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Academic writing

Trawsnewid Addysg; Trawsnewid Bywydau
Transforming Education; Transforming Lives



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In this lecture you will:

- Consider some of the key features of academic writing.
- Explore how to structure your writing.
- Consider how to write in a critical way.

What's the problem?

Writing is easy. All you do is stare at a blank sheet of paper until drops of blood form on your forehead.

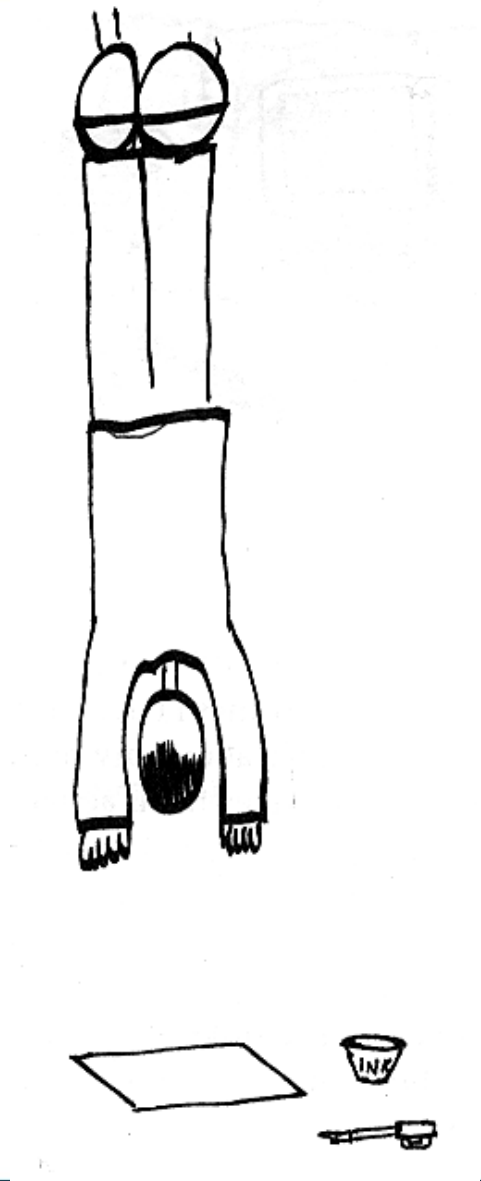
—Gene Fowler

Get started

The development of language and thought are closely linked. Therefore, the act of writing generates ideas that would never have existed at the beginning of the task.

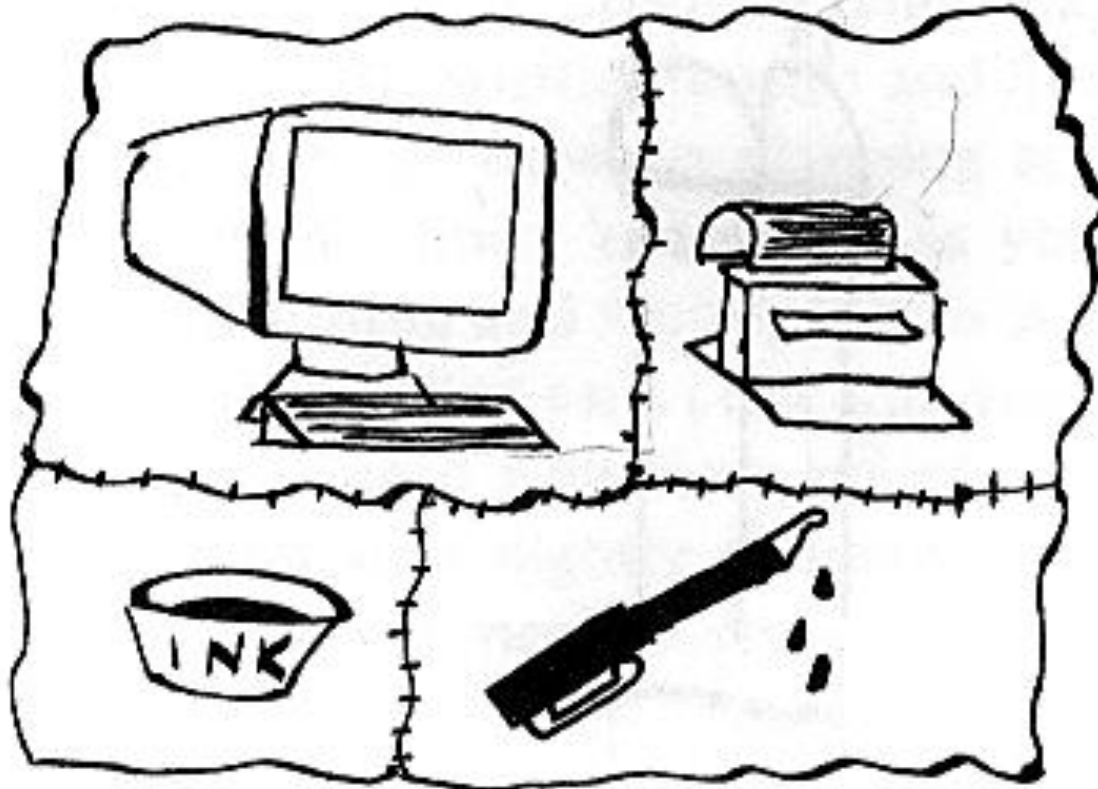
Accept this...

