

# Creating an online tutorial on academic writing skills

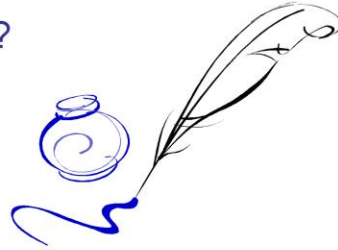


University of Bath  
David Stacey, Subject Librarian



# Session outline

- University of Bath – the context
- Project rationale - why did we do it?
- The process - what did we do?
- The finished product - demo
- Evaluation and statistics
- The future...





# Context

## The University of Bath

- Research intensive, science and engineering strong university
- More than 13,000 students (about 3,500 international). 45% female
- 72% undergraduate (of which 3% p/t)
- 28% postgraduate (56% p/t)



# Writing Skills

“Most contemporary British students arriving at university lack the basic ability to express themselves in writing. Growing numbers of students are simply not ready for the demands that higher education is – or should be – making of them”

Spurling, H. 2006. A Summary of the Royal Literary Fund's Report on Student Writing in Higher Education, Writing Matters [online]. London: RLF, 2006. Available from: <http://www.rlf.org.uk/fellowshipscheme/research.cfm>



## Existing Provision for Undergraduates

- Subject teaching staff
  - Royal Literary Fund Fellows
  - The Library's Information Skills courses
  - SORTED programme
- 
- Learning Support
  - English Language Centre
  - Personal tutorials



## Project rationale: why did we do it?

## Perceived needs

- Better on-line support for academic writing development
- Tailored to the needs of University of Bath undergraduates and reflecting views of staff
- To complement existing academic writing provision
- Accessible to students from a wide range of subjects
- If possible, to encourage deep and/or strategic learning
- A resource to be used alongside teaching and/or for self-directed learning



## Team and resources

- A suite of six e-learning modules
- Written and developed by a Fellow of the Royal Literary Fund
- Managed, developed and tested by the Science Faculty Librarian in association with a Chemistry Teaching Fellow
- Funded by the University's Teaching Development Fund with matched funding and support from the Library
- Developed in the academic year 2009-2010 for the start of the academic year 2010-2011

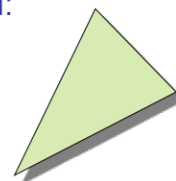
Trevor worked 2 days a week funded by RLF to help students improve their writing (1:1) – leveraged for knowledge on writing we as librarians lacked i.e. essay and report writing. Focused generic examples given on environment and communication as he had found these to have wide currency across all faculties

ALSO WILLING SLAVES – Chris (Info Librarian) and Despina (Greek Erasmus student) plus SLs for activity examples along the way (including myself) – all free!

Trevor's time had to be paid for though!!!

## Team and resources

- Trevor Day – Fellow of the Royal Literary Fund:  
THE KNOWLEDGE
- Linda Humphreys – Science Faculty Librarian:  
MOODLE DEVELOPMENT
- Bridgette Duncombe: Chemistry Dept Teaching Fellow:  
DEPARTMENTAL LINK
- A novel 3-way structure = writing skills expert, technical expert & departmental link for testing and feedback



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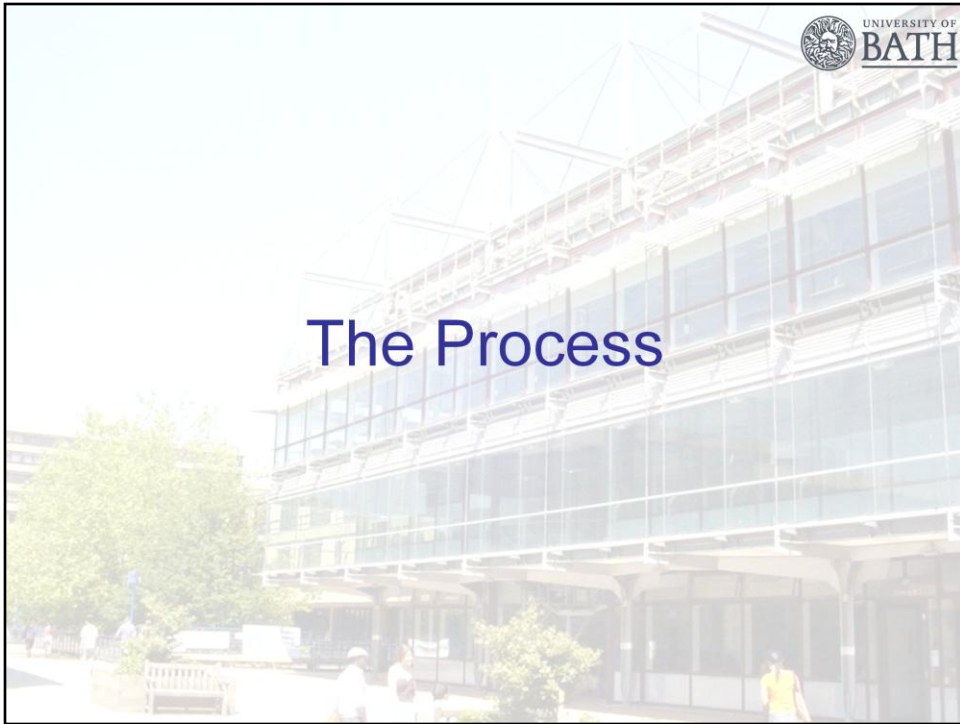
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# The 6 modules

