

# PREPARING FOR UNIVERSITY

FutureLearn MOOC

Notes for teachers

Week 3

# PRE UNIVERSITY MOOC

The Preparing for University MOOC was developed to equip students for the challenges of the university learning environment. The lessons focus on specific skills while reinforcing skills learnt in previous lessons throughout the 7-week course.

At university instructions are often not as specific as students would like them to be, so instead, students have to tackle questions and learn through feedback and discussion with their peers to understand how they might improve next time. The course is reflective of this process, and involves students completing specific activities with minimal training, taking time to reflect on their own skills, and discussions with teachers and peers.

The following notes will guide you through the series of weekly steps and activities of the Preparing for University MOOC. The notes will explain the rationale behind some of the steps and suggest questions you might ask to your students to guide them through the learning.



# WEEK 3: STRUCTURE

This week is best suited to students who have already applied to university (e.g. students in Y13 or Level 3 Y2). If your students have not yet already applied to university, they may find Week 4 on Persuasive Writing more useful.

## STEP 3.1: Introduction video

When constructing a piece of writing we need to structure in thought, ideas and writing. One of the most important parts of creating structure for a piece of writing is how to structure a paragraph of writing. You might ask students to discuss what they think structure is and why it is useful to create a structure around any piece they are writing.

## STEP 3.2: Thinking about structure

This step asks students to think about the word 'structure' and what it means. You might ask your students:

- Do you think structure means different things as you progress through the education system?
- Do you like being told what structure to use to write an assignment such as an essay? Or would you like to think about what sort of structure might be appropriate?

## STEP 3.3: Seminar about structure

In this video, students discuss their ideas about structure with a university lecturer. Students talk about how the essays they write argue for and against a given topic and they conclude by forming their own opinion. The students are asked what they think structuring an argument is about and what makes a good argument. Students provide one piece of advice about structuring an essay.

What advice would your students suggest about how to structure an essay – their 'top tip'?

## Activity: Structure

### STEP 3.4: Forming an opinion

Imagine a university essay where instead of weighing up pros and cons and coming to a conclusion, you set out your informed opinion at the beginning, and then present evidence to back up your opinion throughout the rest of the essay. In Week 5 on textual analysis, students will be asked their initial thoughts on a piece of writing. In this current week students will be asked for their opinion on a particular topic. As students research a topic in more detail, their views may change, but this is a good process. You need to start somewhere so that you can question the material you use to research the topic.

### STEP 3.5: Supporting your opinion

In this step, you might ask your students:

- What material might you use to support an argument?
- What is the difference, for example, between using Wikipedia and using a Government website as sources of evidence?
- What is the difference between using websites and using peer reviewed journal articles as sources of evidence?

Do your students know what peer review is and what journals are? This would be a good point to have a discussion around this, explaining the research and publishing process. We will come to acknowledging academic sources in Week 7.

## Activity: Structure

### STEP 3.6: Undergraduate views on structure

In this video, undergraduate students talk about the need to be concise, the need for greater depth and the desire for a more fluid, less prescribed writing structure. The last student suggests that writing essays at university is more rewarding than previous experiences because of the research they are required to do and the ability to be less confined by a prescribed structure.

Your students are asked if there is anything they might do to begin to work on this university-style of writing. Ideas that could develop these skills include:

- Write a summary of a peer-reviewed journal article.
- Take a piece of writing and reduce the word count.
- Look at a piece of writing, such as a newspaper article, and study how the writer begins the piece. How they start their paragraphs and how they link paragraphs.

### STEP 3.7: Understanding feedback that relates to structure

Structuring work is difficult and is a key criterion of most marking schemes at university. As such, students will often get feedback on the structure of their work. To pre-empt the next step's video on feedback, you could facilitate a discussion with your students about why structure is such an important feature of marking criteria. In many marking schemes it is the first thing on the list that judges the quality of an essay. Why might this be?

Without a good structure an essay will not persuade the reader of the writer's argument or opinions and will lose its purpose, irrespective of its other qualities.

## Activity: Structure

### STEP 3.8: Seeking help with feedback

One of the key points in the video is that Bob does not use enough evidence – this is very important in any assignments at university. Bob is also told that if he works on the structure of each individual paragraph, the structure of the essay as a whole will improve.

