

**KAREN FOLEY:** Welcome back to the Student Hub Live. Well, this is our assessment boot camp. It's the 9th of October. And this session looks at unpacking your TMA.

So today already we had a look at critical thinking. And we've had a look at process and content words, so really trying to understand what the question is asking you.

Now, you'll have a question, but you'll also have a lot of guidance. And this is very, very important, because it tells you what the assessor is expecting you to deliver. And joining me to discuss this is Peter Taylor.

**PETER TAYLOR:** Hi there.

**KAREN FOLEY:** Hello, Peter. Our people at home have been finding their assessments on the Assessment tab on the module web site. And I'm delighted that you have all your assessments.

**PETER TAYLOR:** I have a lot of them here from a whole range of different subjects.

**KAREN FOLEY:** Brilliant. So we're going to talk a little bit about the guidance, the learning outcomes, and the student notes.

**PETER TAYLOR:** Yeah.

**KAREN FOLEY:** Now, when I was first a student, I used to think that these were sort of a helpful and very optional sort of idea about what you might cover with this really exciting question that I was asked. And only later did I realise how important the guidance was in terms of the feedback I was getting and how when it said you might like to talk about these things, actually you really should talk about those things if you want the high marks. But equally, it's your degree and it's you're learning at the end of the day.

But for students who want to be conscientious and really sort of think about getting those higher grades and following the learning outcomes, tell us about these two sort of things, in particular for new students who may not have heard of learning outcomes and guidance before.

**PETER TAYLOR:** Right. OK. So one of the things I did was I looked across a whole range of different subjects and assessments in areas I know nothing about. But what I was looking at is, well, what advice

and guidance is there to help the student understand exactly what's being asked. And there's a lot of stuff there that I think many students may not realise is there.

So first of all, the learning outcome. So there's this list of learning outcomes in terms of knowledge, skills, et cetera, which is the basis upon which the whole course is created. So the course is meant to deliver the teaching of certain knowledge and certain skills, et cetera. And the assessment is aimed at assessing that knowledge and skills.

And so it starts off by saying, this particular assignment, this particular question will assess a particular learning outcome. So you're immediately being told what it is that's being kind of assessed. And so that gives you your first kind of way in, even before you've actually looked at the question. And when I looked at some of these questions, some of them were saying, we're actually going to assess knowledge from Unit such and such. So it's immediately focusing on a particular area of the course.

Now, the thing to remember about TMAs is that they're written by a module team. So they produce the questions. But at the same time that the questions are produced, there is a marking scheme produced. So this marking scheme is for your associate lecturers to use to be able to grade in a consistent fashion.

So the key thing here to remember is that you've got a large number of students, respond number of ALs, and we want those ALs to be marking in a consistent fashion. So we give quite detailed marking schemes, which means that there is a clear intention of what the module team is looking for.

So once they've kind of created that question, created their mark scheme, there are often guidance notes. And those guidance notes are often linked into that mark scheme. So the guidance notes are really giving you very good clues about what you need to write. And so looking at the guidance notes, looking at the question, answering your question, kind of benchmarking your answers with the guidance notes I think is an important strategy for understanding what exactly the module team are asking.

**KAREN FOLEY:** Absolutely. We've got some different things for you to vote on at home. When you read a TMA question, how confident are you that you understand what's being asked? We've got some multi-choice questions about feedback. Have you been surprised in the past from feedback on a TMA that's a Tutor Marked Assignment that's suggested the markers were looking for something that you hadn't realised? And also, how clear is your TMA marking criteria to you?

So Peter, it's a really important thing then, this whole sort of combination of guidance and understanding the question. But you've said something in terms of these learning outcomes that I wanted to pick up on, because it's quite interesting. Sometimes modules will say, be able to apply a certain number of concepts to a different setting or be able to define key terms and duh duh duh. And they might say, be able to describe, be able to write an essay.

And you can sort of think, OK, there's a list of six things. They all sound perfectly sensible. But actually, maybe one of them if we had a pie chart would be like 40% of the whole thing and others would be less. How can people start to understand what those learning outcomes are and how important they might be when they're reading the tutor notes, because the tutor notes often well, the student notes, sorry. They often give you a clue about really where the emphasis should be.

**PETER TAYLOR:** Well, I think I mean, I've got one here that says test learning outcomes KU1, KU4, CS1, KS2, KS3, and KS5. So there's a lot of learning outcomes within that.