1. Critically evaluating what you read (including the peer review process)
2. Writing an essay
3. Writing a practical report
4. Getting your argument across
5. Plagiarism, and how to avoid it
6. Citing and referencing



(originally 5 tutorials, but referencing & plagiarism were split due to size)



## The Process

## The bid

- Information Skills Moodle course already created, but only linked to existing referencing and plagiarism guides
- Teaching Development Fund (TDF) theme was a fit that year: 'Preparing for academic study'
- A bid was put together by the team and was successful – securing £7,935 to pay for RLF Fellow's time

**(originally 5 tutorials, but referencing & plagiarism were split due to size)**

Given the low cost and high input of staff time, the size of the final product (maybe 5 hrs or more material) this represents very good value for money!!!!

# Software

- No suitable software was initially available!
  - **Open Source** software was used: **eXe Learning**  
(considered easier to use than Flash, without training)
- **Videos** (QuickTime & Windows Media Player)
  - academic staff (e.g. report writing)
  - views of students (e.g. essay writing tips)
- **Quizzes** and Moodle's '**Personal Journal**' feature
  - however, no tool that allowed text highlighting! Also:
  - eXe quizzes could not be linked to Moodle gradebook!

(originally 5 tutorials, but referencing & plagiarism were split due to size)

## The Finished Product





## Academic writing skills



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## Academic writing skills

Welcome to the Moodle course on Academic writing skills.

This is a flexible resource that can be used by students on their own or under the supervision of staff. It is written for undergraduate students in the first or second year of their degree but other students may find it of benefit.

A given module takes 30-80 minutes to complete and need not be tackled in one go. In early testing we discovered that students often returned to a module more than once, using it for specific guidance when they were completing an assignment.

Each module begins with a stated set of learning outcomes and ends with a references section. Most modules have a quick review section. A [glossary](#) gives definitions for many of the technical terms used in the modules.

While we have made efforts to ensure that the guidance in these modules reflects good practice at the University of Bath, there are differences in practice across departments. It is the responsibility of students to check the nature of assignments, assessment criteria and recommended practice in their own subject.

We welcome your feedback to improve the quality of this resource. An evaluation survey is provided at the end of each module.

Please [contact the Library](#) to report any problems or if you have any questions.

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## 4. Getting your argument across



The aim of argument, or of discussion, should not be victory,  
but progress.

