

KAREN FOLEY: Welcome to the Student Hub Live. Well, in this session, we're going to focus on moving on up. So whether you're a level 1 student moving to your second tier at level 1, or moving up a level to level 2, things are going to start getting different. And joining me to talk about how it's all hotting up is Rachel Penny--

RACHEL PENNY: Hi, there.

KAREN FOLEY: --from psychology. And we have a fabulous internet here, Rachel, and some things that we're going to talk to students about. And I think you had a fabulous idea. Because we're all thinking about going on holiday right now after getting all the EMAs and things done. And whilst we're going away on holiday, we thought that might be a useful way to think about what students might be doing in terms of how difficult it is.

One of the things that a lot of my students often say to me is what's going to be different? How do I prepare? I know it's going to get harder. I know I need to do more, but of what?

And it's one of those things that I think is increasingly difficult to both articulate and also understand. So tell us then, what do students need to know at which levels? And what should they be really focusing on, considering there are all these books and ways that they can up-skill over the summer?

RACHEL PENNY: Yeah, so the very first thing I would say is that the TMAs and the EMAs, exams you're doing towards the end of a module-- they're designed with your next step in mind. And so actually reviewing your feedback, kind of how did you get on with those, is actually a really good thing to do over the summer, thinking about the next year. Because the feedback you got-- what could you be working on? Have you been directed to some skills activities?

Because the skills that we build each year progress through your degree. And so we're always building on what's come before. So whether you're moving within modules within a year group or up a level to the next one, it's always about building on what's come before. And yes, it might seem a bit strange to talk about skills development in the sense of planning a holiday. But often, it's really useful to think about a familiar task to help understand kind of what we're asking as you move up the levels.

So for example, you know that when you're beginning to think about planning a holiday, the

first thing you're trying to do-- right, where are we going? And so often, people will kind of go to a website, and they have a few criteria in mind, things like how close do you want to be to the sea, do you want activities and things nearby, rainy day activities, depending on how local you're going. And so there's criteria you're wanting to look, so you read different articles on a website, and you then have to make a decision kind of based on those which place is most relevant to where you want to go.

And in a way, that's a bit like level 1. Because we're asking you to describe and pick the bits of information that are most relevant to what we're asking you. So in that sense, it's sort of straightforward. You don't have too many things to be thinking about. That doesn't mean it's easy, but it's straightforward in terms of the type of task we're asking.

But if you are starting to think a bit more about your holiday-- often we know that just looking at one website, that's not actually what most people do. And they'll start to want to think about comparisons, and looking at different reviews. So they might look at a book as well as a website, or they might look at more than one website. Because they're wanting to begin to get a feel for how people rate different things.

And so again, that's moving up a level. So when you're moving into level 2, often we want you to start beginning to weigh things up. We want you to start developing arguments. So we want you to look at more than one source, and we want you to think about what is the information here, what is the information there, how do they relate to each other, how are you building an argument?

So in that sense, you're starting to write critically. And it's really important, actually. When people hear the word critical-- the way we use it in day to day life is actually really negative, you know, when people criticise, or are critical about something, we always imagine that's quite a negative way of looking at something.

But when we're talking about academic writing, we're not meaning it negatively. We're using it in the sort of sense of stepping back and trying to take that broader perspective. So you're weighing up the evidence and looking at it, just taking that step back from it so you can look on to it. And when you're looking at ideas for a holiday-- same kind of thing. You have to decide how good that source is.

And we've all seen things on websites about dodgy reviews, and people buying reviews and things. And so again, you have to know a bit about the source you're looking at. And that's true

in academic writing as well. Not all sources of information are equal in terms of rigour, and whether they have that kind of quality controls and things. And so your tutors, as you move up the levels, will help you understand which sources are better than others when it comes to choosing the evidence.

And when we're looking at holidays, it's the same kind of thing. You're trying to decide well, where's the best information? And I need to then, from that best information-- what's most relevant to me, and how am I weighing it up? How am I kind of deciding on what's going to meet our needs best based on that weighing up process?

