

KAREN FOLEY: Welcome back to the Student Hub Live Assessment Boot Camp. So we've been just having a look at critical thinking and this idea about taking a different approach to the knowledge that you've got from the module materials you have. But how do we apply this to our assignments?

Now, we're going to take a look at process and content words in your TMA. And I'm joined by Anactoria Clarke, who is going to talk about this subject with us. But first before we start looking at this in detail, Lee and Zach, have people out there found their assignments, and how do they all feel about them?

LEE: They have found them. And they're really quite excited about them. And yeah, there's been lots of comments about people who are a little bit nervous. Peter in particular has mentioned that he's a little bit sort of anxious about starting a TMA. And he'd like some help and some advice with that. And of course, we've already signposted Peter to his tutor and student support team. But he's really hoping that the next few sessions will help him understand what we're looking for from TMAs.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. And anything else, Zach? I can see you're munching on your biscuits there in your bay.

ZACH: Yeah. I've got my biscuits already here.

KAREN FOLEY: Yes.

ZACH: Yeah, just following on, a lot of people throughout the morning have obviously seen their first TMA questions and are worried about how to plan for their assignments. It's a new experience for a lot of our students kind of upcoming this October. So hopefully we can make some things clear for them in this session. Looking forward to it.

KAREN FOLEY: Good. Now, don't worry too much about your assignments. You can worry a little bit, but not too much about your first assessment, because the whole name of the game with assignments is that we give you a task. You read the module materials. And then you answer the question and we evaluate the extent to which you've answered that.

It's not a decision on how good you are as a student. And some people who've been out this study can feel a little bit anxious about picking something up like this.

Anactoria, you work a lot on the access programme. And often people come to the university thinking, oh, I haven't studied for so long. It can be a little bit daunting. Tell us a little bit about how people might start feeling anxious about their first assignment, and why you think that is.

ANACTORIA

CLARKE:

I suppose it feels like a test. You might have opened the box with all your module materials and that might have been quite a bit of a challenge. And diving into the module materials for the first time in a long time is another challenge. And then all of a sudden, you've got this thing that you've got to submit. And somebody's passing judgement on it and it can feel like a big investment of your time and your energy and of you actually. So I think there's a lot at stake for students when they submit that first assignment. They feel that they're putting a lot of themselves into it.

KAREN FOLEY:

No. It does. I mean, 80% of our students have already found their first assignment, so that's brilliant, because knowing the task can often help alleviate some anxiety, because once you recognise what's happening with it, you can then sort of start to plan for it.

Now, some of our students may not know about how assignments are weighted and how they work, and that at Level 1, in particular, you just need to pass the module. Your overall grade is made up right at the end of module at Levels 2 and 3 in terms of how much it matters. But it can still feel incredibly important, that first assignment.

ANACTORIA

CLARKE:

It's really important to get it in.

KAREN FOLEY:

Yes.

ANACTORIA

CLARKE:

And it's really important to get the feedback. And it's really important to read the feedback and ask your tutor if you've got any questions about what they've written on it. And that I think is the purpose of that first assignment. It's for you to practise using the TMA system, to kind of get it ready for the deadline or for the deadline agreed with your tutor, and to open it when you get it back and to kind of take on board the sorts of things that are being written and just get used to that pattern, because that's going to be with you a long time.

KAREN FOLEY:

Forever, in fact. Forever and ever and ever, if you keep studying, like me. So tell us then about this process, because you're right. It is a process. It's not that the first one has to be perfect and that if you get 60% on the first one, then you've got to get 62% on the next one, et cetera. Every assignment is assessing ultimately something different, with a different amount

of marks and with a whole different aim.