- Don't worry about the first attempt.
- You can fix the language and the style later.
- Things can be moved, deleted, polished.

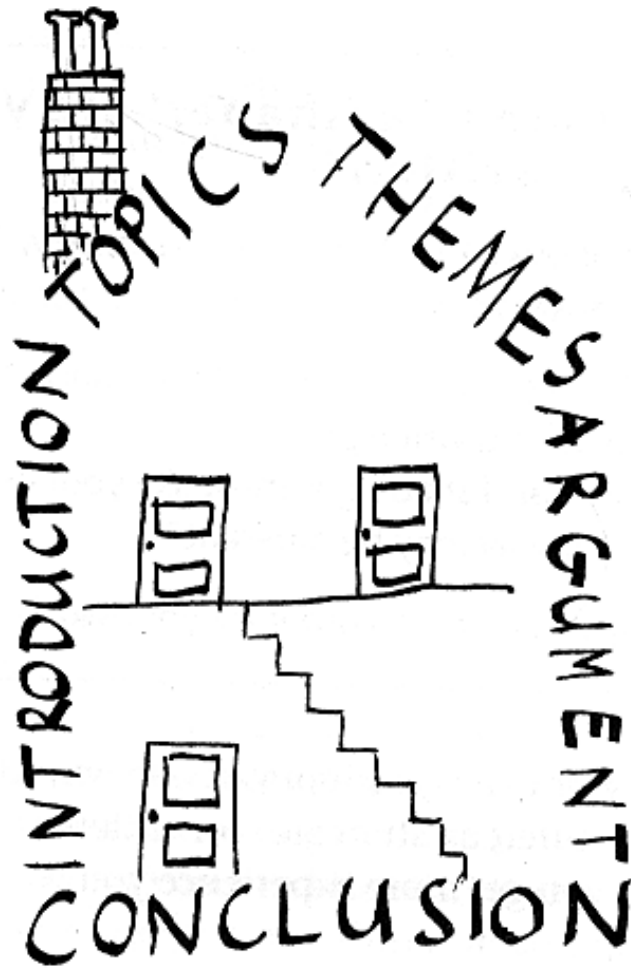


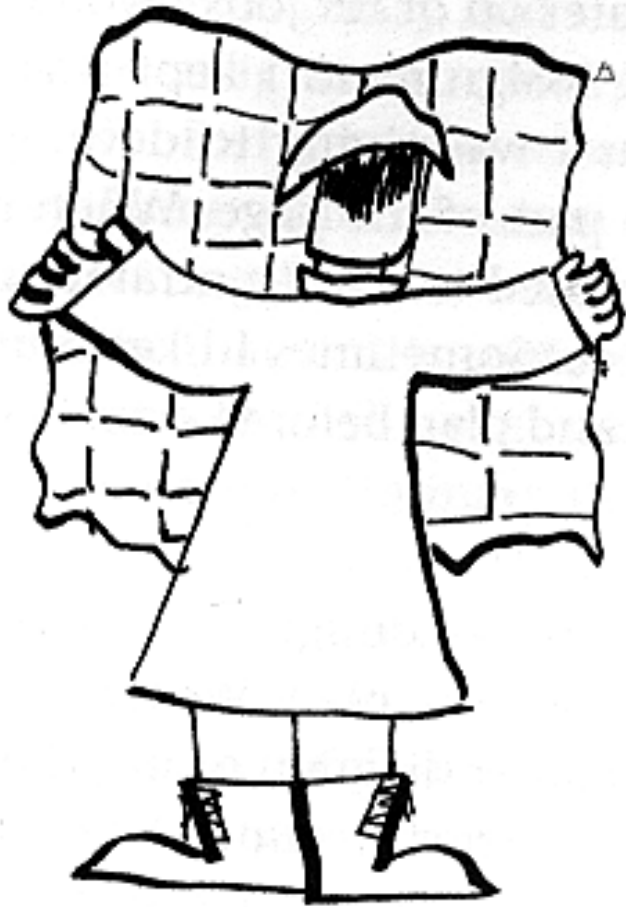
The diver

The patchworker



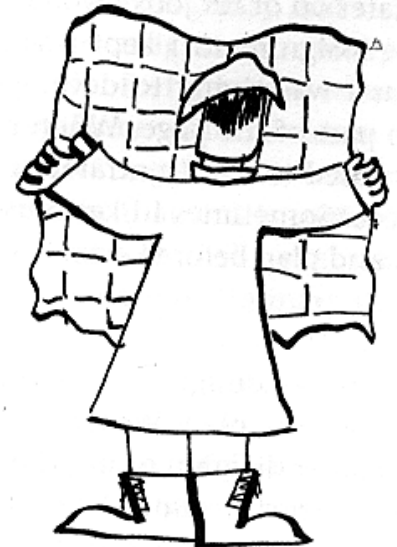
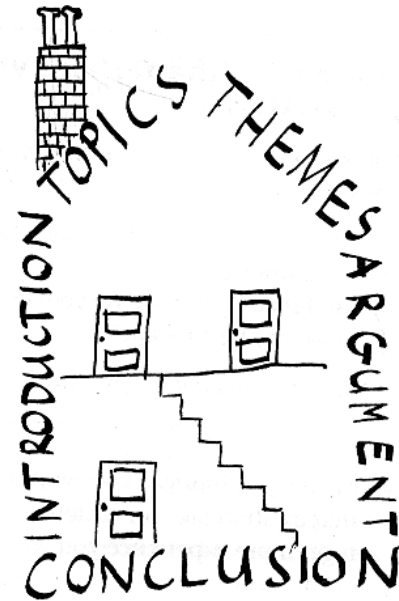
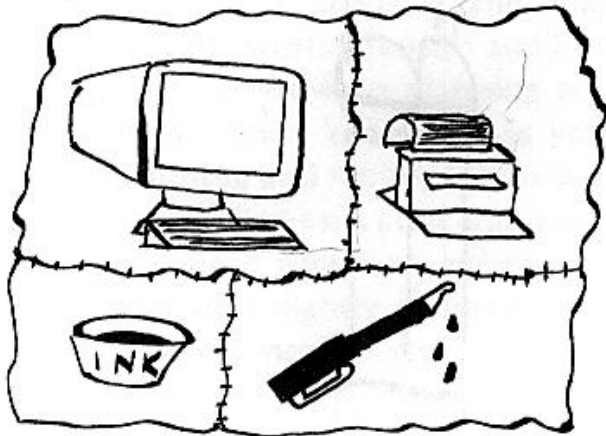
The architect





The grand planner

Identifying your writing style



Writing Apprehension

- **Don't start** with the introduction
- **Plan the assignment** down to the last paragraph before you write.

This will reduce your anxiety and help you see a logical pathway through your assignment.

Reducing Writing Apprehension

One line structures

My argument

How can resources help
children in Year 2 subtract
numbers up to 20?

One line

- I will look at literature to see what others have said.
- I will look at school experience.
- I will analyse the data and draw conclusions.
- I will use the conclusions to answer the question.

