Supporting academic writing development: questions and activities

General questions following a student’s first university assignment

1) How did you find writing your first assignment for your degree? Was it as you had expected it to be?

2) How did this assignment compare with the kinds of assignments you had to do for A-level/school/college?

3) How did the sources you were using to research this essay compare those you had used at A-level? Did working with these sources raise any questions you would like to discuss further?

Specific questions around the marks and feedback received

1) What mark did you expect to receive for this assignment and how did this compare with mark you actually received?

2) Now you’ve had a chance to look at the feedback, are there any particular comments you would like further clarity on or would like to discuss further with your tutor? This might include any feedback comments you are unsure about and would like to get a better understanding of.

3) Overall, what does the feedback suggest you need to: a) make sure you continue doing; b) think about doing differently next time?

Exploring the writing process in greater detail: some additional questions

1) How did you go about locating relevant information and academic sources for the assignment?

2) What about the time you spent reading and researching your essay? Did you feel this was right or do you think you need to adjust how much time you spend in future?

3) When you were reading a source (e.g. book chapter or journal article) how did you go about selecting relevant material for your assignment?

4) How did you plan your assignment, including narrowing down the content and deciding on what to include and not include, and why?

5) How did your assignment’s structure take shape? How did you decide what structure to use?
The following activities can also, in various ways, be facilitated digitally.

**Activity: Applying assessment criteria**

Provide students with: a) the relevant assessment criteria for a particular type of writing; and b) some previous examples of student writing. Working with the criteria ask students to ‘mark’ the essays and discuss the judgements they reached and why.

A more focussed version of this activity might ask students to consider, in particular, features such as:

- How effective the introduction and conclusion are
- How evidence is used to support ideas and arguments
- How connections are made between different sections
- How directly relevant to the assignment brief the piece of writing is

**Activity: what does criticality look like in a piece of writing?**

With reference to anonymised examples of student work that demonstrate criticality at appropriate levels, ask students to analyse the examples and discuss the different ways criticality is articulated and ‘performed’ in their discipline. Ask students to focus on the following types of questions:

- What particular features of the work mark the writing out as being ‘critical’?
- How does the language used signal the students’ criticality?
- In what ways has evidence been used critically?
- [If looking at an essay] How do specific sections like the introduction and conclusion signal criticality?

**Activity: Assignment checklists**

Ask individuals and/or groups to come up with short checklists to help them to plan, write and edit their next assignments. To aid this activity, ask students to consult feedback and assessment criteria.

Ask students to share their checklists. A follow-up activity, post-assignment, could invite students to evaluate the checklists and their effectiveness.

**Activity: Discuss initial approaches and assignment plans**

Choose a time when students are about to commence a written assignment. Ask them to spend 15 minutes sketching out:

- What their approach is going to be (e.g. if it is an essay, how have they interpreted the title and what it is asking them to do)
- How they intend to allocate their research and writing time between now and the submission date (e.g. students could be tasked with coming up with a week-by-week schedule complete with targets for the completion of particular tasks)

Ask students to feedback on the results of this exercise and to raise any questions they might have concerning the assignment.
**Activity: Writing assignment Q and A**

Choose a time when students are about to commence a written assignment. Invite students to raise anonymous questions relating to the assignment (e.g. by writing them on pieces of paper and placing them in a box). Once all the questions are in, either go through them or invite students to discuss their responses to each.

A variation on this exercise could be run after students have received feedback for a written assignment. Again, invite anonymous questions about the feedback based on any aspects the students feel they would benefit from clarifying.