- ANACTORIA CLARKE:** Absolutely. So just because you find one really easy doesn't necessarily mean you'll find the next one easy or you'll improve, because they're bound to get a bit more difficult as you progress through the module. So the important thing to remember is that there might be something that you're really good at and then there might be something that there's more of a challenge that you find. So if your marks go down, that's not a problem. That just means that that's the thing you need to work on a little bit more and get some help with.
- KAREN FOLEY:** Yeah. Yeah. So it's all about bearing in mind that every assignment is categorically different, that you're looking at something different, and it's not really a value in terms of that mark on you, but it's about how well you've done at a particular task, which can be different from the next task.
- ANACTORIA CLARKE:** Absolutely. And you might be different when you're doing one assignment.
- KAREN FOLEY:** Yes.
- ANACTORIA CLARKE:** You might have absolutely no time at all to study for those two weeks and you might be cramming it into all the nooks and crannies and 10 minutes here and 20 minutes there. But if you get the assignment in and you pass it, that's a win.
- KAREN FOLEY:** Now, tell me about this, because you teach as well. Do you see a trajectory of your students' grades? And do you ever think, ah, Sue was at 62 and now she's gone down, et cetera? Do you track those grades? And do you sort of worry about students who may fluctuate?
- ANACTORIA CLARKE:** I worry about the students fluctuating simply because I worry about their own confidence and how they're feeling about it. I know that there are some modules and some assignments, even at Level 3, there's a particular really difficult one or that's how students perceive it, for TMA 4, one of my modules. And I know that students panic about that and they really worry about it.
- But actually, that's one that they quite often do really well at, because it's quite structured. What the assignment's asking students to do is new to them, but it's quite structured.
- KAREN FOLEY:** Yeah. Now, we've asked students whether they know what process words are in their TMAs. Let's see what everyone has to say. So do you know what process words are in your TMA?

We've had 49% saying no, 26% saying yes, and 25% saying that they're unsure. Now, this could either be your TMA or your TMA, so it could either be the one that they've actually looked at. But understanding the question is essential to getting the right answer, because you can write an amazing piece of work, but if it's not on the right question, unfortunately you just aren't going to get the marks. So understanding the question is fundamental in approaching the assignment.

But we've had the session on process and content words. Broadly, what are the two and why do they matter?

ANACTORIA
CLARKE: As you say, it matters for getting the right things in your answer. We will never ask you to write everything you know on the Roman Empire.

KAREN FOLEY: No, much as we'd like to.

ANACTORIA
CLARKE: And as much of that would get some really interesting answers actually, that will never be a question. So it's really helpful, actually. The process words narrow down exactly what they're expecting you to give. And the content words help you to narrow down which bit of the module you're looking at. So rather than viewing them as things that are more difficult to navigate, actually it's helping you to identify particularly what bits you should be putting in your assignment and narrowing down what you're looking at in terms of the module materials.

KAREN FOLEY: OK. So what's the difference between process words and content words?

ANACTORIA
CLARKE: Process words tell you what to do. And content words tell you what to do it on.

KAREN FOLEY: Right.

ANACTORIA
CLARKE: I think. So the content words will tell you which bit of a topic you're to look at or which aspect the assignment wants you to address. And then process words tell you how to go about it.

KAREN FOLEY: OK. Which is easier though?

ANACTORIA
CLARKE: Well, they both go together, so neither, both.

KAREN FOLEY: Because we asked people whether they knew what the content words were. We had slightly more people disagree, although they might be just changing in time. So we had 30% saying

yes, they do. But 51% said no and 19% said that they were unsure about this as well, so slightly less uncertainty from the audience at home right now.

So what to do it on can often, I think, be a little bit more clear, because we often are studying a certain subject. So we might know that if asked about the Roman Empire, then the Roman Empire is the subject of the thing that we're doing. But these process words in terms of like what we're doing it on can sometimes be a bit tricky to understand, because often they're things that we use in everyday language. But sometimes we use them a little bit differently in an academic sense. And so it's important to understand how these are used at the Open University, I mean at any university.

ANACTORIA

CLARKE:

Absolutely. And I think your last session covered that quite well, with the idea of critical, because when we see in an essay title "criticise," we don't mean "say everything bad about." We mean to assess it. We mean to look at it in a variety of what's good and what's bad and what's in between about that particular topic.

KAREN FOLEY:

You've brought loads of process words with you. If you've got a process word you don't understand, by the way, let us know what it is, because we know that a lot of you have got your assignment. So why don't you try and figure out then what the process words are? So that's what you're being asked to do with the subject matter, so "describe," "evaluate," "critically think," "compare and contrast," those might be the sorts of things. And then the contents words will be those things about what you're doing it on, so the Roman Empire in this particular example,

So have a look and see. And if you don't understand what your process or content words are, then let us know and we'll have some time for questions in the chat later. "Describe" I think is one that most people at Level 1 will be very familiar with. And then they're horrified when they get their assignments back and see there's too much description going on here. So what does something like "describe" mean? And how much describing is in a describing process word?

ANACTORIA

CLARKE:

I mean, that's a really good point. And I guess this is where the content comes in. So describe the Roman Empire would just be massive. You could be going for volumes, never mind 1,000 words on that.