**KAREN FOLEY:** And those are key skills, those KSes.

**PETER TAYLOR:** Yeah. Key skills. And one of the issues is right. There are some which will have a greater emphasis in terms of the question than others. So I think you need to unpick what the question is asking. It's the kind of in one of the guidance notes here it actually says, make sure you answer the question that was asked rather than the question that you wished was asked.

**KAREN FOLEY:** Yes. An Important thing.

**PETER TAYLOR:** Which is a really important thing. But I've got a question here which I thought I'd read to you. It's in chemistry, which is my subject. And it says

**KAREN FOLEY:** Peter works on the Open Programme, by the way, which is why he's always doing interdisciplinary things. And he's also the head of assessment, so it's not uncommon for Peter to have a range of assignments, but he does like his chemistry.

**PETER TAYLOR:** And this one says, compound 1 is an analogue of the popular analgesic paracetamol. Present a plausible one-step retrosynthetic analysis of compound 1 using a single disconnection to give a pair of synthons. Suggest suitable reagents corresponding to these synthons and give a forward synthesis for compound 1. There's a lot of words in there

**KAREN FOLEY:** Were those the process words, Peter?

**PETER TAYLOR:** which are specific to chemistry. So things like retrosynthetic analysis, things like synthons, a single disconnection, they all have specific meaning within the subject. And so one of the important things when you're reading the question is making sure you understand the language, because irrespective, disciplines have their own language. They have and even quite simple words are used differently by different disciplines.

So making sure that you understand how a word is being used, in what particular context and what it means and one of the great things about the VLE is it has this glossary of terms. So if you've kind of forgotten what a word means, you can go back and look up the glossary. So the first thing you're unpacking, even before you get to your process words and things like that, is to actually make sure you understand the language that's being used.

It's interesting. Looking at, say, this is chemistry and looking at some other maths questions, they tend to give lots of small questions with small numbers of marks. So in the arts and social sciences, you often get more essay-type questions. But certainly within STEM-type subjects, they're often there's six marks here, two marks here, five marks here.

So immediately, you're getting a feel for what's important within the TMA just from the way the marks are allocated. So clearly, if that's worth 10 marks, that's going to be a bigger, more important thing than something else which is like 2 marks.

The other thing to recognise is in the construction of the question, this has kind of five parts to question 2, A, B, C, D, and E. In many ways, it's easier to get the marks at the beginning of the question. And they're often written so that it's kind of the last couple of parts are more complex and looking to differentiate between. So in many ways, we're expecting students to get part A, B, and C quite easily, but D and E are going to be hard.

**KAREN FOLEY:** So you're trying to trick them.

**PETER TAYLOR:** No. No, no. Not tricking. I think it's about differentiation. So I think all grading and marking is about being able to say where a student fits across a profile of marks. That's not just to say you're not as good as so-and-so, but it gives that person an opportunity to understand where they are and how they can improve.

**KAREN FOLEY:** This is an important point for some students who may be experiencing difficulty, because there are often easier and more complex parts of the TMA. And some students that I've had, where

they're saying, my mum's ill, I'm really far behind, I've had a cold, the kids are off school, duh duh duh. And we say, actually, you can do some of your TMA. But let's look at some of the easier bits. And then we can identify things that can get them over the 40% pass, even if they haven't submitted a perfect TMA.

Now, how might students start to understand, apart from the level of complexity of the question, where things are more complex? There are not always more marks associated with the harder things. You can sometimes be a little bit tactical about where you focus your energy. But obviously, 10 marks is going to be more important than 2.

**PETER TAYLOR:** Yeah. So obviously, if you're going to be tactical and thinking about where can I which are the ones I can get the most marks on, then certainly at the beginning, if there is a multi-part question, the front end of that ought to be easier for you to get those marks. So that would be where you'd start, and if at the end you haven't got the time to be able to really spend the extra time required to get those marks, moving on to the next question and starting the front end. So I think in those multi-part questions, that one strategy.

I think it's with a long essay-type questions it's more trickier, because there you're developing an argument and a narrative. And it's hard to do that quickly.

**KAREN FOLEY:** Yeah. Now, talking about this whole level of complexity thing, it's really really, really hard to get an 85%. But it's fairly easy to pass if you answer the question that's set and deliver on the guidance that's there and write enough words. So can you tell us about the sort of I guess increasing returns based on time, and how students might start to tackle that, depending of course on what they have, and bearing in mind that every assessment is different in terms of time and place with what you've got going on at home and also how hard it might be?

**PETER TAYLOR:** Well, I think it's important to recognise first of all that we do use the whole marking scale, from 0 to 100. So many universities really just focus between about 40 and 75, 80.

