

Appendix 1

Student Case Studies

The following are examples of actual student consultations taken from Fellows working in a wide variety of institutions.

1.i. Mature student H brings an essay about ways of reporting crime in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. H has returned to full-time education after more than twenty years away from the classroom. She is able and dedicated but very insecure. She is now in her second year and the essay she brings is half-written. She has become bogged down in her material and is confused about the use of primary and secondary sources.

She has begun her essay with a lengthy account of crime during the period, its likely punishment and the unreliability of crime figures. Then she has started to write about ballads, giving all sorts of information about ballads in general but with no reference to crime.

I work with H by structuring the tutorial as she might approach the planning of an essay and by asking a series of questions:

'Why are you being asked this question about this period?'

'What will be the argument of your essay (in about 25 words)?'

'What are the key words of the title?'

'Which primary sources will you use?'

'What are the underlying issues here?'

We then focus on the ballad as one example of how crime was reported. We talk about how she will quote from a particular ballad and use the example to advance her argument. The conversation then moves on to secondary sources and their place in the argument.

Finally, she composes a draft plan in the form of a list of the key areas she would like to cover, how the argument will progress, and how she will introduce and conclude the essay.

1.ii. Student R brings an essay about the reasons for the successes and failures of different British colonies in America. R is a 19-year-old student who spends the first part of any tutorial telling me how stupid and slow she is, so some time is spent on reassurance and confidence-building. She is very conscientious and does a good deal of background reading (probably too much). She has written pages of narrative about the founding of her three chosen colonies but is worried that she's 'got the wrong end of the stick' and is way over her word-count. I get her to teach me about the colonies, the differences between them, why she thinks one succeeded, another didn't. I ask lots of questions about the motivation of the founders, religion, economy, etc. and hope this will encourage her to realise that she not only understands events and dates but also causes. She puts in lots of qualifying remarks like: 'Yes, but I don't know how to put all this down...', 'It sounds so easy when you put it like that...', 'Now I don't know how to compare them...'

The second part of the tutorial is therefore spent helping her to organise her material, deciding how she is going to structure the essay. As with all students, I get her to reduce her argument to an abstract so she has a clear idea of what she wants to say. She leaves with a draft plan which will, we hope, enable her to analyse and compare rather than narrate.

1.iii. Student P arrives with a fistful of past essays. He wants to improve on his grades and asks for a few pointers as to where he's going wrong. The comments by tutors on P's essays are clear and careful, and show a consistent list of mistakes. I ask him to identify the essay which bothers him most and we focus on that one. Then I start with the basics:

'Let's look at referencing. Shall we just check that you're clear about how to quote correctly and use footnotes?'

'I see there are several punctuation errors. The apostrophe, for instance – shall we do a quick revision?'

'You use single sentence paragraphs. That's rarely a great idea...'

Gradually we go deeper into the essay:

'Now, I'm wondering how you plan your essays. You jump rather suddenly from one idea to the next...'

'Do you think about how you are going to link one part of your argument to another?'

'You could make much more use of this excellent quote if you analysed it and explained how it is supporting your argument'.

I encourage him to come back with the first draft of a new essay so we can check how he is putting this learning into practice.

2 First-year Business Studies student F has brought a copy of a coursework assignment: an evaluation of a number of group presentations. She has little confidence in her writing in general and was disappointed with the grade awarded this piece of work. She would like feedback on some of the possible reasons for her low mark. Reading the assignment, I can see that it is well structured and answers the question adequately. F has set out the background to the presentations in her introduction, explained her criteria for evaluation, evaluated and marked each group according to those criteria and has provided an overview of the contest as a whole. F has probably lost marks through poor spelling, convoluted syntax, repetitiveness, inconsistent acknowledgement of sources and the occasional simplistic turn of phrase.

I congratulate her on the way she has planned her work and tell her that this is exactly the kind of effective structuring her tutors are looking for. Then I ask her whether she redrafts her assignments and when she confesses that she doesn't, I encourage her to do so. I suggest that she begins by reading aloud her assignment and as she does so, she comments at various points: 'That doesn't make sense...', 'Oops, I already said that...', 'Oh, that sounds a bit naff...' and so on. I tell her that redrafting and editing don't necessarily mean poring over the printed page for hours on end – it can be just as effective to read her work aloud and write herself notes in the margin to help isolate what needs to be improved or otherwise changed. She obviously has a good editorial instinct, which she would benefit from giving herself the chance to exercise.