So you're hopefully ultimately narrowed by the content. And I know that later on you'll be talking about guidance notes, which quite often point to a specific part of the module materials that you're to look at. But "describe" means to kind of pick out main points or to give a logical

outline of. So not kind of the most minute detail, perhaps.

KAREN FOLEY: And you said before that we would never ask people everything they now about the Roman Empire, for example. How much critical thinking goes into describing, because for example, sometimes I'll say to students, I know that there's all this sort of 30 pages on this. But in context of what you're being asked to describe, you need to pick up what's relevant. You can't just describe everything, because if you describe everything, it doesn't show that you understand what matters.

So if I describe my journey here to you today and I said, oh you said, tell me about your journey, and I said, well, I drove up in the car and this was on the radio and duh duh duh, and I started going on in detail about what I'd eaten, what I listened to, and you said, actually, I didn't want to know about that. I wanted to know about your journey and that's what you did in the car, that's your experience, but I want to know about the journey.

So whilst that happened and whilst it's very, very true, it's not relevant. So in a sense you're sort of describing things that aren't really going anywhere to giving the marks that you need for your assignment.

ANACTORIA CLARKE: Yeah. Absolutely. So picking out those kind of main points and relating it back to the question, because as you said, describe your journey doesn't mean everything you ate that morning.

KAREN FOLEY: Yes. Oh, that was an extension of that.

[LAUGHTER] But absolutely. So it's having that sort of confidence to be able to think, what matters here in terms of what I need to describe so I can say, right, I understand this subject, Mr. Marker who's marking my assignment and I'm going to tell you the things that you need to know and I'm going to describe them in a level of detail that's appropriate. So even if my module materials had like 250 words on something, actually it's only really a sentence I need here that's very brief that just sort of sums up the essence of that, because I don't need to describe it in that much detail.

ANACTORIA CLARKE: Absolutely. And you know, that's where the editing process will come in really useful, because quite often when I'm writing something, I find that I just have to write to get the flow.

KAREN FOLEY: Yes.

ANACTORIA And then I go back through it and go, oh, well that's clearly not

CLARKE:

[LAUGHTER]

KAREN FOLEY: Yes. And it's hard to get rid of those.

Zach and Lee, have people found their assignments and is there any confusion about any words that we need to clarify?

ZACH: Yeah. We did have a question about content words from Susan. She just wanted a bit more clarification on what a content word is in a TMA kind of context. So we know it's a word that has meaning and function. But do you think you could elaborate on that for Susan?

ANACTORIA
CLARKE: Well, content words tell you which bit of the module materials you're going to be looking at. So for example, I might ask a question about the emperor Constantine. So emperor Constantine would be part of the content words, because that's telling you which bit of the module materials to look at and which bit of the topic to look at.

So it might be something to do with how important was the emperor Constantine's conversion to Christianity, for example? So the bits about "important" and "conversion to Christianity" would be the content words.

KAREN FOLEY: OK. So that's the area to focus on. And again, it's about being specific about that.

There are some brilliant interactive lessons that you can do on Study at the OU, which give you a breakdown and examples of going through content words. And you can highlight those. So Lee and Zach will put those links up in the chat for you. And it's a great way to do them.

But also, you might want to find your assignment question and you might want to write the question in the chat and see if you can identify the process and content words. And again, we can let you know if you're right about those. But broadly speaking, they're the things to focus on. So I hope that that's clarified that for you.

OK. Now, people we've asked people whether they mainly read the essay question or the guidance notes. And rather unhelpfully, we've had this as a bit of a scale, because it's a tricky one, actually, because really you're meant to read both. And so it's unsurprising that we had 42 people reading the essay question and 40 reading the guidance notes. But they're both fundamentally important in terms of how we actually unpack the TMA and also about how we

hold that throughout the whole assignment writing process, because we can't just read it at the beginning and then sort of go off, because often while you're in that editing process and you're very interested in this, this, and this, all of a sudden you can rather inadvertently shift your focus.

So how do we retain the focus then whilst we're getting to grips with the notes and the notes that we're writing as well? How do we retain the focus of what the parameters are that we're asked to discuss?

ANACTORIA Quite often writing the question in your own words can sometimes help.

CLARKE:

KAREN FOLEY: OK.

ANACTORIA So rephrase it in words that feel not quite so academic or not quite so unfamiliar.

CLARKE:

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah.