**KAREN FOLEY:** And a 40 is a pass.

**PETER TAYLOR:** A 40 is a pass. But we are keen to use that 40 to 100. So therefore, there are 60%, 60 marks effectively above that 40 part, which we break down into pretty much four equal-size areas, so 100 to 85, 85 to 70, 70 to 55, and 55 to 40. And that's kind of the way we grade things in terms of 1s, 2s, 3s, and 4s.

So clearly, to get up at the top, that 1, is going to require a lot of detailed work. And so it's really up to students to be able to say, how can I get the most marks out of this assignment? I say one way is by doing the front bits of questions, and really then just trying to fit in and push the mark up with the later sections as best you can.

**KAREN FOLEY:** Is there a categorical difference, then, between, say, an 85 and an 84. You mentioned that the associate lecturers have these bands that they mark to and that there's a fundamental difference between things so that they can be standardised and we make sure that they're all fair. How can students sort of understand what's expected of them at that top level or the middle level?

**PETER TAYLOR:** It's really hard if you're talking about 1% or 2%. So that 1% or 2% difference is really hard for students to gauge why has this one got 85 and this one's got 83 or 84 or whatever. So that's the real tricky bit, because it's an academic decision that the AL is making in terms of that grading.

**KAREN FOLEY:** They're going, where are my two marks?

**PETER TAYLOR:** Yeah. Exactly.

**KAREN FOLEY:** Why a decrease?

**PETER TAYLOR:** And that's why it's much more important to worry about that banding process. So as I said, at the end of the module, you end up with a 1, a 2, a 3, or a 4. So where you were in that band are you between 70 and 85 becomes irrelevant. It's about where you are. And that's making sure that students are in their right bands for the mark that goes forward, because it's that grade that's then fed into an algorithm which calculates out the honours classification.

**KAREN FOLEY:** Absolutely. And we said before that at Level 1, the grades are less relevant than they are Level 3, for example. And it's important to work out how your qualification is assessed at what level.

**PETER TAYLOR:** Yeah. So Level 1 is very much about kind of making sure that students are successful. So that's why there's a pass. And then there's a distinction associated, which is really a good pat on the back to say, yeah, you're doing really well. But those grades aren't fed into the calculation of the honours classification. It's just the Level 2 and the Level 3 modules, with the Level 3 modules having twice the weight of the Level 2 modules.

**KAREN FOLEY:** So Level 1's a chance to really practise your skills, get your feedback, and really

**PETER TAYLOR:** To make those mistakes, yeah.

**KAREN FOLEY:** Exactly. You want to make them early.

**PETER TAYLOR:** And to learn your way of becoming a student.

**KAREN FOLEY:** People are finding this incredibly useful, Peter. And Zach and Lee will no doubt give you some ideas about using the assessment calculator, which can be a really nice way to guess your assignments.

We asked people about how clear they felt their TMA marking criteria was. Let's see what everybody had to say at home. So we asked, how clear is your marking criteria, from not very clear to very clear. And we've got 22 saying not very clear and 40 ah, 26 and 47. So 47 saying it's very clear to them, which is excellent.

And we also asked about feedback in the past. Now, this was a little while ago, but have you been surprised in the past from the feedback on a TMA that suggested that the markers were looking for something you haven't realised. And 55% percent said, yes, they were surprised, which I don't think is an unsurprising result, because sometimes when you look at your TMA and you look at the feedback and then the marker says, go and have another look at the guidance, which sometimes if you're a conscientious good student you can go and do. And then you think, oh, how did I miss that?

**PETER TAYLOR:** Yeah.

**KAREN FOLEY:** How do people miss it, Peter?

**PETER TAYLOR:** I have no idea. I think it's something that when you're studying, when you're writing your assignment, you're getting so caught up in it and you begin to kind of lose some of that kind of objective thinking. And one of the things and I know that we all work to deadlines. But one of the great things is if you can write it a couple of days before the deadline and then leave it for a day or two and come back to it, because it's when you come back to it afresh and read it again, that's when you suddenly realise, oh, I've forgotten to put this in or I've forgotten to put that in.

I mean, I know that there are a number of really difficult situations where a student's done a

really good assignment but they've missed out a key thing. And when I look at the actual question, when I look at the guidance, it was quite clear we were asking for it. And I'm never quite sure how it got missed.