Looking at five or six key sentences in her work which are particularly syntactically challenging, I discuss with her how she might express the content of each sentence more clearly and directly, reassuring her that academic writing needn't be full of subordinate clauses and passive verbs. She says that her insecurity about her academic writing has probably led her to write in a style which she finds unnatural. I say that this can often happen, and suggest she might want to ask her tutor for one or two examples of what s/he considers to be good academic writing in the field. The session concludes with a brief discussion on how to acknowledge sources and draw up a bibliography, I refer her to appropriate section in the RLF online writing tutorial, and say that I would be happy to see her again next year if she feels that she has further assignments she wishes to discuss.

3. Third year Film student L has emailed and the tone of her email is one of panic. She has to submit her film script to the department and it has been suggested to her that she requests a meeting with the Writing Fellow. On reading a draft of her assignment, I can see that her dialogue is quite vibrant but her inability to spell is apparent. So too, is her inability to write Welsh in a formal way when that is required in the course work. When we meet, I understand fully the difficulties she is facing. Born and brought up a Welsh language speaker, her education until 11 was at a local Welsh-language primary school which meant that her immersion in Welsh was thorough. However, she was sent away to a private/boarding school at the age of 11 and from that time onwards had no contact with Welsh in any academic function, though she continued of course to speak and use Welsh at home to family members during the holidays.

At university, she decided to follow the film course through the medium of Welsh which meant that all her assignments were to be written through the medium of the language. This, even though her written Welsh was far from acceptable. We have held sessions to do with 'correct Welsh' but there is a need perhaps to offer this earlier in the year to all departments.

I spent many hours trying to help her identify words that were similar in sound but very different in spelling. Eventually we made a checklist of words that she would be required to use on a regular basis. I also encouraged her to devise her own dictionary – a pocket copy book, as she would be able to access this easily at the time of writing assignments.

I would indeed, have liked to have seen her earlier during her time at here rather than in the latter part of the year but I appreciated her willingness to learn and to face her difficulties with grace.

One wonders how many students there are at college who face similar situations to L.

The reverse is also true, of course, of students who come from English speaking homes and yet their whole education has been through the medium of Welsh. They too might need extra support in the bilingual dilemma that could arise.

This has reminded me, in the sessions I carried out with L, of the need to channel students early on in the first semester if possible, so that one is able to timetable adequately individual sessions during the year.

4. JS is a Portuguese student of 26 with several years of experience in Civil Engineering. He is, however, lacking in confidence in his writing skills, especially since he is writing his dissertation in a foreign language. He came to me with a brief but detailed abstract of his thesis proposal, as well as some examples of his writing, and was unsure how to proceed in terms of structure and style, particularly the latter. We discussed his problems in both areas. He has since come to see me with draft sections and chapters, and we discuss clarity, presentation and points of style, and idiomatic usage with which he is unfamiliar. He understands, however, very clearly that the Writing Fellow is neither an English teacher nor an editor; he is interested in the way sentences function, why certain phrases and expressions don't work well in academic writing, and in the way Portuguese and English usage differs. He is also concerned with the overall presentation of his dissertation. He brings in short discrete sections for discussion, and studies the points I make carefully, applying them to the

work he does on his own. One of his main requirements is the acquisition of a degree of confidence and fluency of expression and style.

5. Student B is a distance learner working on an MA in European Law. B is attempting to juggle her studies with the demands of work and family. She feels isolated from the rest of the student community – though has links via email with other distance learners – and also from the University and her supervisor. This isolation and lack of others with whom she can discuss her research and how to approach and structure her work has left her depressed and anxious. Although her work is seen as being of a high standard and she undoubtedly works very hard, her supervisor has commented that she tends to narrate rather than analyse. Although she knows what he means, she can not see where, in her own work, this is happening.

A section of work was sent to me ahead of time, together with student B's concerns. During the tutorial I was able to point out several sections where the narrative overtook the analysis and we discussed how to rectify this – essentially, I got her to 'teach' me about the various elements in question.