## Getting your argument across

4.1 Learning outcome

4.2 Module introduction

4.3 What is an argument?

4.4 A clear line of reasoning

4.5 Creating sound arguments

4.5.1 Necessary and sufficient

4.5.2 In all probability

4.5.3 Arguments from authority

4.6 Cheap tricks

4.6.1 Using emotive words

4.6.2 Assuming cause and effect

4.6.2.1 Act: Assuming cause and effect

4.6.3 Distracting the reader from examining the argument

4.7 Connecting the points in your argument

4.7.1 Quiz: connecting the points in your argument

4.8 Closing your argument

4.9 Quiz: Quick review

4.10 Getting your argument across

4.3.1 Quiz: what is an argument?

4.4.1 Quiz: a clear line of reasoning

4.5.1 Quiz: creating sound arguments

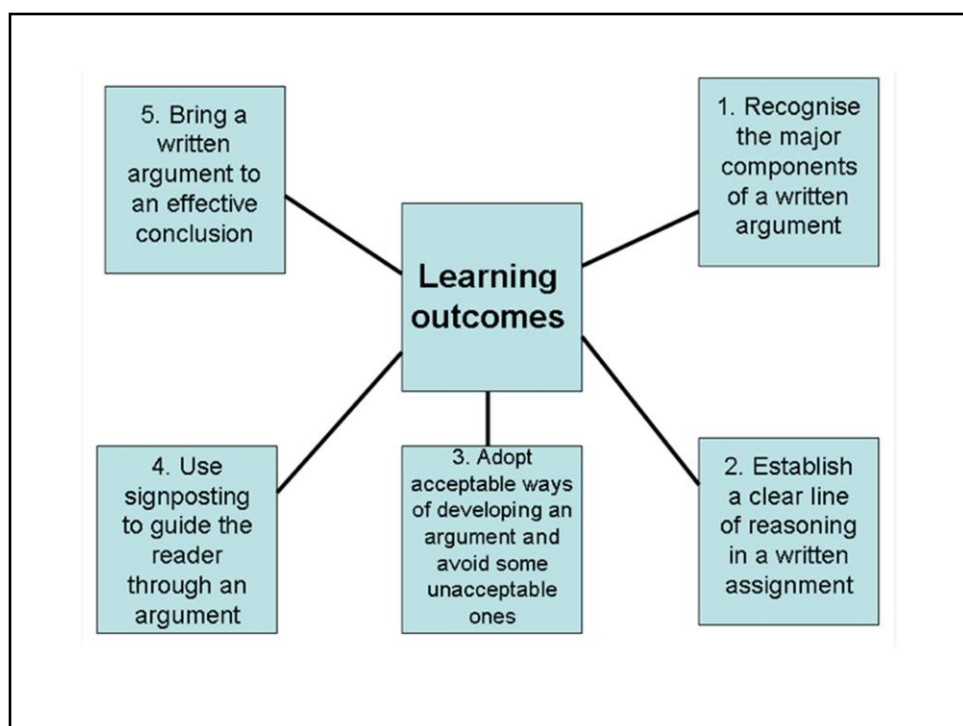
4.5.1.1 Quiz: necessary and sufficient

4.5.3 Quiz: in all probability

4.6.1.1 Quiz: using emotive words

4.6.2.2 Ans: Assuming cause and effect





## 4.6 Cheap tricks



10 mins



There are various 'cheap tricks' that writers use to persuade others of the strength of their arguments. These tricks are not normally regarded as appropriate for academic arguments and are likely to be marked down by assessors. Three approaches are considered here: using emotive (emotional) language to back a position, assuming cause and effect, and distracting the reader from examining the argument.

[Glossary](#)

1. In the passage below, pick out those words that are particularly emotion-laden.

*The trawler fishermen aggravated their misdeeds by throwing the uneconomic catch overboard. The brave protesters approached the fishing boat again and again, ignoring the threats to their own safety.*

☐ aggravated

☐ misdeeds

☐ brave

☐ approached

☐ uneconomic

☐ threats

Show Feedback

1. In the passage below, pick out those words that are particularly emotion-laden.

*The trawler fishermen aggravated their misdeeds by throwing the uneconomic catch overboard. The brave protesters approached the fishing boat again and again, ignoring the threats to their own safety.*

☒ aggravated

Correct

☒ misdeeds

Correct

☒ brave

Correct

☐ approached

Correct

☐ uneconomic

Correct

☒ threats

Correct

Show Feedback

The strongest emotion-laden words are aggravated, misdeeds, brave and threats.

2. Emotive words can be used to emphasise one side or other of an argument. In most cases they can be replaced by more neutral words. In each case below, allocate the word or phrase to the category that describes the person or group favourably (**F**), unfavourably (**U**), or in a more neutral fashion (**N**).

Gathering ☐

Demonstration ☐

Rabble ☐

Scrounger ☐

Social security claimant ☐

Disadvantaged person ☐

Terrorist ☐

Insurgent ☐

Freedom fighter ☐

2. Emotive words can be used to emphasise one side or other of an argument. In most cases they can be replaced by more neutral words. In each case below, allocate the word or phrase to the category that describes the person or group favourably (**F**), unfavourably (**U**), or in a more neutral fashion (**N**).

Gathering **N**

Demonstration **F**

Rabble **U**

Scrounger **U**

Social security claimant **U**

Disadvantaged person **N**

Terrorist **U**

Insurgent **U**

Freedom fighter **F**

Restart

Show Answers

Your score is 6/9.



1. Examine the argument in this paragraph:

*This winter the ski resorts of Scotland experienced more snow than at any time in the last decade. Fewer people went abroad on skiing trips, preferring to stay in Britain for their winter sports excitement.*

There is a cause and effect argument buried in this description. The text suggests that because there was more snow in Scotland, those people that might otherwise have travelled abroad for skiing chose to stay in Britain to do so. Is this argument convincing? Give your reasons for or against in the box below.

**Here is our answer to the previous question...**

The argument is not convincing. We do not know that those people who chose not to go abroad to ski were, in large part, the same people that travelled to Scotland to ski. It could be that the skiers in Scotland were mostly locals, and/or not those who usually travelled abroad. There could be other reasons why people chose not to travel abroad to ski: poor exchange rates, recession and the difficult economic climate, and so on.

Beware jumping to conclusions when formulating cause and effect arguments in your own writing. Build your case carefully, with strong evidence and reasoning at each step in your argument.

