



Assessing by Extended Writing

Overview

Extended writing tasks are text-based assignments that involve:

- research and critical reading from multiple sources of information and ideas, and
- the development of a sustained and well-substantiated argument or point of view.

These tasks are usually set to be undertaken within extended time frames. Students must engage in high-level reasoning and problem-solving as they generate their own creative response to the problem posed. With extended writing tasks, students can engage in deep learning, gain insights into multi-structural connections and relationships among concepts, and develop critical and creative reasoning skills.

Learners need to be given plenty of formative activities to scaffold the skills and knowledge required to master extended writing. Read more about [Developing Students' Writing Skills](#).

When to use

Extended writing tasks are very appropriate for assessing:

- higher order thinking and reasoning skills
- creative and independent thinking
- the skills of marshalling evidence to develop and substantiate a case
- communicating effectively

When not to use extended writing tasks

Extended writing tasks are not always the best assessment tool to use. In some settings, teachers use them because they always have, rather than because any educational rationale supports them. They can be unsuited to professional practice in the discipline; for example, they are typically less appropriate for assessing creative performance and practical skills.

Many course and program learning objectives are not effectively developed or assessed by requiring students to

produce a complex piece of writing.

They are not useful for assessing lower order thinking such as basic recall of conceptual and procedural information.

Get the balance right. If extended writing tasks are:

- the major form of assessment in a program, it is unlikely that the full spectrum of learning objectives and graduate attribute outcomes is being accommodated.
- limited or absent, students may be denied the richness and depth of learning experiences known to be associated with advanced scholarly meaning-making.

Benefits

- Extended writing tasks give students the chance to:
 - engage in deep learning
 - gain insights into multi-structural connections and relationships among concepts, and
 - develop critical and creative reasoning skills.
- In spite of the associated workload, students often appreciate extended writing tasks for the opportunity they provide to probe a topic more deeply and understand inter-relationships better.
- Students can:
 - integrate their learning with the development of graduate attributes
 - practise and refine generic skills, such as written communication and information literacy, within the context of disciplinary knowledge
 - develop critical reviewing as well as writing skills, if peer review is incorporated into the writing process.
- Extended writing tasks result in a concrete product that demonstrates students' capabilities to themselves and others such as prospective employers.
- The process of extended writing can empower students as they develop their authorial voice and status, and challenge teachers' and accepted wisdom.
- Setting extended writing tasks takes less time than setting short answer and multiple-choice questions.
- Teachers can see, in submitted assignments, a rich, concrete snapshot of a student's understanding at a certain point, as well as of their misconceptions or gaps in their understanding. This enables a deep dialogue between student and teacher, and helps teachers see what to address in their courses.

Challenges

- If extended writing tasks are too open-ended, and students are not well prepared and well supported to undertake them, they can become an overwhelming obstacle to learning.
- Some groups of students may be unduly disadvantaged by extended writing tasks—for example, students with disabilities or with poor English language proficiency. Ensure that reasonable adjustments are made for students with disabilities, and that diverse assessment approaches are in place for **all students in the course**

- Certain types of extended writing tasks may encourage plagiarism unless the requirements are carefully framed.
- It can be challenging to get the balance right between explaining what students should do in an extended writing task, and allowing them scope to be creative and original in their responses. This is particularly true for students who are new to university study and to the academic genres of particular disciplines.
- The workload for students in preparing extended pieces of writing is considerable.
- Marking extended writing tasks is time-consuming, and requires thoughtful judgment.
- Because of the high level of subjective judgment exercised by markers, marking is not very reliable.
- The language students use may unduly influence markers. Elegant prose can mask superficial thinking and reasoning, or a piece that displays original and creative thinking may be marked down for its error-ridden or unsophisticated prose.

Strategies

Designing curricula to scaffold extended writing

It is important to consider the design of assessable extended writing tasks in the broader context of the whole course. Include resources and activities on **developing writing skills** to provides learners opportunities to practice and develop the skills and knowledge required for such tasks.