**KAREN FOLEY:** Yeah. Well, I think like you say, sometimes we just get caught up in doing something that really inspires us. And the number of times when I'm marking, I've noticed a real relationship between students who write the question at the top of their assignment and the ones who answer that specific question. And I think holding that question really centrally to your argument helps.

But I wonder if we can spend some time thinking I mean, you've mentioned there are a very diverse range of types of assessment. And some of our STEM students will have categorical correct or incorrect small questions. Some others might have big long essays. And it can be a bit easier to lose track of that. But how do people make this relationship between the learning outcomes and the TMA guidance, and then what they're delivering in terms of the question?

**PETER TAYLOR:** Well, I think I've been looking at some of the guidance that's given. And it is really quite detailed. And I think really making sure you read that guidance, because as I said, I think that was written with the mark scheme in mind.

So I'm looking at one set of marking guidelines. And it says, when marking Part 1 of TMA 02, your tutor will be looking for and it's saying evidence of understanding about why and how we reference, the ability to identify the laid out references. So it's actually saying it's a clear message there about what the tutor is being told to give the marks for. So reading that kind of guidance.

In other cases, there's some really nice examples about when they've asked a question and maybe the notes are then saying, start off by explaining briefly what a SWOT analysis is and how it can be used by organisations. So it's actually really breaking down the answer for you. And if you follow that guidance, then you ought to be able to get the right balance in terms of the marks, et cetera.

But often, students would just focus on the question and look at the guidance and think, oh, yeah, that's guidance. It's a bit like me and instructions for putting things together.

**KAREN FOLEY:** I was just going to say, is it like the because I never read the instructions and I always wish I did when I get stuck.

**PETER TAYLOR:** I open the box and start immediately putting it together. And then something goes wrong and I have to go back and read the instructions. And it's exactly the same as that.

**KAREN FOLEY:** It is, because I've seen some amazing essays in my time from students who are so creative and they just haven't read the guidance and they haven't delivered on what that question is. And because we have this monitoring process and standardisation process whereby we have to be fair, we have to give marks based on things that are agreed by that module team, like you said, you can't award the credit to things even if they're absolutely genius.

**PETER TAYLOR:** That's exactly one of the problems. And the mark scheme, therefore, does actually dictate quite carefully what the answer should look like. And if you get something that's, as you said, maybe a really good answer but isn't actually answering the question that was set, then there's nothing that can be done to give marks for that, because if I were to suddenly say, oh, this is a really good essay and give them the marks, then someone would come down on me as a tutor and say, actually, you know this particular assignment was meant to be testing those learning outcomes and this student has actually said something else, which is an answer to a completely different set of learning outcomes.

**KAREN FOLEY:** And that's why one should always bear in mind the feedback that you get in terms of how well did I complete this particular task that was asked of me, not how good am I as a learner or how good am I in terms of my understanding of the subject knowledge.

**PETER TAYLOR:** And that's why particularly at Level 1, it's about reading that feedback and understanding and progressing, as I said, because you've got a chance to kind of make mistakes at Level 1.

**KAREN FOLEY:** Yeah. OK. We asked people earlier when they read a TMA question, how confident are they that they understand what's being asked. And we'll come back to that, because a lot of people were very unconfident about reading the TMA question. And I've heard that you're finding this very useful, and I hope you are. But let's just take a quick trip to the Hot Desk and see what Lee and Zach have to say.

**ZACH:** Yeah. I mean, we've had some really good discussion all the way from cake to word count in this session. Samantha Mitchell said that this session has been very useful, so thank you, Peter.

And it's cleared up a lot of things for Simon, as it's been giving him a strategy to build on on the mark on a TMA, rather than just going for hell and leather and just trying to write and

splurge out on the kind of page there. So he's found it really helpful and he's feeling a bit more comfortable about it. And I think that's generally the vibe that we're getting on the chat.

A question that keeps popping up is about the scoring, the marking system, and why in brick universities, it appears to be at 70, but at the OU, it's 80. I don't suppose we could cover that. It does seem to be something that keeps popping up.

**KAREN FOLEY:** Well, you should know the answer to that, Peter.

**PETER TAYLOR:** I can deal with that one fairly easily. I think, as I said, it's brick universities tend to use kind of a range between 40% and 70% or 80%. So I once went to one university and I said, well, what do you actually need to get 90%? It was along the lines of, well, you probably need to win a Nobel Prize to get 90%. So very rarely in brick universities do to the percentages and therefore the marking is done accordingly.

We use a 0 not to 100. We stretch that to kind of give greater kind of delineation between those students. And so that's why we use it. I think they aren't equivalent. You can't say, oh, well, a 70 at a brick university is necessarily a 70 within the OU, because they're mapping onto different scales.