# LIVE DEMO

<http://moodle.bath.ac.uk/course/view.php?id=51106>

## Example staff video:

- 3. Writing a practical report – Kieran Molloy (Professor of Inorganic Chemistry)

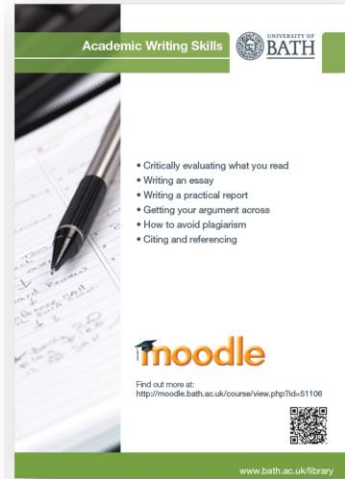
## Example student video:

- 2.3.2 Students' experiences of essay writing

# Evaluation & Statistics

# Evaluation & Statistics

- Pilot study:  
21 Chemistry undergraduates  
– questionnaire feedback &  
tracking of interaction with the  
tasks
- Post-launch:  
- Moodle reports – monthly  
usage figures  
- 462 Mechanical Engineering  
undergraduates tested the  
Plagiarism module



TEST METHOD = Bristol Survey On-line (BSOL)

## Evaluation & Statistics

- First module written – Writing a practical report – was most challenging, mostly due to variation by discipline!
- All 21 students tested in **the pilot** felt it improved their understanding:

*“I liked the fact they asked a few questions along the way and gave you practice with answers to compare yours to”*

*“It addressed which tenses to write in and how to write an abstract, both of which I found confusing prior to reading”*

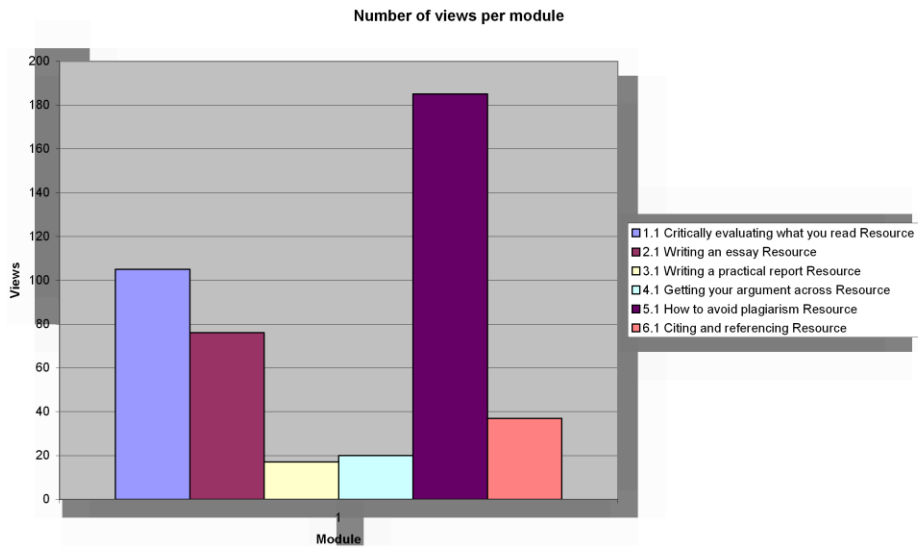
434 of 462 Mech Eng students felt the Plagiarism module had greatly or slightly improved their understanding. Most first years (179 out of 281) felt it had greatly improve their understanding.

## Evaluation & Statistics

- 434 of 462 Mechanical Engineering students felt the Plagiarism module had greatly or slightly improved their understanding (94%)
- Most first years (179 out of 281) felt it had greatly improve their understanding (64%)
- Monthly usage statistics are very encouraging – as reported to Senior Tutors at the end of 2010
- The Plagiarism unit has proven most popular

434 of 462 Mech Eng students felt the Plagiarism module had greatly or slightly improved their understanding. Most first years (179 out of 281) felt it had greatly improve their understanding.

# Usage: October 2010







## What happens now?

- Direct uptake by some departments e.g. Engineering deliver the plagiarism module in the classroom
- Many departments publicise it e.g. Management
- Subject Librarians are making use of it in their teaching
  
- We were unsatisfied with eXe and its limitations
- We invested in Articulate software for use in refreshing the resource, improving visuals and variety of activities
  
- The final project report was received without response but has been considered a success
- Other institutions expressed interest and the possibility of developing OER products based on this is being explored

**OER = Open Educational Resources**

# The future...

1. Widespread testing of the modules in the first year of use; analysis of feedback
2. Move away from eXe Learning to Articulate software
  - Make modules more visually pleasing
  - Improve organisation of content and signposting
  - Increase interactivity for deeper/strategic learning
3. Seek to make modules leaner
4. Consider more deeply ways of using the modules in subject groups, or independently, and signalling this to users

Any Questions?

