

PREPARING FOR UNIVERSITY

FutureLearn MOOC

Notes for teachers

Week 4

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 4: PERSUASIVE WRITING

This week is best suited to students who haven't yet applied to study at university (e.g. students in Y12 or Level 3 Y1) who are looking to apply to university in the next few years. If your students have already applied to university, they may find Week 3 on Structuring Writing more useful.

STEP 4.1: Introduction to week 4

In this week, we introduce the idea of persuasive writing. At university, when you write a piece of text, or an essay, we call this academic writing. In some way or another, when you write a piece of academic writing, you are usually trying to persuade someone of your opinion. You want to persuade that person that the evidence you are using is good and that you have a strong argument.

To write persuasively at university the key thing you need is evidence. Evidence may come from your own experience or it may come from the literature, for example, research that others have published.

Although this week uses the university personal statement as a model, the lessons in this week can be applied to any piece of writing. The main points are that you think about who your reader is, and that you support the ideas you are writing with evidence (references).

Activity: Persuasive writing

STEP 4.2: What is persuasive writing?

This article takes the reader through a series of scenarios. With your students you might want to discuss each scenario, prompting them to think about writing style and whether evidence is required.

Below are each of the scenarios:

- a) Writing for yourself, such as a shopping list – no evidence is required here. You know what you mean, and you don't need to be persuaded.
- b) Writing a letter or email to someone: On the whole, it will not require any evidence but here you need to think about who the reader is and adjust your writing accordingly. Think about how you would write differently if you were writing to a member of your family, compared to if you were to write to a teacher, or a potential employer asking if there were any job vacancies.
- c) Writing to persuade requires you to write in the correct language for your reader and use evidence to back up what you are saying. Academic staff at university need to write persuasively when they apply for a grant (money for research) or when they present their data or ideas to an academic journal. University students write persuasively in essays or laboratory reports. Pre-university students may need to write persuasively for a job application, persuading the potential employer that they are the right person for the job, or in their UCAS university application where they try to persuade the reader that they are a good candidate for the course. If students did/are doing an EPQ (Extended Project Qualification) they may need to persuade their teachers of their good ideas, supported by their data.

Activity: Persuasive writing

STEP 4.3: Introducing the personal statement

In this step, the work for the week is introduced. We ask the question, ‘where do you think you might need to write persuasively in the future?’. Some students might not be thinking of applying for university in the immediate future. Instead, as one example, they might want to consider writing a cover letter for a job application.

In this section we introduce Gina, a character we created. In this MOOC she is played by a student, Jennifer, who studies a Drama course at the University of East Anglia. To act the part of a student in the process of applying to university, Jennifer uses a script written by the Preparing for University team.

The first thing a student should do when writing about themselves is to write down all the information that comes to mind. A good starting point is to get the student to talk about themselves, perhaps to a family member or a friend over a social media chat so that the conversation is recorded or, if they feel comfortable, record themselves talking using a voice memo app.

STEP 4.4: Gina’s monologue

In this video, Gina is speaking freely about what activities she is undertaking at school/college, her hobbies and interests, and what she particularly likes studying at school/college. This is going to form the basis of her UCAS personal statement.

The next steps will work to turn this free open speech into a first draft of her personal statement.

Activity: Persuasive writing

STEP 4.5: Prioritising thoughts

In step 4.5, we take the information from the video in 4.4 and ask: ‘what next?’

From the discussion with Gina’s friend, she has a lot of thoughts about the study she is currently doing, and she does a lot outside of school/college. It is important that Gina starts to think about who the personal statement is for. Keeping this in mind, we need to consider what points from Gina’s monologue are important to the people who will read the statement. We ask ‘which subject Gina might apply to study?’. First, students need to look for evidence in Gina’s monologue to back up their ideas. There is no right or wrong answer; you could just use this as the basis for a discussion about how and why you pick a subject to study at university.

STEP 4.6: Making decisions

In this section, students can think about all the things Gina has mentioned and start making decisions about what to keep for her personal statement and what to delete. The focus needs to be on the reader.

Activity: Persuasive writing

STEP 4.7: Organising thoughts

The following task asks students to put themselves in the position of the readers – as someone who, perhaps, will decide whether they will offer Gina a place at university.

In this section, you may ask the students to discuss the following:

Task: Take a short passage from Gina's monologue. For example, Gina likes studying people and what they do, and when travelling she likes seeing different people and how they go about their everyday lives and how it shapes them as a person.

Q1: What is the point? Answer: That Gina has an intrinsic interest in people.

Q2: Why are you telling me? Answer: Because this could relate directly to psychology and the study of people and their behaviour.

Q3: How could you support your point? You could use the point that she liked reading Oliver Sack's book, which suggests that Gina's interest is more than a passing interest in people.