ANACTORIA And checking back. Every couple of paragraphs, maybe look back at the question and read the couple of paragraphs you've just written and think, is that going towards the answer to this question or have I gone off on a tangent?

CLARKE:

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah. Yeah. And how do you know then whether or not you've gone off on a tangent? How can you sense-check that?

ANACTORIA If there isn't a way for you to tie it back into the question it might just be putting a sentence at the end of the paragraph will tie it back in perfectly and everything you've got there before is your argument and that's fine. Or it might be that you think, actually, there's no way that this can kind of back, in which case you know you might have a little bit of a tangent, which are really interesting but ultimately unrewarding.

CLARKE:

KAREN FOLEY: Ultimately unrewarding indeed. I like that way. Lee and Zach, any other questions from people at home?

LEE: There's been a few questions, which have largely been sort of answered by today's session, really. And there's been a lot of interaction. There's been a few people using the process word activity from the help centre as well, so that's been really useful for people.

But there's been lots and lots of chatter and comments about TMAs and how this is helping them establish what that TMA question actually really means. So it's been very helpful for students.

KAREN FOLEY: Thank you.

Now, there is a list of all of these words, like "describe," "evaluate," et cetera, because they do have certain meanings and parameters. And students can find those at Study at the OU. And there are lots of places. Often in your module you might have a list of those words. And if not, you can ask your tutor, because they're very, very easy to get hold of.

Now, you said it's important to identify what those parameters mean. What if students get stuck and they analyse, like that's a big word, how do I sort of go about doing that, and what level of data? And I know that you've said actually it's important to evaluate the process and content words together, so you can't evaluate everything, for example, if this is your subject. You need to sort of think, how many words have I got in there? For what level of detail can I get into?

But what would you say to students about sort of really clarifying, maybe with their tutor or maybe with other students, about the extent to which they are addressing the question?

ANACTORIA

CLARKE:

Yeah. Absolutely. I mean, my advice would always be, if you're not sure, ask your tutor. With a TMA, it might well be that maybe you've not seen the bit in the guidance notes that points you to the exact kind of section of the module materials. Or it might well be that they can just kind of clarify for you, well, actually it's this bit that you're looking at. Don't worry about all the other parts.

So definitely ask your tutor. And definitely kind of apply yourself to the bit that you've just studied, because very rarely will a TMA ask you anything that's kind of more broad-ranging about the whole module. It's going to be asking you about a particular theme or about a particular section, if you're a literature student maybe about a particular passage of a novel but usually if it's only a short word count, not the whole thing.

KAREN FOLEY: And they're not there to trick you, are they, because sometimes you can look at a question and think, my, that's profound. I'm off to the library. And you can get in all sorts of bother going and researching something that you think is really massive and then think, oh, I've only got 1,000 words or 350 words or whatever it is to focus on this.

ANACTORIA And that's the other danger, is thinking that you have especially at Level 1 that you have to do masses outside of the module material. Usually you don't at Level 1 particularly. Usually what you need is there or certainly most of it is there.

KAREN FOLEY:

ANACTORIA Yeah. So definitely stick with that.

CLARKE:

KAREN FOLEY: Now this session we don't want to go into Peter's session, which is all about the learning outcomes and the guidance. But this session on the question, we don't want to get too profound. We've identified what we're asked to do. We've seen the word limit. And broadly, we need to relate the two.

The question has set its parameters. And you've said sometimes rephrasing that question can help you. But can you give our students any guidance about setting their own parameters in terms of how they're answering the question?

You've asked me to do this, this, and this, and this is my answer. Because that can really help sort of frame a good essay in terms of, well, these are the things that are important and these are the things that I'm going to go into. So is there a sort of relationship between framing your own answer in light of the essay question and saying, well, this is how I'm delivering on it?

ANACTORIA Absolutely. And this is where a really good introduction comes in, I think, especially if it gives you a contentious word in the essay title. So you might want to say how you are defining it.

KAREN FOLEY: Yes.

ANACTORIA So I'm looking at these particular things. And that helps to frame your answer then.

CLARKE:

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah.

ANACTORIA And that will give actually the person who's marking some really good guidance. That's what the students says they're doing. Oh, yeah, they're doing it.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah. OK. Now, can we take some of these words, because I know you've got a list and we can have a look at them. And let's pick up just a couple, because we've got about five minutes

left, just some of the key ones that we think that students might struggle with. And mainly what I wanted to hear is just sort of identify how these are different in an academic context to the way that we might use them colloquially.