KAREN FOLEY: OK. Well, let's stick with level 1 and 2 first. Because you've made some really, really brilliant points. So level 1 is often about the internet. And as you've said, there's a range of stuff there.

And our students will mainly be studying with the sort of spine of the virtual learning environment, where most of the things will be housed. Even if they have books and various things, they'll be studying online, and they'll be looking at a sort of parameter of things, and they'll be learning stuff. But as you said, there is so much information on the internet, and not all of it is relevant.

And you mentioned that at level 1, we're really trying to get on describing. However, we often then say to students, but in your opinion, what does this mean? And I wonder if you could just sort of explain this delicate balance between describing, and how a lot of that describing is demonstrating your understanding through being selective, through saying this internet has all this stuff on it.

But if I'm looking at a holiday to Thailand, then I'm only going to look at this. And if I'm looking at it at this sort of time of year, and I'm only then not going to look at that, and then I'm going to get really limited. So I can show you I know something by being descriptive, but by being selective. And that concept, I think, is quite challenging for students to understand, especially when we're saying describe this, but also tell us your opinion on it. But don't tell us your opinion, really, because we don't want you to write in the first person, et cetera.

RACHEL PENNY: That's right.

KAREN FOLEY: So it can be difficult.

RACHEL PENNY: Oh, it is, absolutely. It's one of those things where I say it's often what people would

understand-- I think exams at school are changing. But certainly, a while back it was about showing what you knew. Had you'd learned the stuff you'd been given?

What we're doing, even at level 1, is we're saying we'll give you the stuff. You don't need to go outside the module resources to do the assignments, but we're asking you to address a particular question. So you still have to choose the most relevant bits, and you have to apply it to that question. So not just talk about the relevant material in a general sense, but actually, how does that material help us address the question set?

So it's not so much about developing an argument-- that's towards the end of level 1, beginning level 2. But it's still being selective. It's still using the information to address a particular question. And that is challenging, there's no question. And we don't expect anybody to walk in the doors at level 1 knowing how to do that.

Actually, a really important part of level 1 is developing some of those skills. And again, it may not always be amazingly obvious. We'd like to think it is, but we know it's not always obvious. But actually, the assignments are designed to help develop those skills. And so when you look back, maybe, at your level 1, and you look at the assignments you did, maybe it's more obvious how we've been developing those skills more.

And we generally start with not giving you too much information to use to answer a question. Towards the end of level 1, we're probably giving you more because we want you to start thinking about how you're using more and more information, having to be more and more selective. And often, students kind of complain about word counts and how tight they can be, but actually, it's probably the best way, because being concise in what you write is a skill that you're going to need to use throughout.

And if we gave you 4,000 words at level 1, you could probably fill them. But it would be really hard to develop that skill of conciseness. Giving you a 1,000 words for quite a big topic might feel really unfair, but we're kind of forcing you into being selective and being concise. And so that means when you then have a higher word counts at level 2 and level 3, you've still got those skills of conciseness and selectivity, and you're then bringing that to more material.

KAREN FOLEY: So it's almost like if you're on the internet, and you look at those search engines, and they say how many people? Would you like to take your dog? Do you want these outdoor activities? How much is your budget, and et cetera? And it's thinking about what is this question asking me? And therefore what is in and out of scope? That's the sort of key thing in terms of taking

home.

But as you say then, when we move up to level 2, we're starting to use other things. And I guess the analogy here was sort of maybe books about an area, so reputable sources. And as you said, some are more robust than others. And again, it's about evaluating that.

So if you've got a key thinker or somebody who's contributed a lot and has a big weight and a small study, you'll start to sort of play around with scale and scope as you present that evidence. So how would you sort of recommend students sort of view, as a mindset, moving up to level 2 about things that they might start being a little bit more critical, but not in a negative way, about?