Get sorted with the sub-topics

Aim, focus and purpose of assignment

Overview of current literature

Research context/ Ethical consideration

Discussion of research findings in relation to literature

Conclusion – critically examine your own research (e.g. reliability, validity, generalisability)

Recommendations

Mind Maps: Subtopics

Mind map Subtopics

- What will go in each sub-topic – don't fuss, get the ideas down in one or two sentences.
- Make it clear –it should help you understand exactly what you need to include.

For example

Overview of literature on using resources in Mathematics:

Theory

Strengths

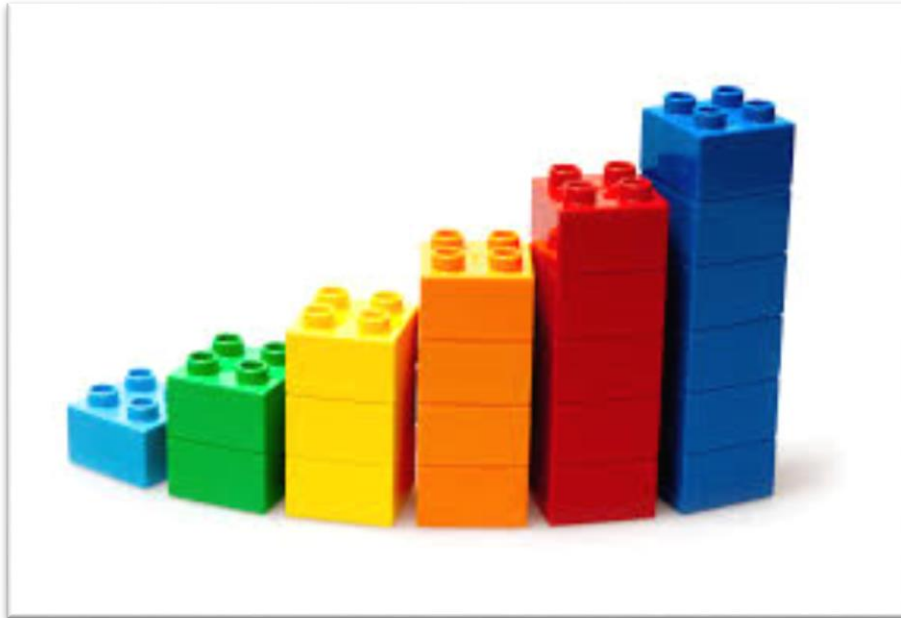
Limitations

Add notes from your reading

Go through each sub-topic

- Big ideas
- Add a few notes
- Ideas will start to be generated

Sub-topic paragraphs



Good writers use paragraphs well

- Well developed – around 8-10 sentences.
- No assumptions (unsubstantiated claims)
- Cohesive – they make sense, ideas are connected to one another
- They signpost the logic of the argument to the reader (topic sentence)

Main text

- The main text of the essay has three main parts:
 - An introduction
 - A main body
 - A conclusion

The introduction.

- The introduction consists of two parts:
 - It should include a few **general statements** about the subject to provide a background to your essay and **to attract the reader's attention**. It should try to explain why you are writing the essay. It may include a **definition of terms** in the context of the essay, etc.
 - It should also include an **indication of how the topic is going to be tackled** in order to specifically address the question.
- It should introduce the central idea or the main purpose of the writing.

The main body

- The main body consists of **one or more paragraphs** of **ideas** and **arguments**, together with illustrations or examples.
- The **paragraphs** are **linked** in order to connect the **ideas**.
- The purpose of the essay must be made clear and the reader **must be able to follow its development**.

Flow of information in paragraphs

- **Paragraphs are usually structured as**
 - **Topic Sentence**
 - This is the **first** sentence and it expresses **The main idea**.
 - **Supporting Sentences**
 - details that expand your main idea.
 - **Concluding Sentence**
 - a rounding off, possibly by summarizing what has been said or drawing a logical conclusion from it.

Flow of information in paragraphs

- **Use linking words**

- also, as well as, *firstly*, next, then, **finally**,
so thus, as a result, because, therefore, for
example, for instance, in contrast, **on the**
other hand.