ANACTORIA

CLARKE:

Yeah. I mean, there were two particularly that jumped out at me, "criticise" being one of them, because we think "criticise" is pointing out all the bad things and it's not. It says make a judgement by reasoned discussion of the evidence involved. Describe the merit of theories or opinions, or the truth of assertions. So you're very much looking at kind of two sides there and you're evaluating it.

KAREN FOLEY:

So this is what you mean when you're saying rewrite the question. It's not what would I rather the question were or how am I going to answer it on one side. If for example you have to evaluate something, you don't want to say, well, I'm doing it like this.

You really sort of saying actually, if you've asked me to do this, then I'm going to weigh up the merits of this, et cetera. So it's really breaking down what that task is asking you to do.

ANACTORIA

CLARKE:

Absolutely. I mean, I've got a friend who studied with the OU and she graduated last year. But she didn't understand argument until she got to Level 3. She didn't understand when people said construct an argument exactly what that meant. And I think if she'd kind of got that down earlier, she would have had a much easier time.

KAREN FOLEY:

Well, to be fair to her, though, it's a hard thing, because often you think, I know what that is, but actually I'm really struggling with the Roman Empire, for example. So you can sort of defer very easily to the things that you naturally find most difficult, because we all know what an argument is. We have them all the time.

And so it is a difficult thing to sort of get to grips with. But I can see here by just reading a couple of them that they do have a different meaning and that by default, you're massively skewing your argument if you don't actually understand what they mean in this context.

ANACTORIA

CLARKE:

Absolutely. And "illustrate" is another one.

KAREN FOLEY:

OK. What does it say about "illustrate."

ANACTORIA

CLARKE:

It says make clear and explicit, and give carefully chosen examples.

KAREN FOLEY: Right.

ANACTORIA So whilst we all enjoy a nice little picture of a cat
CLARKE:

KAREN FOLEY: Yes. Oh, yes.

ANACTORIA on an exam paper, when somebody is having a really bad day.
CLARKE:

KAREN FOLEY: Yes.

ANACTORIA That's kind of not what it means in the academic sense.
CLARKE:

KAREN FOLEY: Yes. And "assess" is another one there.

ANACTORIA "Assess," yeah. So determine the value of and weigh up. And it's very similar to "evaluate."
CLARKE:

KAREN FOLEY: Right. OK. So important for students to find these words and to be able to get them, because some of them are a lot more explicit, like "compare and contrast." You can't go too far wrong with that. But you can see the subtle differences here with some of these words.

ANACTORIA Absolutely. And some of them are quite close, so I think having a grid like this just kind of
CLARKE: pinned up or somewhere handy when you're doing your assignments is really helpful, because then you can look at it and go, OK, what's the word that they're using, so what is the task?

KAREN FOLEY: Yes. Brilliant. OK. Zach and Lee, any questions before we wrap up?

LEE: There's no specific questions they're asking, but there's been lots and lots of questions about where do I find my TMAs. And now students are beginning to sort of wonder where they are and find those resources. So we've answered it a few times. But just to sort of make that a little bit clearer, that it is on the Assessment tab on your module website.

But if you have any problems finding this at all, you can just call your student support team. We'll walk you through it while you're on the phone in front of your computer. It's not a problem.

KAREN FOLEY: Lee, can people also find that on their study calendar, because sometimes those link through to the assignments so you can sort of see when they're due?

LEE: They do. So when you get to the appropriate week of study on the study planner, you'll see that there's an assessment due. And it'll have a link there from the TMA to the TMA in the Assignments tab as well. So it all links through and it all should be fairly seamless. But if there's any problems or any concerns, then you can connect the student support team.

KAREN FOLEY: And have you found all of yours, Lee?

LEE: Absolutely, yeah. I mean, I'm quite lucky. I spend a lot of my day signposting students to find them, so I know where they are.

KAREN FOLEY: And when are you going to do yours?

LEE: At some point before the cut-off date.

[LAUGHTER]

KAREN FOLEY: A very important point. OK. Well, thank you very much, Anactoria, for filling us in on that. And thank you all for your chat at home. Do take a look on the Assessment tab on your module web site and see if you can find your assignment.

Our next session we'll be focusing on unpacking your TMA. So, it'd be brilliant if you can find it before then. And again, let us know if there are any questions that Peter Taylor, who'll be joining me next, can help you with. See you in a minute after this short video, which is another of our campus tours of Walton Hall.

[MUSIC PLAYING]