**KAREN FOLEY:** Now I want to check a piece that we've understood the question here, because I have a feeling and it's just based on a gut feeling from some of my students that this is about pass a distinction level as opposed to the actual band of the scale, because I think you're quite right in terms of what is awarded. But I wonder if people are asking about the potential. Zach, is it more about the potential or is it about the actual scale in terms of where things are at?

**ZACH:** It is about the scale, yes. It's definitely about why is it you need for a first class in a brick university, you're going towards a 70 and why is it at 80-plus?

**KAREN FOLEY:** So why is it harder?

**ZACH:** Mm-hmm.

**PETER TAYLOR:** I don't think it is harder. I think it's the same. They're just mapping onto the different scales. But also, I think it's important to recognise that at the award board, we do look at examples of students' assessments. And we have external examiners in.

And we do calibrate so that actually if somebody who's got, say, 80 and we look at the work

and we say that's good enough to get a 1, then we would draw our borderline lower. So 85 is where we guarantee it, but actually depending upon how the assessment looks in terms of kind of how difficult it is because it does vary slightly from one year to year, it's really difficult to always get it spot on the same every year then we can kind of play around with some of those boundaries.

**KAREN FOLEY:** Yes. I mean, students should be very reassured, shouldn't they, Peter, about that level of detail that goes into these exams.

**PETER TAYLOR:** The amount of scrutiny.

**KAREN FOLEY:** The cross-marking that happens to make sure that people aren't just marking on a whim, and again how that boundary is standardised. It's all incredibly thorough and robust.

**PETER TAYLOR:** Yeah.

**KAREN FOLEY:** I see you've got another maths assignment.

**PETER TAYLOR:** Well, this is an interesting one. So this is a maths assignment. And right at the very beginning, it says in the wording of the questions "write down, list, and state" means "write down without justification." "Find, determine, calculate, explain, derive" should show all your work. So it's actually starting to try and unpick some of what the words I mean. I thought that was a really nice example about how you could avoid getting into confusion about what a word means by almost having a little kind of glossary up front about what the words actually mean within this particular set of questions.

And there's some other examples around so here's a really nice example where students were asked to produce a poster. And right at the very front end, it's saying for this poster, you'll get two marks for the title, one mark for the author, three marks for the introduction, so really trying to kind of lay out quite clearly

**KAREN FOLEY:** It's amazing how many people forget the title, for example, on a graph.

**PETER TAYLOR:** Yeah. Yeah. So just making sure that you read and you kind of just double-check that you've got those marks, you put the title in, so you've got a good chance of getting those marks.

**KAREN FOLEY:** Peter, this has been an incredibly useful session. And thank you so much for bringing along all this assessment. I must say I'm so relieved that we're doing our essay-writing workshops and

I'm not going to have to deal with any of this maths and different sorts of ways of working.

I mean, some students have been saying to me, I'm not sure what an e-poster is. I'm not sure what's a poster is. And often we're trying to find innovative ways of assessing people. And really, you don't need to know what those things are. Just go with the guidance and have it explained and ask your tutor if you're not sure.

**PETER TAYLOR:** Yeah. There should always be a clear explanation of what you're being asked to do. And so if you don't understand, it's not your fault. It must be something you've kind of missed and contact your tutor and they'll be able to sort you out.

**KAREN FOLEY:** Absolutely. Especially it's helpful to email what you don't understand about it, as opposed to, I just don't understand the question. I find those hard to answer myself. I don't know about you.

Peter Taylor, thank you so much for coming along and bringing all those assessments with us.

**PETER TAYLOR:** Thank you for inviting me.

**KAREN FOLEY:** OK. We're going to have a short break now. And we're going to show you the Jennie Lee building. And then our final session for today's boot camp is going to be on essay-writing. Isabella's coming along and we're going to take a look at essay-writing, so unfortunately ignoring all those maths-based questions.

But if you do have a question, do email us. And if you're a student who thinks, actually, I could do with a bit of help on this, that, and the other, and I'd be interested in a tutorial in online rooms about this, that, or the other, then let us know, because we've got some essay-writing workshops that will be following this programme, so you can see those on the Student Hub Live website. And I'll tell you the dates a little bit later on.

So that's where you can bring your essay along and we'll actually help you unpick the process words. And you can talk to other students about how you might go about answering those. So stay tuned for our next session with Isabella and we'll fill you in on all that. See you in a minute.

[MUSIC PLAYING]