I. INTRODUCTION		
	General Statement Organisation Statement	
↓		
II. MAIN BODY		
	A. Introductory Sentence Point 1 Point 2 Point 3 ... Concluding Sentence	
↓		
	B. Introductory Sentence Point 1 Point 2 Point 3 ... Concluding Sentence	

↓		
	C. Introductory Sentence Point 1 Point 2 Point 3 ... Concluding Sentence	
↓		
III. CONCLUSION		
	Recall issues in introduction; draw together main points; final comment.	

The conclusion

- The conclusion includes the writer's final points.
 - It should recall the issues raised in the introduction and draw together the points made in the main body
 - and explain the overall **significance of the conclusions**. ((What general points can be drawn from the essay as a whole?))
- It should clearly signal to the reader that **the essay is finished and leave a clear impression that the purpose of the essay has been achieved.**

Topic sentences

- The topic sentence is a sentence that is used at the beginning of a paragraph to tell the reader what it is that you are going to be talking about in that paragraph.

Good features

- **Succinct:** Long, rambling sentences can be confusing.
- **Clarity:** Don't try to use big words or jargon: say it as it is.
- **Precise:** Don't be too broad – this is unhelpful for the reader.

Good or bad topic sentence

Theresa May has just been to Brussels.

What about this?

Theresa May has returned from Salzburg after trying to secure a new deal for Britain in the European Union.

Better?

Theresa May's argument for Britain's special status in the European Union is controversial for both state and party.

Example in context...

Lesson study was developed by Peter Dudley.

Better?

Dudley 2015 argues that lesson study is a professional learning approach which significantly improves teaching and learning.

Reader informed/argument – does it or doesn't it. Signals for and against.

Not good

‘The debate over the teaching of phonics will only be touched on briefly as it diverges from my central focus.’

Telling the reader what the paragraph is *not* going to be about.

Waste of words.

Avoid

- Don't use facts as topic sentences – this will not lead you to write an argument.
- Don't just describe – you will lose your argument.
- Don't say “In this paragraph I am going to write about” when introducing a topic – it's boring and a waste of words.

Subtopic/Paragraph Organisation

- Organise the paragraphs within each subtopic.
- Write a topic sentence for each paragraph and begin to fill in the paragraph.

Make sure the topic sentences signal a logical argument

- Look at the steps between each paragraph.
- Does it make sense to the READER – not just to you.

So far...

By now you have:

Ignored the introduction

Mind mapped the sub topics

Put paragraphs under the subtopics

Written topic sentences

Checked the logic of the assignment

Paragraphs

Now you have to begin to fill in the paragraphs for each sub-topic.

Writing a good critical paragraph

- Maintain proper pacing (long/short sentences, varied vocabulary)

Ignore writing style till the end

- Once you have a first draft - go back and fix the writing style.

Voice

- Voice – mostly 3rd person (objective)- ‘The results from the peer observer showed that...’
- Sometimes first person (subjective) when writing about personal reflection ‘I noted in my ARC reflection that the children...’

Language for audience and purpose

Academic writing does not need to be complicated but it is formal.

- Avoid contractions (don't, can't etc)
- Use the full forms of words (Assessment for Learning)
- Avoid informal words or phrases – taken on board

Clear and Concise

Don't try too hard – write simply and cleanly.

‘Following Lesson 1, the evaluative discussions sought to identify the areas needed to be adapted for Lesson 2.’

Clumsy and clunky

Precise and specific

‘Following Lesson 1, the peer discussion and evaluation identified that more open questions were needed for Lesson 2.’

Illustrate with concrete examples

You must support your points with specific, concrete examples.

‘One major criticism of guided reading (Ofsted 2004) is that it becomes little more than children taking a turn to read aloud in a group. I observed this in a Year 2 classroom and noted that pupil input ‘out of turn’ was rare and the opportunity for dialogic book talk was lost.’

Tentative Language

You are trying to present an objective argument so use cautious language.

Avoid: *most important, extremely significant, correct.*

Try: *suggests, seems, appears, could be.*

Choose the right vocabulary

- You would be amazed at how many students choose the wrong word to convey meaning.
- If in doubt go for simple but formal.
- Don't try too hard!

Never stereotype or offend

- Don't use comedy.
- Don't directly address the reader.
- Don't refer to 'the SEN/ALN/EAL children' but children with additional learning needs.
- Use attainment or skill-level, not ability.