Imagine receiving feedback that states ‘the whole essay structure is weak’. This can seem overwhelming. Instead, looking at structure within the essay, on a smaller scale, can help. Do individual sentences have a good structure? Does each paragraph have a good structure? Once you have looked on this smaller scale, then you can look at the links between paragraphs. Consider, is there a flow of information from one paragraph to another? It can help to break the feedback down into a smaller scale, rather than trying to look at the whole thing all at once.

In this step, we also encourage students to be proactive in seeking help. This is an important point at university. Students can miss out on learning if they don’t ask. The tutor provides the teaching session, but it is up to the students to ask questions in the lecture, carry out independent study (as discussed in Week 2), but if they don’t understand something or wish for more help on a subject, they need to ask. Asking for help does not affect how their work is graded – some students worry about that.

There are a range of support systems at university. Learning enhancement teams are situated in universities and can help students learning more effectively and improve their work. Teams such as this offer tutorials, workshops as well as peer assisted learning programmes (student-led mentoring). The specific support available will vary by university but there will always be someone students can speak to if they would like to improve their work or studies.

### STEP 3.9: Creating good paragraph structure

Over the next few steps, we look at the issue of creating good paragraph structure. Students are given a paragraph to comment on. This paragraph is typical of initial work students can produce at an undergraduate level. The paragraph is a jumble of points on a vaguely related topic. What do your students notice about the structure of the paragraph? It might be worth noting that there is no clear opening sentence, and the paragraph lacks a flow of ideas, with no clear ending.

Looking critically at writing is a really important skill. Students should not accept writing in books and papers and assume it is perfect. Instead, students should be able to say what is good and not so good and use evidence to back up their suggestions.

## Activity: Structure

### STEP 3.10: Going through the structure of the paragraph

In this step, we give some advice about what needs work with the paragraph. Can your students think of anything else we did not mention?

### STEP 3.11: Possible solution to the paragraph

The suggested solution is just a suggestion – there are no right and wrong answers. Looking at the paragraph, ask your students:

- Does the first sentence now reflect what the whole paragraph is about?
- Highlight all the connectives used and discuss what each adds to the writing.

Connectives do more than improve the flow of writing, they demonstrate synthesis and analysis. In writing, connectives reflect a deeper understanding of the topic than the list-like writing of the first example of this paragraph.

### STEP 3.12: Paragraph examples

In this step, we provide a number of examples to give students experience in being critical, thinking about the opening sentence, and using connectives wisely.

### STEP 3.13: The lecturers' perspective

In this step, lecturers reaffirm the importance of structure. Take note of the line in the middle, in pre-university the reader wants to know what the student knows – at university the reader wants to know what the student thinks. This is a huge shift in learning for students, but hopefully an exciting one.

## Activity: Structure

### STEP 3.14: The difference between a pre-university and a university environment

Higher education is about learning how to have an opinion and write about it with evidence. It is important that students don't worry about not being able to do this when they arrive. The process of being in higher education is to gradually learn this skill. This Preparing for University MOOC is about giving students an awareness of what skills they will develop at university. University is more about developing skills than learning information.

### STEP 3.15: Summary of the lesson on structure

Structure in writing reflects a flow to your thoughts and helps engage the reader. The summary reaffirms the need for structure in writing and reiterates the importance of opinions supported by evidence.



# Top tips

## Week 3

1. Producing a piece of structured writing reflects a structure to your ideas and your arguments. It demonstrates a structure and a flow to your thoughts and helps engage your reader, giving them confidence in your ability to develop and support your argument.
2. When writing an essay make sure you have thought about your view on the topic. Working out your opinion on a subject gives you a starting point from which to build your essay and your argument. It is important that you back up your opinion with evidence in order to persuade others that your opinion is valid.
3. When you receive feedback on your essays, follow up with your lecturer for clarification on any points that you don't understand. This will help you understand the areas you may need to improve on for the next time. Remember, at most universities the first year of study doesn't count towards your final degree. This is the time to make mistakes and learn from them.
4. There is no set formula for writing at university level. You have the freedom to develop your own self-developed structure which enables you to describe, analyse, synthesise and evaluate topics you are given. Remember, when structuring your paragraphs, make sure the purpose of your paragraph is clear and you're linking together your ideas throughout.
5. A key difference between previous Level 3 study and university study is that previously your teacher would want to see what you know, but at university level we want to know what you think. Have the confidence to share your ideas.