

Doing Essays & Assignments

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2nd
Edition

Pete Greasley

Doing Essays & Assignments

Essential Tips for Students

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How to impress and how to distress markers

What do tutors look for when they mark assignments? What impresses them and what frustrates them? In this chapter we'll look at the results of a survey which asked tutors to address these two questions. From the survey you'll gain an important insight into what tutors are really looking for when they mark assignments:

- What they like and what they dislike, what impresses them and what annoys them (sources of 'marker distress')
- The most common mistakes witnessed by tutors when marking student assignments
- Some of the most important things you can do in an assignment to improve your mark
- Some of the worst things you can do that will *reduce* your mark

The results of this survey have also been published in the journal *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* (Greasley and Cassidy, 2010).

A survey of tutors

Having spent some time recording my own observations of common problems when marking assignments, I decided that it would be useful to canvass the views of other tutors. Thirty-two tutors (with a health or social science background) responded to an email survey in which they were asked to:

- (a) list up to ten things that annoy/disappoint you when marking assignments
- (b) list up to ten things that impress you when marking assignments

The survey produced over 200 comments identifying areas of concern. It also yielded 140 comments listing things that impress tutors when they mark assignments. The astute reader will notice that tutors found more to complain about than admire. As one student commented when I brought up the subject in class: ‘Is that the survey which shows what a set of miserable, pedantic *@*\$@# you all are?’

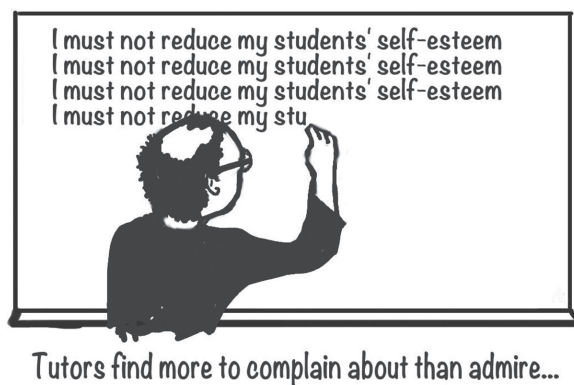


Illustration 2.1

Anyway, the comments were coded into themes and the tutors were asked to rank them in terms of:

- the most important thing a student can do to improve their assignments
- the worst thing a student can do in an assignment - that will reduce the mark

We'll discuss these in due course, but first, let's see what the most common problems are.

How to *distress* your tutor: the most common problems in assignments

Table 2.1 (on the next page) lists the most frequent problems identified in the survey. Notice that the top three issues relate not so much to *what* is written but *how the assignment is written and presented*. Thus, it wasn't 'failing to answer the question' or 'failing to read the relevant literature' that topped the table – it was problems with language, grammar and expression (1st), referencing (2nd) and presentation (3rd). So if you thought that these were relatively trivial things, think again. You will need to devote some serious time to sorting out these aspects of your assignment if you want a high mark. These are the essential basics of an assignment; it's assumed you'll get them right.

The other issues listed in Table 2.1 will be discussed in more detail throughout the book, but just to give you a flavour of the problem areas, I've listed some of the comments from the survey in the box below the table.

Table 2.1 The most common problems in assignments

| Rank | Problem |
|------|---|
| 1st | Poor language, grammar and expression |
| 2nd | Poor referencing |
| 3rd | Poor presentation |
| 4th | Too much description, too little critical analysis |
| 5th | Poor introductions and conclusions |
| 6th | Not following guidelines for presentation and word limits |
| 7th | Poor structure (organisation/use of headings) |
| 8th | Inappropriate use of appendices |
| 9th | Failing to answer the question |
| 10th | Over-use of quotations |
| 11th | Failing to read the relevant literature |
| 12th | Problems with tables and figures |

How to distress markers: comments from the survey

Language, grammar and expression

Failing to proofread assignment for typos, spelling mistakes, grammar, etc.

Mixing up 'there', 'their' and 'they're', 'were' and 'where', 'been' and 'being'

No paragraphs, or single-sentence paragraphs

Acronyms used without full explanations being given first

Use of colloquial terms/conversational language (such as didn't/ couldn't/isn't/doesn't)

Referencing and references

References that don't appear in the reference list and vice versa

Inaccurate referencing, despite all the guidance available

Using weak references, e.g. Reader's Digest, 9 o'clock news, etc.