Comma splicing

This is the most common mistake when using the comma.

Two independent clauses are joined with a comma.

This is wrong.

Examples of comma splicing

- I always find writing essays difficult, I usually leave them to the last minute.
- Lesson study is a useful tool, it identifies areas to improve.
- The children were engaged in the activity, the peer observer noted the times.

Don't throw away marks

- Spelling – check UK and not US
- Grammar – clarity of expression
- Punctuation – the apostrophe
- Vocabulary – right word and varied words
- Accuracy rather than complication.

Referencing

You cannot present other people's ideas as if they were your own.

Be careful.

Ignorance is no defence.

Introduction: Second last action

- This is the most important part of your assignment. It sets out the rationale for the work.
- A two-paragraph introduction provides scope for setting out your plan. One is fine as well.
- First key sentence is an introductory sentence. It signals the argument to the reader.

Introduction

- After the first key sentence there are a number of lines of elaboration from the first sentence.
- After the elaboration the writer sets out the plan.
- The last key sentence is the final sentence of the introduction which sets up the reader's anticipation.

(Dr Catriona Ryan)

End of the introduction: invite the reader in.

This special issue puts the spotlight on writing. It covers the full range of development of writing from very young children learning about writing together with their parents to young adults writing at university. Several different aspects of writing are considered.

(Myhill and Fisher 2010)

Finally Track Back

- This is where you check the relevancy of your argument throughout.
- It is mind-mapping in reverse.
- Can you narrow the argument back to one line?
- Re-draw map.
- Check the paragraphs. Do each represent a different angle on the argument?

Build the assignment structure

Key introductory
sentence

Some explanatory sentences

Invite the
reader.



Introduction

Build the assignment structure

Topic sentence
Link to previous
Signal

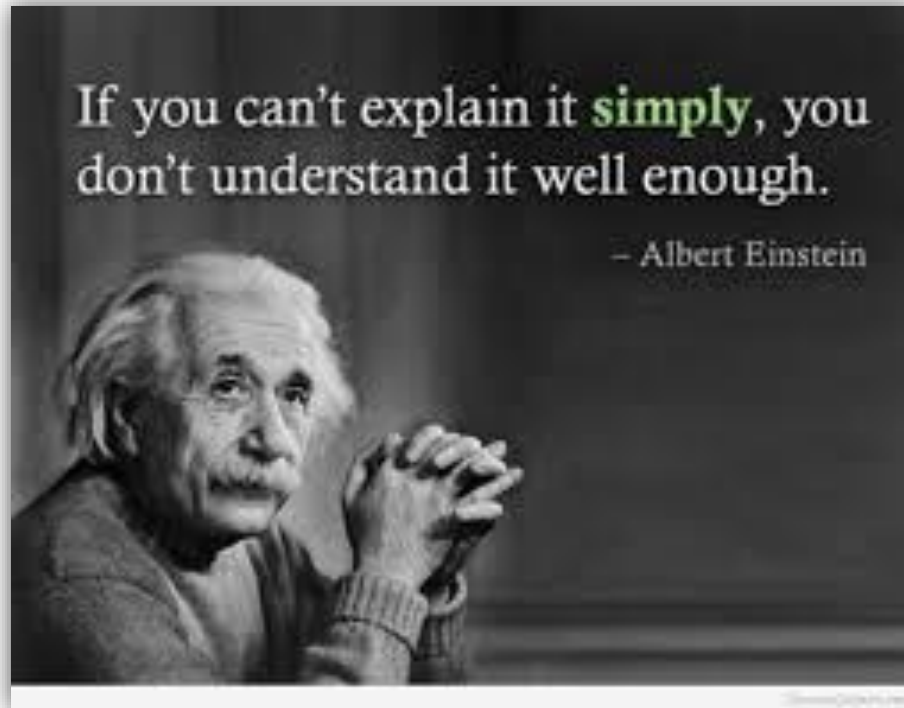
Sentences which develop and
explore the argument

Concluding
sentence



Sub-topic Paragraph

Remember



Consider

- **Today weak literacy is a real problem in Wales. This is a disgrace and needs to be improved. About 40% of children can't read when they get to secondary school and this is something we must focus on as a priority. In this day and age, shouldn't we be able to make sure that each child has the skills they need when they reach secondary school?**
- It is not clear here if the student is expression their own view or reporting evidence found in a text.
- What about the tone?