Align extended writing tasks with learning outcomes

Ensure that assessment tasks are well aligned with course objectives and outcomes. For instance, in an engineering or design discipline, ask for a report on a case study. Or in a communications subject, have the students write a journalistic article rather than a scholarly essay.

Remember, you want students to develop communication skills that are appropriate to their future professional practice.

Design extended writing tasks

No matter what the context, you need to clarify the general shape of an extended writing task and communicate it clearly to your students.

Timing of the task

Extended writing tasks are typically undertaken in untimed settings, within extended time frames, with the writer determining the amount of time spent on completing the task. For students who are new to university, it can be helpful to break the assignment into stages, with discrete outputs at specified times, and ongoing feedback to keep students on track. For example:

- Have students maintain a reflective diary or log book throughout a semester, possibly with periodic submission of a synthesised brief personal learning statement.
- Break the task into separate stages where students develop and submit sections of an essay, report or article (e.g. research question, literature review, methodology or approach, results, discussion, and finally the whole paper including the conclusion).

Scale of the task

Extended writing tasks help you assess students' deep understanding of a topic that is complex, ranging over multiple dimensions and drawing from diverse sources of information and ideas.

They invite open-ended interpretation, analysis, synthesis and integration. Submitted assignments should provide a well-justified and well-substantiated case, and possibly propose explanatory hypotheses or original recommendations for action.

It's easy for students to become confused as to the scope and expectations of an extended writing task. Clarify these at the outset.

Length of the output

The length of the piece of writing is possibly the most common way to define its scale, but you also need to tell students what you require of them in terms of:

- depth and breadth of research, and
- extent of critical and original thinking.

If you rely on word count, particularly if you scrupulously observe it (for example, by refusing to mark any words beyond the defined limit) students may respond by "writing by words" rather than "writing for meaning". The following variables can be used to help prescribe the scope and dimensions of the task.

Research and input

In preparing for extended writing tasks, students can easily misjudge how much research is necessary, and either skim the surface of the topic or research it so exhaustively that they run out of time to think and write about it. Be explicit about how much research you expect of them, especially in the early stages of an undergraduate degree; support your students as they develop critical information literacy skills.

Other ways you can help are:

- At first, provide all the required readings, and tell your students why they are relevant and appropriate. Later, you can prescribe what types and even how many readings students are expected to find and incorporate.

- Offer preparatory workshops and discrete exercises on information gathering and critical reading to accustom students to the demands of scholarly research. Perhaps you could do this in collaboration with the Learning Centre or Library.
- Ensure that assessment criteria and marking rubrics reflect different levels of performance in terms of research undertaken for the task.

Academic integrity and plagiarism

How you set out an extended writing task tells students a lot about the moral and ethical standards you expect of them. In your guidelines, clarify that they must acknowledge the sources they have used, and minimise the opportunities for plagiarism.

