICKY HARLOW: I would advise them to get their pen on the page as soon as they can. Get the concepts in the head. Practise writing. Practise.

Look at other people's essays as well. There's always lots of essays around online and things you can research, other people's essays. Look at how they've employed those techniques. And see what you can do. And play around with it.

And it isn't restricting actually. It's very freeing. Often formal restraints can free you to think more clearly.

KAREN FOLEY: Would you say there's a right or a wrong way of doing those things, like those different approaches? Could you say, I don't know whether to do a block approach or a zigzag approach. I'm going to think on that for three days and procrastinating. How good a result can you get? Does it matter?

NICKY HARLOW: I don't think it does. I think it's up to you how you write. I really do. I don't think you should harness yourself to any particular technique. And you may find different essays require different techniques anyway.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah, absolutely. So I guess the take-home thing there is that at level two you are being asked to use slightly different process words than you may have been at level one. And it's important that you understand what those mean and the extent to which you're doing them.

Another thing that I've often found teaching at level two is that sometimes students can forget that they need a little bit of description. So as we said before, it's always important to define the key terms, set the parameters, even though you can now get into the nitty-gritty. It's the proportion that changes. Isn't it?

NICKY HARLOW: It is. It is. You will be citing your research a lot more at level two.

KAREN FOLEY: OK. So we're nearly out of time. And conclusion is the one thing that I want to conclude with. And what I want to talk about is how to make a good conclusion, because you said, initially, well, we tell people what we're going to say, and then we say it, and then we tell them what we've said.

Now, when I'm marking those sorts of things and I think, oh, you're repeating yourself here, that's no good. And then some students will all of a sudden say, well, I've said this, this, and this, and then they go off on to this profound thing, that I think, oh, that's brilliant. But it's just not related enough to what you're talking about right now.

So how do students sum up, how do they conclude in an appropriate way? And are they just paraphrasing then what they've said before? What would your advice be about a good conclusion?

NICKY HARLOW: Not really paraphrasing. They're looking at what they've written and all the different examples they've given and everything, and they will sum up by looking at x, y, and z, I have shown whatever it is you're trying to prove. And the worst conclusions are always where-- and this often happens-- a student decides to introduce a whole new topic at the end that could have gone miles back at the beginning.

Make sure you don't do that. Make sure you're actually underlining, this is what I have now demonstrated.

KAREN FOLEY: So I guess that the conclusion really is this is why all of the evidence that I've shown you addresses your question.

NICKY HARLOW: Yes.

KAREN FOLEY: And I'll thank you very much. OK. Brilliant. Nicky Harlow, that has been absolutely fantastic. Thank you so much for coming along today.

NICKY HARLOW: I hope it was helpful.

KAREN FOLEY: It was some brilliant. HJ!

NICKY HARLOW: There's cake theft going on here.

ANNIE: HJ.

KAREN FOLEY: Well, I want some popcorn now.

ANNIE: I don't know about that.

HJ: Well, you weren't going to share the cakes so.

KAREN FOLEY: I had no intention of sharing the cakes.

HJ: This is like a people's revolution here. And to be fair, I was dared.

KAREN FOLEY: Oh, right. So has everyone been egging you on then?

HJ: Maybe. I just think, are they happy with-- I'm not sure if they're happy with my selection of cakes.

ANNIE: They're saying you're a legend.

HJ: The problem is now I know you're on guard.

KAREN FOLEY: Nicky Harlow, I am so sorry about the carry-on here. Honestly, this is the thing when you get students involved. It's just ridiculous. We think everyone's grown up now, but clearly there's a bit of a child in us all.

Thank you so much for coming along. It's been a really, really useful session. And I hope that at home that's sort of helped with essay writing. There are some really, really good resources that we've got on the website if you'd like to brush up on those essay writing skills. But don't worry, because a lot of this is embedded in your module. You'll be picking up those study skills.

And next week, we're looking at critical thinking. So we'll be looking at how you can actually start organising your thoughts and thinking about what is there, what isn't there, and how you could introduce those ideas in an essay. So in particular, the students at level two, and even those at level one, this will come in handy at any time. But we are taking a specific look at that next week. So do come along for that.

Right. HJ, do you have anything sensible to say?

HJ: Perhaps. We'll see. I think we're still talking a bit about cakes. But I think one thing I picked up on the chat there that I really liked is that Davin said about having some one reason through your assignments before submitting, which is like we talked about a tip about reading your notes to someone else.

But having someone read through your assignments is really good, because I find when I'm going through an assignment, it's hard to pick up your own mistakes sometimes, just because you've been through it so much.

ANNIE: Very true.

HJ: So I really like that actually. And I'm going to try that. And I'm going to put it up here on our board. So if you email us, Davin, we'll have something nice to send to you back, because, well, you sent us that great tip.

ANNIE: And we've got some really great selfies coming in of stationary and your pet buddies, which I'm loving. So we've got by Shannon Mason her notes, which says, in highlighted ink, buy cakes for next Hub session, which is very relevant, because that is literally what everyone's been talking about today.

We've got Hazel Harris who has brought in a picture of her stationary. And she's said that it's an absolute lifesaver, which looks really cool actually. It's pots with pens in at the sides. So I'm loving that stationary.

HJ: I think Vivienne sent in-- she calls it a deskie. I really like it. I think we need to adopt that. We're sending in deskies. All this lovely stationary. But she has it so it's portable, so she can study anywhere, which is really good actually. She's very organised, unlike me, because mine always ends up just as a pit at the bottom of my bag.

ANNIE: Oh like this then?

HJ: It's not that bad really. Is it?

ANNIE: Quite bad.

HJ: Do you think?

KAREN FOLEY: It is bad. It is bad.

HJ: I think, if we're looking relative to how it's been, I'm getting better. I'm making an effort here, guys.

ANNIE: Fair enough.

KAREN FOLEY: If Sophie were here, which she sort of is, she wouldn't be putting up with this.

HJ: Sophie would have a disappointed face. Actually, compared to last week, I think Sophie would be rather happy with this desk. I think it's all right.

KAREN FOLEY: And isn't it lovely that she's there looking over your shoulder.

HJ: She can't argue with me now.

KAREN FOLEY: Exactly. And you won't be here next week as well, because you're off to university.

HJ: Off to big school, yeah.

KAREN FOLEY: Going to do your sensible things.

[MUSIC PLAYING]