Her second problem was that she tended to read everything, whether it was directly relevant or not to the essay she was working on. We spent some time analyzing key words, defining the central argument, creating lists of headings, sub headings and key words, ordering these and then isolating which primary sources were of most relevance and which secondary sources will support her central argument and which would offer critical comparison.

What was most relevant, I felt, was that we did nothing new; B knew all of this and knew how to achieve the required end. What she needed was an opportunity to clarify her ideas and to go back to basics – structure, what to read, how best to make notes, etc. – without feeling stupid, immature, incapable (her words).

Later, she emailed to say that her supervisor had been impressed when she was able to tell him at the meeting that she understood what he meant and that 'this' was how she planned to resolve it.

She has kept in touch since.

6.i. M is a final-year International Relations student, who brings to our first session (in the last week of the spring term) a full draft of a 5000 word dissertation. The draft, which she has emailed to me one week before our meeting, is so incoherent that it's often difficult to discern what argument is being furthered, and her sentences are so garbled as to be incomprehensible at times. Before tackling the weaknesses of her prose, it's necessary to clarify the central proposition of her paper and to find a way of imposing an overall structure on the piece.

Accordingly, I begin the first session by asking her to tell in a sentence or two, without consulting the dissertation, the essential point she wishes to make in it. This she does, with somewhat greater transparency than in her writing. I then ask her to summarise for me the principal pieces of evidence on which she bases her overriding argument. This too she does quite concisely and lucidly. We construct a plan of the dissertation as she has described it, and only then do we turn to the piece of writing she's handed in. Using a highlighter pen, we identify the paragraphs in which each of her major points is being made, and from this exercise it becomes apparent that the draft does not follow the outline at which we're arrived through discussion. We then mark on the hard copy blocks of text that might be transposed, and identify places where new bridging material is required.

M emails a substantially revised draft to me at the start of the summer term. This version is far more persuasive than its precursor, but individual sentences still require a lot of attention. Before our second meeting I highlight various opaque episodes in the dissertation. During our session I read these aloud to her, and ask her to paraphrase them for me. As before, her paraphrases are invariably preferable to her rather long-winded and jargon-clogged writing, and we use her own spoken words as a basis for a detailed redrafting. At the end of this session (which, like the first, has lasted around eighty minutes), we both feel that the dissertation has been greatly improved.

6.ii. J is a first-year English Literature student, who brings a 1000-word essay that she feels is 'total rubbish'. It becomes apparent at the start of our meeting that her self-confidence is so low that she is on the brink of leaving the university.

The essay is certainly weak – so weak that a complete rewrite is required – but it's easy enough to identify a couple of promising ideas buried within the text, and to suggest ways in which she might build upon them. The chief flaw of the essay is that the title explicitly requires the student to give a personal account of the ways in which an introduction to psychoanalytic theory has changed the ways he or she reads literature. Instead of answering the question, J has stitched together half a dozen very brief summaries of various essays she has read on the subject of fiction and psychoanalysis. The position taken in some of these essays is in contradiction to the position taken in others, so I begin the session with J by asking her with which of these various arguments she would be inclined to agree. I emphasise that her tutor is not expecting a definitive scholarly declaration on the question of literature and Freud: she is being asked to submit a personal and necessarily provisional statement. She should, furthermore, not concern herself with being 'literary' at this stage of her

career: independence of thought and clarity of expression should be her priorities. Within a few minutes J is very much more at ease, and soon is talking easily and fluently, and refining her ideas as she speaks. Towards the end of the hour I point out to her that a transcript of her contribution to our discussion would stretch to considerably more than one thousand words, and that she is now in the position of having to edit her thoughts to fit the length of the essay, rather than having to rely on the writings of others in order to amass the necessary word-count. I suggest that before embarking on her next essay, she should – as a preliminary to constructing a plan – set aside an hour for jotting down whatever ideas she may have on the subject, rather than rushing to the library to immerse herself in secondary texts.

J was still at the university at the end of the year.