Using too many internet references

Presentation

Assignments with no page numbers

Small/illegible fonts (Arial font is often recommended because it is clear)

Text not double-spaced (or at least 1.5 spaced)

Describing rather than analysing/criticising/evaluating

Not providing some sort of critique of or reflection on the work they've read (i.e. assuming that because it's in print it must be 'right')

Poor introductions and conclusions

No clear introduction or salient conclusion to the assignment
New information in the conclusion

Not following guidelines for presentation and word limits

Incomplete front sheet (not putting student number on front page)
Not adhering to the word limit

Poor structure (organisation/use of headings)

Essays that lack structure and seem to hop from one theme to the next at random; no sense of flow, very little (if any) signposting
Using headings for every paragraph

Inappropriate use of appendices

Appendices that are not referred to or discussed in the assignment or have little or no purpose

Failing to answer the question

Writing an abridged version of the essay question on the front page (and then of course failing to answer the question as set)

Overuse of quotations

Too many direct quotes when they should be putting things in their own words

Failing to read the relevant literature

Not using up-to-date references/poor reading round the subject
Not reading widely enough to give a basis for the arguments (or assertions)

Problems with tables and figures

Tables and figures not numbered or discussed

There was also an 'other' category which included some interesting comments about feedback, self-assessment forms, odd smells, and writing in a local accent (see below).

How to distress markers: some other comments from the survey

Feedback

Ignoring feedback given when a draft assignment was submitted

Not learning from the feedback given to previous assignments or to comments on the draft assignment

Most annoying is when they are still making all of these mistakes in semester 2 of year 3!

Perhaps this [survey] will prevent them making the same mistakes over and over!

Self-assessment forms

Utopian self-assessments

Self-assessment forms that say things like 'I know I didn't reference this correctly' or 'I know I didn't follow the guidelines' (really, really annoying)

What's that smell?

My absolute horror - work that smells strongly of tobacco - it makes my office stink

Pages smelling of cigarette smoke!

The paper smelling of either cigarette smoke or some strong perfume. (The latter presumably to lure you into feeling good about the smell so you give them a good mark)

Writing in a local accent (in this case a Yorkshire accent)

Use of 'Yorkshireisms', for example - not recognising words which are supposed to start with an 'H' ('ad' for 'had', etc.)

Students writing 'as' when they mean 'has'

Using 'should of' when they mean 'should have'

Writing 'eee by gum' rather than 'surprisingly'

(OK - I've made this last one up.)

How to *impress* your tutor

So, we’ve had a taste of what tutors don’t like, but what is it that impresses them? Table 2.2 provides the answers.

Table 2.2 What impresses markers?

| Rank | What impresses markers |
|------|--|
| 1st | Critical analysis, perspective and argument (with supporting evidence) |
| 2nd | Language, grammar and expression |
| 3rd | Introductions and conclusions |
| 4th | Structure |
| 5th | Presentation |
| 6th | Illustrating and applying ideas to specific contexts |
| 7th | Reading the relevant literature |
| 8th | Following guidelines relating to answering the question and criteria |
| 9th | New information |
| 10th | Referencing and references |

From Table 2.2 we can see that what impresses tutors most in an assignment is ‘critical analysis, perspective and argument’. This reveals the importance of analysing and evaluating ideas, theories and research studies, rather than simply describing and reporting them.

But notice what came second on the list: ‘language, grammar and expression’. This reinforces the importance of devoting a significant amount of time to making sure that your assignment reads well – that the points you are making are communicated clearly and concisely.

Finally, for now, you might notice that referencing came right at the bottom of the list: should we be impressed if the references are all present and correctly formatted according to guidelines, or is this something to be expected?

The box below provides some comments from the survey relating to each of the issues presented in Table 2.2.

How to impress markers: comments from the survey

Critical analysis, perspective and argument (with supporting evidence)

Analysis of reading rather than description

Being aware that just because something is in print this doesn’t make it a for-all-time, concrete, unassailable fact!

Ability to see more than one side of an argument

(Continued)

(Continued)

Language, grammar and expression

Clarity of writing making it easy for me to read and follow

Introductions and conclusions

A good introduction that states the aims of the work and a concise conclusion that reflects the introduction and the student's own conclusion

Identifying clearly in the introduction what issues the student is going to investigate

Structure

Clear signposting of ideas that enables the work to flow in a logical manner to a conclusion

Good use of headings and subheadings

Presentation

Paying careful attention to guidelines for the assignment and presentation of work - these are easy marks to gain

That time has been taken to proofread the essay to ensure that there are no typos, etc.

Illustrating and applying ideas to specific contexts

Relating discussion to actual examples

Reading the relevant literature

Evidence of a good range of reading (including texts taking a different perspective) Reading over and above the set texts

Good use of references to support discussion, such as when students cite several authors for one 'statement' showing they have read around and integrated what they have read

Following guidelines relating to answering the question and criteria

Addressing the question - and showing they are answering the question

Reference and thought put into the marking criteria

Including new information

- Telling me something I didn't know by going beyond the reading/lectures
- The essay content is different from the others I am marking
- Students who tackle the question in a new/original way
- Drawing in related learning from other modules, for example, rather than treating each element of learning as separate

Referencing and references

- Correct referencing, following guidelines

The most important thing you can do to improve your mark is ...

So, we've had a brief look at how to distress and how to impress tutors, but what is it that has the most *positive* and the most *negative* impact on the mark? In Table 2.3 we can see what happened when the tutors ranked each issue in terms of what they felt has the most positive impact on the mark.