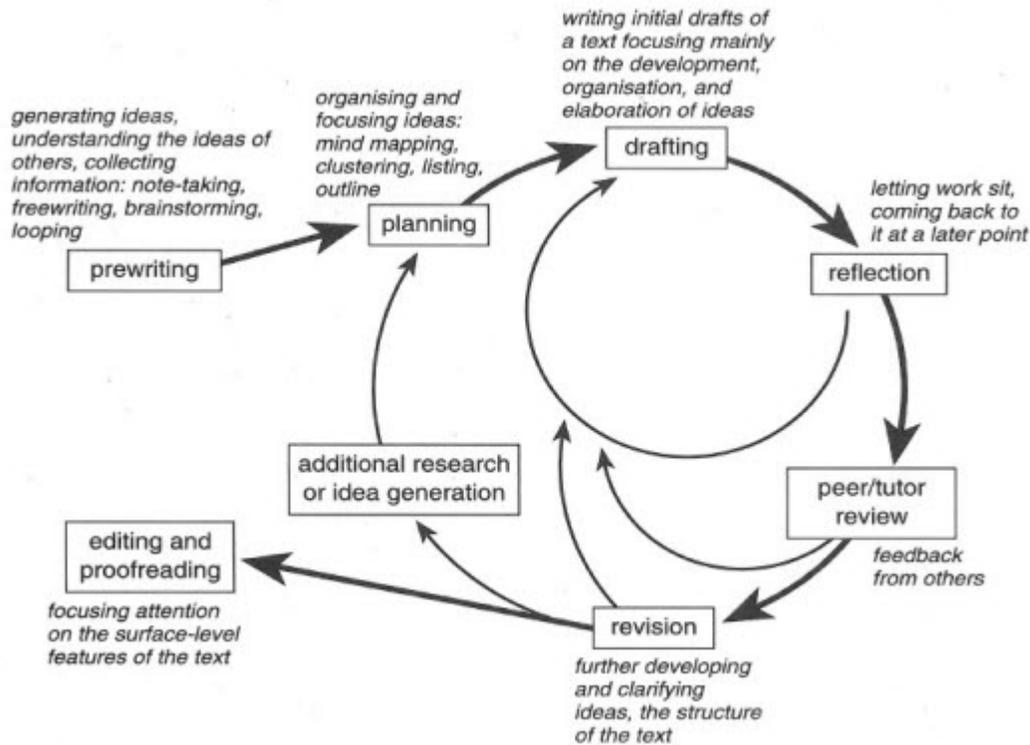
- Set tasks that require students to explore inter-relationships between topics, interpret new data and integrate personal experience, rather than tasks that involve simply finding and synthesising available information.
- Require students to submit a summary of information searches they undertook, including databases and search terms used.
- Set a preliminary task in which students prepare an annotated bibliography of work they intend referring to in their research and writing.
- Clarify that you expect photocopies, scans or files of reference material used, or links to it, to be appended or attached to the final submission.
- Require students to submit with their work an Originality Report generated from Turnitin.

The process of writing

Define how you expect students to undertake the processes of researching and writing. Is the task to be completed by students individually, or can they work as a group? If you require group work, how will individuals' contributions and performance be interpreted and graded?

Particularly for new students, clarify the different stages of the writing process - for example, as depicted by Coffin et al. in the diagram below.

Figure 1: The writing process (Coffin et al., 2001)



- Have students submit a critical account of one or more readings before they develop their full paper, and use this exercise as the basis of in-class discussion about the processes of critical reasoning.
- Engage students in reciprocal peer review processes using the task's assessment criteria and marking rubrics. Allow them to redraft their work after peer review, and to note how it has changed, before they submit it for marking.
- When group collaboration and/or peer feedback are involved, require students to append to their final submission a brief reflection on its contribution to their work.

The intended audience

Unless otherwise stated, the intended audience for an extended writing task can be assumed to be the course convenor or tutor, and students write with the assumption that this person primarily wants to assess the quality of their learning as demonstrated by their writing. But you can also require that they address a different audience. For example:

- Have them address an imagined audience in an industry or community setting.
- Involve an authentic reader in assessment, such as a supervisor in a relevant workplace setting.

Output (the product)

New students can be very confused about what the expected written output should look like in terms of its functional components.

Explicit sub-headed structural sections (for example, abstract, introduction, methods, results, discussion) can help,

but these may not be enough to help them organise their ideas and develop their argument.

Students can also be uncertain what type of language to use, particularly as different disciplinary contexts have their own peculiar expectations. To make expectations clear to students:

- Provide guidelines that describe and illustrate the structural and stylistic characteristics associated with effective writing for the type of task and intended audience.
- Ensure that assessment criteria and marking rubrics explicitly reflect these characteristics, so that students can make sense of feedback and know where to direct their attention to improve their performance.
- Engage students in reading and assessing examples of writing. Select samples that demonstrate effectiveness (and/or ineffectiveness) in terms of the structuring of an advanced line of reasoning, and the extent of formality, technicality and personality expected in the writing.

Assessment criteria

Tell students at the outset what assessment criteria you will use when marking an extended writing task. This will significantly affect all stages of their work.

