

Making report writing 'active'

DR WENDY GARNHAM



What is the idea?

This chapter will present the active report writing project that I have been using with students studying my foundation year module on Social Psychology. Report writing can often be seen as a “dry” and formulaic exercise. Making report writing more of an active endeavour, that empowers students to be more creative and innovative underlay this project.

Why this idea?

When we ask students to conduct research and write a report on it, we tend to give them a question, give them instructions for how to

conduct the research, how to write it up etc.- it is all tutor led with very little option for students to show their creative potential or to tailor the report to their own interests. Moreover, in assessments of this nature, students often leave it until the last minute to complete it, meaning the mountain of meltdowns set in. This project enables students both to invest their own creativity into the assessment and also breaks the task down into manageable chunks across the term, with each chunk linked to a formative feedback opportunity. It allows students to learn by doing, encourages them to seek support and implement feedback to help them develop as independent learners.

How could others implement this idea?

The active report writing method follows five key steps: Conversation in the café, Sling your hook. Down the Rabbit Hole, Playing Detective and Be a Rembrandt.

1. Conversation in the café – idea generation

Students are initially introduced to the assignment brief: to conduct a content analysis. For the first step, students should select an area of the module syllabus that interests them and then generate as many different questions about that as they can think of. What questions do they have about that area? What do they think would think, it would be interesting to explore? They are encouraged to talk to friends and family, to share their ideas and to imagine a conversation in a cafe. If they were talking about the area of the syllabus that interests them, what questions might their friend raise? How would they respond and would they themselves have any question to raise for their friend in return? The emphasis is very much on generating ideas. Whether or not these are ideas that

they take forward for the final analysis doesn't matter at this stage. Towards the end of this stage, students individually document their flurry of ideas in a conversation collage which can be as creative as they like.

2. Sling your hook – hooking evidence to ideas

Students look back at their collage and select one of the questions they generated to take forward for their content analysis. It must be a question that can be tested using content analysis. Their task is now to explore the literature to find out what is already known about the content of that question. What has already been done? Where are there gaps in our knowledge? The idea is that students aim to “hook” evidence onto their ideas. Students document their findings in an annotated bibliography table, showcasing their referencing skills on the left and making brief notes about what they are taking from the article/book to use in their research. Is there evidence that links to their ideas? If so, what is it? If not, will they take that idea forward or omit it?

3. Down the rabbit hole – formulating an introduction

In Alice in Wonderland, one scene shows Alice falling down a rabbit hole, moving from a broad opening, to a narrow tunnel. This analogy is used to explain the next stage of the report writing process. How does this work? Having completed their annotated bibliography, students have to do something useful or constructive with what they found from the academic literature. This stage requires them to organise their findings to create a rationale or introduction to their content analysis. Why is their study needed, given what went before? How does it help to progress our understanding further? What gap will it fill? They should start with a broad introduction

to the area they are studying and narrow down to lead naturally into their own study. Students work together to look at examples in the literature that they found to give them a clearer idea of how it works. It is also useful to give students some random extracts from an introduction and ask them to order these so that the story moves from broad to specific in terms of the journey it takes the reader on. Following this chance to engage in active learning, students then individually try to work on their own introduction to their research. Their introduction should end with a clear and precise prediction about what they will find in their content analysis.

4. Playing detective – analysing the evidence

Stage 4 is all about conducting the content analysis. Just as a detective will look for evidence, students now do the same. Students collect together examples to analyse. What the examples will be will depend on what the student is investigating but they could be TV adverts, political speeches, lonely hearts advertisements, children's cartoons etc. They decide on a coding scheme to use to analyse the examples, i.e. what will they look for in the examples that will help them to answer their question? Often their exploration of previous research will give them some ideas here. They then analyse the examples they have collected to look for patterns or trends.

5. Be a Rembrandt. – painting a picture of what the evidence suggests

The final stage of the process is where the student “paints a picture” of what they did and what they found in the form of a research poster. They have already written the introduction or rationale but now they add to this by outlining the method (what examples they used, how they selected them, what coding scheme they used),

the results (a graph or a table to show any patterns or trends, or the lack of!) and a discussion (outlining what their interpretation of their results means in the context of existing research in this area). This can seem like an unsurmountable task at first but to help students understand what is required, we give them access to a Padlet wall which contains examples of research posters used by members of the School of Psychology. Students are encouraged to work together to look at these and comment on what they liked about particular posters, which ones stood out for them and why? This helps them to develop as critical thinkers as well as being able to see the task being modelled by established academics.

Transferability to different contexts

Anyone who uses report writing as an assessment tool may be interested. Although we used this in psychology, it is not necessarily discipline dependent. It is possible to extend this further by holding virtual poster conferences where others, such as staff teaching on similar modules, can look at the posters as they would in a face to face conference and ask questions on these.

It is also possible, at each stage, to build in formative assessment opportunities. For example, at stage 1, peer assessment could be used to comment on things such as the range of ideas, the relevance to the topic area and the presentation. At stage 2, feedback could be given on referencing using a tick box method. At stage 3, students could be encouraged to self-assess using a checklist (which in turn can be created from a class discussion). Stage 5 lends itself nicely to a peer assessment exercise such as a virtual poster display.

Links to tools and resources

A similar approach was used to make essay writing active: see chapter 1 of this publication: <https://www.fulcrum.org/concern/monographs/vm40xt05h>

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About the Author



Dr Wendy Garnham

UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX

<https://twitter.com/DrWGarnham>

Dr Wendy Garnham is a Reader in Psychology at Sussex and the Director of Student Experience for the Central Foundation Year programmes. She is also a National Teaching Fellow. Her career has spanned teaching at all levels of the educational spectrum from reception through to postgraduate. Her interest in active learning is borne out of the experiences she has had with each of the groups and individuals she teaches. Wendy loves having fun in teaching and learning because she believes strongly this is how we learn best.