RACHEL PENNY: Yes, so I think it's important to again, start with the module materials. Because they have been written to help you address the questions, address the content that you need. So they're really important. You're still going to need to be demonstrating your understanding of those.

And then beyond that, often level 2 modules will have skills activities all about looking up some independent sources. Because depending on which module you're doing, how much you need to do independently will vary. So be guided by your study planner, be guided by your module web site and what your tutor is telling you.

And it is about beginning to use key words. Maybe you could look up authors that were in the module materials. There might be an author that seems to be quite key to that area. Well, use that person's name as a jumping off point. Have they done other research in that area?

And that can sometimes give you leads into finding very relevant information. But still, you are having to go and find it for yourself. But it is about using the module materials as a jumping off point. Because it will still be really important that you're demonstrating understanding of those.

And it's also really important that you take the guidance from the skills activity about looking for sources, what's been peer-reviewed, what's been through quality assurances, what's sort of good sources, books, journal articles. They often have to go through multiple edits. They have peer reviews, et cetera. So there's quite a lot of stringent controls there which may not be true of other websites, or other types of resources.

KAREN FOLEY: Like Wikipedia.

RACHEL PENNY: Like Wikipedia.

KAREN FOLEY: So we've been asking everyone at home whether they've chosen their module. 42% have already enrolled. Some 33%, I think, at the last count yes, but they haven't actually enrolled. So a lot of people are now sorting out their finance, et cetera, at the moment.

If you're undecided, which 25% of you are, then come to our faculty of Arts and Social Sciences showcase this afternoon, where we'll talk you through some of the new module content, if indeed that's the faculty you're interested in. 43% are not planning a holiday this summer. 36% are and 21% are unsure about that at the moment.

But in terms of favourite holiday, it seems to be culture that's really in the lead, perhaps unsurprisingly. And let's take a look at what you said was important when you're choosing a holiday, so some of the factors that you think might be relevant. Relaxation the big one right now, unsurprisingly. Cost is coming in at a very high second.

Interesting scenery, recharge, wheelchair access, something you like, eating out, quiet time, location, making a change, accommodation, entertainment. So a huge variety of factors there that would really, I guess, help people to sort of really focus on what parameters they had. Again, thinking about answering that question with your process and content words. HJ and Priya, how's everyone at home?

HJ: Well, I think we're excited to start our next modules.

PRIYA: A lot going-- yeah.

HJ: We're thinking about it. Some people are a bit nervous. Jennifer's hoping to start level 3, but is a bit concerned about how much of step it would be, so finding this session really useful. And some of us are on our level 1 modules as well, so it's nice to think about what's going to be ahead, and what we're going to do to prepare for that as well.

PRIYA: Yeah, absolutely. We've got lots of enthusiasm coming from Sarah. She's gone and purchased the book from Dan Weinbren so she's bought that of Amazon. So she's really feeling inspired about the history of the OU. So lovely to share in that with her.

HJ: It's because we've been watching those campus tours as well during the break.

PRIYA: That's right, yeah.

HJ: So that's why we've been on to buy the book, and everyone's enjoying finding out more about

the Open University. And yeah, I think we are ready to progress. There's lots of tips being shared about having a look at the materials beforehand.

PRIYA: Yeah, sharing them.

HJ: Some of the centres in the nations, they have the books for you to view or online as well, don't they?

PRIYA: Yeah, you'll be able to see that.

HJ: So you can get a taste of what's expected in the next level.

PRIYA: Yep.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. And Dan's book, of course, is an excellent way to fill in between now and a new module. In fact, I still haven't finished reading it, so maybe that's something I should be doing over the summer also. But a really, really good book. And the history of the Open University is amazing. And I think once you sort of get the whole way it was all set up, and some of the ethos, really, of the place it really does make you feel very proud to be part of it.