The assessment criteria can be exploited as part of the overall learning design of a writing task, for example:

- Set out the purpose of the task in the criteria. Show the different levels of cognitive sophistication involved, from remembering, understanding and applying through to analysing, evaluating and creating (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001).
- Provide an assessment rubric that sets out the features that distinguish grades at different performance levels.
- Require students to peer review each others' work at draft stage and to give feedback based on the rubric.
- Have them self-assess their work using the assessment rubric and attach a self-assessment sheet or file to their submission, containing their own grade and commentary.
- If students request a re-mark of their work, require them to complete a self-assessment sheet. This minimises the likelihood of vexatious "grade grubbing".

Engage students in active and productive learning

Through extended writing tasks, students can engage in active and productive learning and develop discipline-based and generic understanding and capabilities. The following are some ways in which you might enhance this engagement and development:

- Hold in-class discussions in which students provide critiques of their own and others' writing and break down the writing and underlying reasoning processes. Discuss with students how much originality and creativity has been demonstrated in the writing in question.

- Ensure that guidelines and learning emphasise the iterativeness of extended writing. Make clear what you expect of students at different stages of the process.
- Structure the task as a "patchwork" text comprised of many components (for example, a critique of an article, a commentary on a related lecture, a personal account of a relevant experience, an analysis of a selected data set), with an integrating overview explaining relationships among the components in terms of the topic (see Winter, 2003; and Wilson, 2012).
- Help students take responsibility for their own learning and assessment: have them negotiate criteria for assessment; involve them in assessing their own and their peers' writing; require them to prepare a response to assessment feedback they receive. You might even allow them to set their own assessment topic, subject to your endorsement.
- Develop tasks that reflect the distinctive characteristics of the discipline, such as the "performed essay" (Roms, 2007).
- Engage students in reflecting on diversity in the ways of thinking and reasoning across the disciplines they are studying.
- Provide timely and constructive feedback that students can incorporate into their ongoing learning performance.

Ensure fairness

To ensure that all students have an equal opportunity to succeed, try the following strategies:

- Ensure that reasonable accommodations are made for students with disabilities—alternative tasks, presentation formats, extended deadlines and so forth.
- Value students' individual and diverse backgrounds. Ask them to refer to their own experience where it is relevant, and invite them to comment on the application of ideas and theories to their future possible work settings.
- Ask students to include an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses in their own work. How do they think they could have improved it, if they had had more time or other resources? Respond to the students' self-assessment, so that they can see that you value it.
- Allow students to rewrite and resubmit their work following feedback, where this increased workload can be managed.
- Assign a proportion of the marks to students' preparatory work, such as annotated bibliographies and critical reviews of articles, so that assessment is not entirely invested in the final submission.

Make marking as reliable as possible. Monitor and maintain assessment standards, for example by the use of grade exemplars.

Use technology

With extended writing assessment tasks, you can exploit learning technologies in the following ways:

- Some **UNSW graduate capabilities** relate to digital and information literacy. Students can use learning technologies to access, manage, create and share information and ideas as they engage in extended writing tasks.
- Enrich students' learning experience and enhance their outcomes by using technologies in:
 - collaborative writing and peer reviewing (for example, using file-sharing applications and review tools within **Moodle**)
 - publication and dissemination of their work (for example, using ePortfolio tools and advanced publishing software) and
 - more dynamic social interaction about task topics (for example, through blogs and wikis)
 - checking that they have attributed all quotations correctly by checking their own work in **Turnitin**.
- Manage staff workloads effectively. For example, have students submit assignments online, return feedback to students in media-rich formats, mark and process results online, conduct marking moderation with teams of tutors online, and monitor assessment standards using a database of past students' work.

Additional information

External resources

- Queen Mary University of London, **Thinking Writing**. Resources and case studies from the "Writing in the Disciplines" project
- **UNSW Learning Centre resources**
- **WRISE (Write Reports in Science and Engineering) website**. A resource for staff and students on the structure and language of reports.
- Workshop on Patchwork Text at UK Assimilate Conference 2012 (Ann Wilson, UNSW).

Further readings

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