Table 2.3 How to improve your mark in assignments

| Rank | What has the most positive impact on the mark? |
|------|--|
| 1st | Critical analysis, perspective and argument (with supporting evidence) |
| 2nd | Following guidelines relating to answering the question and criteria |
| 3rd | Illustrating and applying ideas to specific contexts |
| 4th | Structure |
| 5th | Language, grammar and expression |
| 6th | Reading the relevant literature |
| 7th | New information (different, original) |
| 8th | Referencing and references |
| 9th | Introductions and conclusions |
| 10th | Assimilating feedback |
| 11th | Presentation |

There are a few key points to take from Table 2.3.

First, the most important element is ‘critical analysis, perspective and argument (with supporting evidence)’: it wasn’t, as you might expect, answering the question (though this was a close second). This shows how highly critical analysis and argument are valued in the minds of tutors.

The second point to note is the importance of ‘illustrating and applying ideas to specific contexts’. This is closely related to ‘critical analysis, perspective and argument’ in terms of grounding the discussion of ideas, theories, etc. in actual examples.

And finally, notice that in seventh place there is a category called ‘new information (different, original)’. The provision of ‘new information’ (beyond that covered in the module) may be an impressive feature in an essay, for example, tackling the question in a way that is different from the other essays – especially, as one tutor commented, ‘when you’ve got a bunch of 150 scripts to mark!’ (Though make sure your originality isn’t at the expense of answering the question.)

And the worst thing you can do in an assignment is ...

Table 2.4 lists some of the worst things you can do in an assignment – where marks are lost. Not surprisingly, ‘failing to answer the question’ took the top spot, but look at what came second: poor language, grammar and expression. This might be surprising to some, but what use is a report if it can’t be understood?

Notice also, in bronze medal position, ‘too much description, too little critical analysis’. It’s that phrase ‘critical analysis’ again. As we shall see, description

Table 2.4 The worst thing you can do in an assignment

| Rank | The worst thing you can do in an assignment |
|------|---|
| 1st | Failing to answer the question |
| 2nd | Poor language, grammar and expression |
| 3rd | Too much description, too little critical analysis |
| 4th | Poor structure |
| 5th | Not following guidelines for presentation and word limits |
| 6th | Failing to read the relevant literature |
| 7th | Poor referencing |
| 8th | Poor introductions and conclusions |
| 9th | Inappropriate use of quotations |
| 10th | Poor presentation |
| 11th | Inappropriate use of appendices |
| 12th | Problems with tables and figures |

may have been sufficient at school or college, it may even get you through some of the first year at university, but beyond that you will need to start focusing on critical analysis.

Key advice from tutors

In a more recent survey of tutors I asked, ‘What key advice (tips) would you give to students about doing essays and assignments?’ Their advice highlighted five areas, in the following order of prevalence:

1. Develop your argument
2. Read widely (and critically)
3. Answer the question
4. Plan your assignment
5. Get formative feedback

Unsurprisingly, ‘answer the question’ figured highly in their comments, but it was interesting to see that ‘develop your argument’ was the most frequent piece of advice – confirming the results of the original survey. It was also interesting to see their emphasis on reading widely (beyond set texts and resources) and getting formative feedback. I’ve provided some of their comments in Box 2.1.

box 2.1

Key advice from tutors

Develop your argument

- Take a line of argument. Merely outlining that X said this and Y said this is overly descriptive and fails to develop a critical standpoint, which is what you should be aiming for
- Think about what you want to argue in relation to the question, and structure the assignment around that argument
- Clearly set out the structure of the argument in the introduction, the question that is being asked and how it will be answered. In the conclusion refer back to this and show how it has been answered
- Ensure that the steps in your argument are logical and that these can be traced throughout your essay/assignment
- Plan the essay clearly. Work out what the argument is going to be, the premises of that argument and the empirical evidence that will support the argument

(Continued)

(Continued)

Read widely

- Read widely around the subject area (the reading list is a start - not the end)
- Don't read passively. Read the literature carefully and in a critical way

Answer the question

- Follow the brief and answer the question. Make sure you reference the question throughout and that you provide a clear answer
- Revisit the question and make sure you've answered it
- Answer the question you've been given, not the one you want

Plan your assignment

- Plan your assignment - use headings and sub-headings to help structure it
- Plan it before you write it - draw it out visually on a bit of paper

Get formative feedback

- Think about scheduling and time management - and make sure that you leave yourself time to send drafts or ask for advice. The students who do this with plenty of time to spare *always* get the best marks because I will have told them what they need to do to boost their grades
- Seek tutorial support/guidance (students seem to think they should only do this if they are struggling)

summary

In this chapter you've gained an important insight into the minds of tutors when they mark assignments - what impresses them and what distresses them. You've also been tipped off about the most common mistakes committed by students when writing assignments. So we've laid the foundations, and you've got some pretty good advice already, so now let's get started on the tips.