But I wonder if we may sort of tend to Jennifer's question, which is about moving up to level 3 now, where things get progressively more difficult. And of course, one thing we haven't mentioned explicitly-- but there's some students may be aware of-- is that the grades matter a lot more at level 3. So at level 1 you have to pass. You can make as many errors, and indeed you should, as you want to there. Level 2, things count more towards the over-weighting of your qualification.

But level 3 really is where a lot of the stuff matters. You need to be getting the best grades if you want to get a certain qualification band, so a pass 1, or pass 2, et cetera. And that can matter more in certain areas than others. What's different, Rachel, then for level 3?

RACHEL PENNY: So I think level 3 is about pushing, pushing, pushing more. So it is a step up. Jennifer will have been already done one step from level 1 to level 2. So I think most people notice that there is a kind of change in intensity. I would say it's similar moving up to level 3.

But of course, again, your level 2 modules are there to help prepare you for level 3, so you're not being thrown into the deep end. You have been being prepared for this. Again, it will be building on skills that you've been developing over assignments.

As you said, in the early stages, make the mistakes. Use the feedback, take chances, go for it. Don't stop doing that as you go up. But of course, as you said, the marks do count. We know this.

Level 3, it's about developing more nuanced arguments. It's about sort of more critical thinking. That has to become a really key feature of your writing. You are developing an argument based on what you have read and about putting it together.

Again, still the most important thing is demonstrating how the information you're reading helps you address the question that's set. It's all about developing the argument for the question. And it probably will involve more independent searching for evidence, for studies, for resources. So again, that in itself does take more time.

So probably, that was one of the things I would flag up, that you probably will need more time. Because some of that kind of extra studying, extra work that you may have been able to skate a little bit past in the early levels-- really, if you are very motivated to get a high level degree, you are going to need to invest time in doing more of that searching, finding the very best sources to help you develop that key nuanced argument. So it is about probably taking a bit more time.

You probably want to be thinking a bit more about what I'm using, and more time at the planning stage as well, I would say. Doing that essay plan. Maybe, again, you've been avoiding it, and just going for it on the screen. I would say at level 3, the more time you invest in that planning stage of thinking about the shape of your essay, or report, whatever you're writing, what point you want to make, which ones are most helpful, and being really kind of ruthless with yourself.

Because you might have a favourite point. You might really like it. But if it's not relevant enough, ditch it. Be ruthless. And also keep that balance. Make sure that if you do have a favourite point that is relevant, brilliant, include it, but make sure it doesn't take over the whole assignment.

So it is about looking at that structure and balance to your assignment. How much is it addressing the question set, how you're developing that more nuanced argument using more independent sources. But you're ready for it. I think that's why we want to keep sort of saying we're building on what's gone before.

You're not starting from scratch when you go up to level 3. You're not starting from scratch when you've go up to level 2. You have come from somewhere, and it's been getting you ready.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah, and it's almost like-- here I guess, the analogy back to the holidays, is the sort of specialist information, maybe the language guides, the tracking guides if you're doing something technical, for example, or maps that are going to show localised information, et cetera. So really, you're using those sources and as you say, you are prepared for them. But the important thing is to think about how you're integrating them.

The other thing that often happens at level 3, depending, of course, on which module you're doing, is that often you'll have things, and you might have themes or ways of doing things. So often, the module will help by sort of saying, hey, here's an idea, or here's an idea, let's apply it to this, this, and this. So you're almost sort of trying to match things together and explain them in your learning, and that can be challenging. How might students then start sort of critically evaluating, as you described earlier, about really thinking about what the strengths and limitations are when there are all these things going on?

RACHEL PENNY: I mean it's, a skill. And I would say it's a skill that probably is the slowest developed, because in a way, it takes practise. It takes using feedback to help develop your skills in that area. And so it's probably one of those things to kind of look out for in your feedback What did they say about how I'm evaluating?

And if you're not sure, it's not clear what the feedback is, ask your tutor. I'm really aware this critical writing, evaluative writing, is a really important part. I need to understand how I'm doing on it. And if it's not clear, ask them. That's absolutely fine.