7. Student M brings an essay about female employment in the 19th Century. M has 2 young children and holds down a part-time job as a youth worker in addition to her studies. Her tutor referred her to me. The tutor tells me that M is enthusiastic and articulate in class. However, her written work is difficult to decipher. Most of her sentences read like gobbledegook. At our first session, we work through two or three pages, sentence by sentence. I ask her to explain what she meant to say. I write down her explanations, then read them back to her. They make a lot more sense. M clearly has a good grasp of the topic. On further questioning, M reveals that she has been using the thesaurus in an attempt to sound more impressive.

In subsequent sessions, I encourage M to use language she understands and feels comfortable with. Clarity should come first. I reassure her that she will pick up the academic 'jargon' as her studies progress. A few weeks later, M brings her next essay. She has taken my advice on board. This time, she tells me she read her draft aloud to check that it made sense. I am amazed at the transformation. We work through the second essay in a fraction of the time. As she is leaving, she tells me that she feels much more confident about writing essays now. Later, she emails to let me know she gained a good B for the second essay.

8.i. Three sessions working with R on essay about health benefits of physical education. R is a part time post graduate student who said in the first session that he had never been confident about writing essays and was anxious about having to write one on the health benefits of physical education. As he said he finds it easiest to learn from written material, I gave him a copy of the literature department's guide to essay writing. We spent most of the first session brainstorming the topic (which was interesting – something I know nothing about) and making a spider map.

In the second session we worked some more on ideas for the essay and drew up a plan together. As with a lot of students, the whole idea of an introduction, with logical steps leading to the conclusion, seemed to be virgin territory, and he was amazed by the end result – a clear, logical structure on which to base his essay. A month later he returned for a third session with the almost-finished essay. He has a great writing style and most of the essay read really well. A few final tweaks and a lot of encouragement were all that was needed.

8.ii. Student N brings part of an essay on race and slavery. N was understandably concerned about her essay, which had no introduction, poor punctuation and which consisted almost entirely of regurgitated and partially understood chunks of text. She is finding it difficult to adapt to an academic way of writing and is also daunted by the need to think and write about abstract subjects. I get her to read a paragraph out loud and she discovers at once that the sentences don't work. I ask, 'What are you really trying to say?' She thinks for a bit, then says, 'What I mean is ...' and tells me in a single, lucid sentence. I suggest she writes down exactly what she has just told me and, lo and behold, we have the beginnings of a clear, straightforward argument. We repeat this process several times and I suggest she does this for herself and write the essay that way, deleting the 'what-I-means' as she goes along. We rough out an essay plan. A subsequent session is devoted to tidying up, with a quick lesson on the uses and abuses of the comma and some more reading out loud. I hope the intense work she has done on this one essay will impact on her writing in future.

9. Student A is writing a postgraduate dissertation on citizenship and people with learning disabilities for the Social Work Department. She's highly articulate, has an impressive vocabulary, inside and outside her subject, and clearly cares about the issues she's investigating. There are, however, problems with her writing and, on her first visit, she said she thought she might be dyslexic and had arranged to be tested. (In fact, it was someone in the disability services who recommended that she come and see me). She said that she feels physically sick when she has to write something. She was also confused by how the most recent paper she'd submitted had been marked. One marker had passed her, another had failed her. When I looked at samples of her work, there were obvious flaws. The two most frequent ones were a failure to check subject/verb agreements and a general carelessness in checking what she'd written. When I focused her attention on misspelled or missing words, she still read the sentence as she'd intended to write it, rather than as it was on the page (which seemed to support the idea that she was dyslexic). Examples are "word", which she read as

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“world” and “boarder” read as “broader”, and there were many others. When I forced her to slow down and read more attentively, she saw immediately what was happening and corrected herself. By the second visit, the test had shown that she wasn’t dyslexic. She’d also bought a grammar book and was keen to improve her writing and conquer her fear of it. She’s very intelligent but she was never taught grammar. She speaks fast and well, but with many grammatical mistakes (“I’ve took”, “they’ve wrote”, etc.). She is working hard at these problems and my input was to give her some basic grammar points, direct her to the writing pages on the university intranet, the RLF and Purdue websites and try to change the way she works. She reads quickly and carelessly so I suggested mechanical strategies to slow her down, such as holding a sheet of paper under the line she is reading to prevent her eyes leaping ahead and to get her to focus on the actual words on the page rather than on what she anticipates will be there. As with many of my other students, it’s a pity she didn’t come to me much earlier in the process.