Consider instead...

- The results of the 2009 and 2012 PISA assessments (NfER 2010, 2013) of reading literacy suggested that these skills needed to be a focus of improvement in Wales. This need was identified further in the ESTYN overview report (2012), which found that 40% of pupils arriving in secondary school have reading skills below those expected for their chronological age.
- What has changed?

- Vygotsky and Piaget are examples of constructivist theorists. Vygotsky quotes in his book 'Language and Thought' (2010) 'what the child can do together today they can do alone tomorrow'. (Vygotsky 2010). This is an important fact to bear in mind when planning a lesson. Bruner (1986) is another constructivist. He thought that children learn best when the teacher creates a good learning environment. Bruner was a psychologist who, when he was at Harvard, wrote many books and papers that focus on how children learn through solving problems in the classroom. Bruner wanted to create an educational environment that would focus on (1) what was uniquely human about human beings, (2) how humans got that way and (3) how humans could become more so. In 1966, Bruner published another book relevant to education, *Towards a Theory of Instruction*, and then in 1973, another book, *The Relevance of Education*. Finally, in 1996, in *The Culture of Education*, Bruner reassessed the state of educational practices three decades after he had begun his educational research and...

- Vygotsky and Piaget (citation?) are examples of constructivist theorists. So? This needs to be expanded and made relevant to your assignment. Vygotsky quotes no he doesn't. You are quoting him. Choose another word - states, asserts, suggests...in his book 'Language and Thought' (2010) this is not needed, just the date of publication 'what the child can do together today they can do alone tomorrow'. The full stop is not needed here but a page number is (Vygotsky 2010, p.38). This is an important fact is it a 'fact'? to bear in mind when planning a lesson why? How? Did it inform your own planning? In what way?

- Bruner (1986) is another constructivist *is he the same as Vygotsky? Piaget?. Why is he being discussed?* He thought that children learn best when the teacher creates a good learning environment. *what does this mean?* Bruner was a psychologist who, when he was at Harvard, wrote many books and papers that focus on how children learn through solving problems in the classroom. *Do you go on to explore problem based learning? Is this a focus for your lesson?* Bruner wanted to create an educational environment that would focus on (1) what was uniquely human about human beings, (2) how humans got that way and (3) how humans could become more so. In 1966, Bruner published another book relevant to education, *Towards a Theory of Instruction*, and then in 1973, another book, *The Relevance of Education*. *This is simple description/recall.* Finally, in 1996, in *The Culture of Education*, Bruner reassessed the state of educational practices three decades after he had begun his educational research *This sort of biographical detail is not generally useful. Also, this follows the Wikipedia page for Bruner almost exactly.*

Getting down to it...

- Plan for your writing. You might want to use a visual diagram or plan; you might want to write a series of topic sentences and grow your writing from there.
- Plan your time to allow you to write regularly. Get into the habit of setting aside time for your writing.
- Set yourself a timetable for your writing, taking into account other factors that will draw upon your time –be realistic.
- Give yourself time to reread and edit your work.

Getting down to it...

- You needn't start at the very beginning –you might write the literature review first, for example, or leave your introduction until last.
- Consider where and when you write best.
- Take breaks, a breath of fresh air, a chat with friends, but make sure you set times and keep to these for when you plan to re-start writing

Make it easy on yourself

- Keep the assignment in mind at all stages –what are you asked to do? What is your focus?
- Make sure your plan keeps your writing relevant to the question.
- Consider the resources you might draw upon to help you –readings, peers, tutors etc.
- Look at your feedback and use it to improve your work.
- Make sure that you are clear and concise in your writing and structure your assignment in a logical way.
- Reference accurately.

References

Pinker, S. (2014). *The Thinking Person's Guide to Writing in the 21st Century*. London:Penguin

Myhill, D. A.,and Fisher, R. (2010) 'Writing development: cognitive, sociocultural and linguistic perspectives', *Journal of Research in Reading* , Volume 33, Issue 1, pp1-3.

Writing a Journal Article presentation given by Dr Catriona Ryan at UWTSD 2015