But what I would say-- again, it's just about trying to get into that sort of mentality of taking that step back from the material. And it's really hard because when you're reading something and you're really engaged, you're really thinking about it, take a step back from the books. Go and talk to somebody about it. Because actually, when we go away and we talk about it with somebody else, we're that bit removed, and it starts to become easier to think, oh, how does it help me answer this question? How does this? What are the strengths of this?

KAREN FOLEY: Because it's like, you wouldn't pick up one of those dictionaries and say, this is the answer to all your questions on Thailand. You'd say, well, this is going to be very good at helping you figure out some certain language things which might be useful in this context. But it's not going

to be categorically brilliant on all that counts, not if you're trying to find a restaurant.

RACHEL PENNY: Absolutely. And I think that's what's important, is that each bit of evidence that's relevant is bringing something, but not everything. And so that's where you start to engage with it and weigh up these pros and cons. There'll be stuff that is helping, that's supporting the kind of thing in the question. There'll be other stuff that's challenging it.

And it is about kind of going, right, is this supporting it, is challenging it? And then make sure that the reader knows that you know it's either supporting it or challenging it. So we often talk about linking back to the question and making that explicit. Because you might write about something, and you know in your head that you know it supports it. If you don't say it clearly, then the reader doesn't necessarily know you know it does.

KAREN FOLEY: So it's almost thinking OK, what's this bit here good for? And then saying, well, this is good for this sort of thing, this is good for this. And when we put these together, you can go on your holiday with X, Y, and Z, and this is the specialist information you need, and this is the general information you need, and being really mindful about the contribution that each has, and not saying, well, the dictionary is the be all and end all.

RACHEL PENNY: Well, that's it. Depending on who's in your party, there might be specific needs that some of your members have. And so when you then come to kind of weigh it all up, you'll be using different things. And different things will give you useful information. So it might be time of year to go.

KAREN FOLEY: Or the cake.

[LAUGHTER]

RACHEL PENNY: Or the cake. It could be anything. And it is that weighing your top and understanding that it's about you, your question. So when it comes to holiday, there's holidays that would suit other people that wouldn't suit you and your family or whatever.

KAREN FOLEY: But that doesn't make them bad.

RACHEL PENNY: But it doesn't make them bad. It's just about how relevant it is to you and what you're planning. And again, with the assignment, there'll be lots of material that that's interesting, that's good material. But if it doesn't fit your question, doesn't suit answering your question, then for that assignment, you don't need to bring it in.

It's just like when you're planning a holiday. What matters is what makes it work for you and your family, not worrying about what works for other families. Because they will have different needs, different requirements, different things they're looking for.

And again, with the assignment, there'll be module material that isn't relevant to that question, but would be relevant to another question. So it's not that it's not useful. And often, of course, the module material is you're knowing this whole subject. It's not about just giving you material that helps you write the assignments.

The assignments are there to help you use the material you're learning. But it's not the only purpose. You'll be reading lots of things that are not about the assignments. But when it comes to write the assignments, it's then about going what is absolutely for that question and relevant for that question? And then how do I put it together?

And that's what I was saying about the planning, the more you think about the structuring it, and making sure that you're building in those links back to the questions so that your reader absolutely knows where you're going with what you're writing, and why you're including the things you're including. And that's true of any level. But I think as you go up, and especially at level 3, you need to show the reader that you absolutely know why you're including what you're including, and how it contributes to that assignment.

KAREN FOLEY: Brilliant. That's been really, really useful, Rachel. Thank you so much. And I hope that been useful for you at home to really sort of think about how you're using your sources, and how you're bringing them together, et cetera. Rachel's going to staying with us, though, because our next session is going to focus on study intensity.

But we're going to have a short break and show you another fabulous part of the campus, which is the tree sculpture. So join us in a couple of minutes for Rachel, and also, Fanny and Frank, who'll joining us to give us different perspectives on study intensity. See you in a second.

[MUSIC PLAYING]