Q4: So, how does this make you a good candidate for my course? Answer: Gina has already worked out that she has an intrinsic interest in people and enjoys reading books about the study of people.

After looking into what a Psychology course entails, Gina would further link her interests to that particular course.

The next step is that Gina needs to make everything relevant to the lecturer. It is always important to keep in mind the reader and constantly ask 'what does this tell them about me?'

In telling the reader about herself, Gina must use evidence to support the key points she raises. For example, if Gina decided to study chemistry then her trip to the Chemistry Society would be ideal to use as evidence. However, she would need more detail about what exactly it was she enjoyed about it, and to show her knowledge and interest in specific areas of chemistry. Or, if Gina decided to study history, her interest in people would also relate.

Next is a discussion about how Gina can connect her ideas; it is worth thinking about this early on, so that students can get their points in a logical order.

Activity: Persuasive writing

STEP 4.8: Gina's draft Personal Statement

This is Gina's first attempt following the same thoughts outlined in the previous steps. In this step, we are asking students to be critical readers. Look at Gina's first draft and ask your students to think about whether Gina is making good points, backing them up with evidence, and relating them to her course.

STEP 4.9: Gina gets some feedback

Getting feedback from a trusted other, a teacher, family member or guardian, is extremely important when writing a personal statement. In this step, Gina receives feedback on her first draft from a university lecturer. Students need to respond to the feedback Gina is getting and will need to apply it to their own work later. You might ask students for their initial thoughts on the feedback provided to Gina. What key points do they take from the video which they might apply to their own work?

STEP 4.10: UCAS video

UCAS have produced an excellent video on writing the personal statement which we have linked to within the MOOC itself.

STEP 4.11: What does all this have to do with persuasive writing?

The questions we have been posing to Gina are encouraging her to revise her personal statement to ensure that she provides a clear, well written, structured and persuasive piece of writing. If she is to make her case effectively, Gina needs to win over the reader to her side. In this way, the writing of the personal statement has become an exercise in persuasive writing. Your students can now make this exercise speak to their own work. They might like to consider how their writing can be enhanced by working on the following step. If students are not applying to university, they might apply these exercises to a letter accompanying a job application.

Activity: Persuasive writing

STEP 4.12: Getting your thoughts down

Students will now do the equivalent of what Gina did when sitting on the steps talking to another student. Your students will need to spend about three minutes talking about themselves to a classmate. Ideally, this conversation would be recorded to allow students to speak freely without the need to remember key points. Conversely, students can take notes for one another about key points from their discussion.

STEP 4.13: Do what Gina did

Gina needed to work out what material was relevant and what wasn't. Your students need to do the same. Working with their three minute account of themselves, students will need to split the points about themselves, their interests, what they are good at, experiences they have had etc. into three categories: 'irrelevant', 'perhaps', and 'definitely use'.

This step also asks students to evaluate this process. Evaluation involves reflection, which is an important step in writing; reflection is a key part in writing a piece involving yourself. Evaluating this process will allow students to reflect on the initial processes involved in writing like this.

STEP 4.14: Your first draft

This step requires students to work on developing their own personal statement. Students will then be asked some reflective questions on this process.

STEP 4.15: Reviewing what you have written

In this step, we ask students to think about their reader; for example, a personal statement is written for university staff to read. In Week 1 of the Preparing for University MOOC, there was a video about what lecturers' value in their students. Students can watch this again and think about whether their personal statement would appeal to one of the lecturers.

You can prompt your students to think about whether they have highlighted and evidenced their curiosity, their desire to learn, their critical reading etc.

Activity: Persuasive writing

STEP 4.16: What has all this got to do with writing at university?

The video in Step 4.16 discusses the process of writing at university. Students' initial steps may be to brainstorm about the topic. Mind maps are helpful tools to use when brainstorming but there are many other helpful ways to get our thoughts onto paper. In the process of writing, research is necessary, to read around the topic to gauge a deeper understanding but is also important for providing evidence to back up points you want to make. However, the main thing is to get ideas and words on to paper. Once your students have an initial draft, it can provide them with a solid foundation to start reflecting, prioritising their points, and being critical of their writing.

STEP 4.17: Your approach to writing

This step is a series of questions for students. Hopefully, they will have more of an idea about the type of writing they will be expected to do at university.

Top tips

Week 4

1. Persuasive writing is concerned with getting someone else to believe or do something.
2. It's not about telling them everything, but about selecting the most relevant information for your purposes and presenting it in the most effecting way.
3. This means you have to think about the reader: who they are, what's important to them, what they are expecting.
4. Your writing is likely to be better if you have a good process, which moves you from gathering your ideas, to organising them, to presenting them to your reader.
5. The more conscious you are about why you are doing a particular bit of writing, the better that writing is likely to be.