Assessment Series No.4

Assessment: A Guide for Students

Phil Race

LTSN Generic Centre
Assessment: A Guide for Students
November 2001

Professor Phil Race currently works part-time at the University of Leeds, and spends the rest of his time running staff development workshops in the UK and abroad on teaching, learning and assessment methods. His recent publications include 'The Lecturer's Toolkit (2nd Edition)' (Kogan Page, London, 2001), and '2000 Tips for Lecturers' (Kogan Page, 1999). He also works with students on study-skills development, and has published 'How to Get a Good Degree' and 'How to Win as a Final Year Student' with Open University Press (1999 and 2000 respectively). He is an ILT Member, elected Council Member, and Accreditor.

Contents

Generic Centre Guides and Briefings

Welcome to the Learning and Teaching Support Network Generic Centre's series of Assessment Guides and Briefings. They aim to provide a series of overviews of important issues and practices in the field of assessment for the higher education community.

The Assessment Guides are intended for colleagues with particular roles and for students, as their titles suggest. The Briefings are primarily intended for lecturers and other staff involved in supporting learning.

The Assessment Series is a snapshot of a field in which development is likely to be rapid, and will be supplemented by specific case studies produced by the LTSN Subject Centres.

The series was developed by Brenda Smith and Richard Blackwell of the LTSN Generic Centre with the support of Professor Mantz Yorke. Experts in the field were commissioned for each title to ensure that the series would be authoritative. Authors were invited to approach the issue in their own way and no attempt was made to impose a uniform template.

The series editors are grateful to colleagues in LTSN Subject Centres and other senior colleagues who refereed the series, and of course to the authors for enabling its publication.

We hope that you will enjoy the Assessment Series and find it interesting and thought provoking. We welcome your feedback and any suggestions you may have for future work in the area of assessment.

Professor Brenda Smith
Head, LTSN Generic Centre

Richard Blackwell, Senior Adviser,
LTSN Generic Centre

Professor Mantz Yorke,
Liverpool John Moores University

November 2001

Introduction

How important is assessment?

In a nutshell, it's the most important thing that happens to you in higher education. You're there to learn, they keep telling you, but however much you learn (or don't learn) it's what you're found to have learned which counts. Actually, it's not quite as simple as that. It's how well you can show what you've learned which counts. Nor is it as simple as that! It's how well you can get your act together, in the right ways, at the right times and in the right places, to show what you can do with what you've learned that counts. The message is straightforward enough: you've got to get your act together to do yourself full justice in as many assessment contexts as possible. Even better, you've got to try to make sure that your assessed work does more than do you justice! In other words, you've got to be ready and able to put your best foot forward on demand, repeatedly, and without falling over! This guide aims to help you to do all this.

How do you feel about assessment?

Some students seem to sail through all their assessments without turning a hair. If you're such a student, you probably don't need to read this guide! You're probably one of the normal students who has some quite strong feelings and emotions when assessment is in the air. All of these emotions are natural, intelligent responses to something important going on. Some of the more frightening emotions include:

• fear, anything from mild anxiety or tension to blind terror or panic;

• vulnerability, feeling exposed (or about to be exposed) to discomfort, failure or even ridicule;

• inadequacy, feeling that you're just not ready for all of this - not yet, anyway;

• frustration, feeling that you could always have done better (and we all always could have);

• pressure, so much to do, so little time left to do it in (however early you started).

There are also more positive emotions and feelings going on, including:

• excitement, wanting to respond to the challenge;

• adrenaline, energy, eagerness to compete and win;

• comradeship, being in the same boat as many of the people you know, battling against the same odds;

• roller-coasting, everything moving so fast;

• expectation of better things to come, most assessments are gateways to further opportunities.

For most, the feelings are a mixture of positive and negative ones – but they are usually strong feelings. Strong feelings often arise when people feel that the circumstances around them are out of their control. Some of the circumstances linked to your assessment are completely beyond your personal control – but there are many other factors, including how you approach assessments, that are within your control. To be able to do this, you need to know more about how assessment works in higher education, not just how it feels to be on the receiving end of it (which you already know very well). This Guide is to help you to see how assessment works, so that you can adjust your approaches and tactics to give each assessment opportunity your best shot – and keep your mental balance at the same time. Some of the fears and negative emotions are more to do with 'the great unknown' that assessment sometimes seems to students. This guide is to help you find out about the mysteries of assessment, so that you know the game better, and can therefore play it more successfully, and with less anxiety.

Assessment Issues

Since assessment is just about the most important thing that happens to you at university, it's not surprising that there are considerable pressures on institutions to make assessment work well. The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) has a Code of Practice which includes a section on assessment. Indeed, there are several sections of the Code of Practice, relating to many aspects of your experience at university. Universities are judged on how well they design and implement the assessment you experience. Educational provision in each subject area is reviewed from time to time, by staff from other universities who visit your university, and decide how well your university's processes and systems are working. One of the main areas of such reviews is 'Teaching, Learning and Assessment', and it is the assessment that is seen as the most important part of this area of review.

It helps you to know about how assessment should be. In particular, your assessment should be valid, reliable and transparent. But what do these words mean? What do they mean for you?

Valid assessment

This means that assessment should measure exactly what is intended to be measured. For example, exams should not just be measuring your exam technique, but should be measuring how well you have got to grips with your subject material. Marks allocated for practical work should not just be measuring how well you write up your reports, but should be related to how well you go about the practical work itself. Marks for coursework should not just be measuring how well you structure your essays or assignments, but should be linked to how well you go about tackling your coursework. As discussed later in this guide, your syllabus is expected to be expressed in terms of 'intended learning outcomes'. For each part of your studies, you are supposed to be able to know exactly what you could be expected to do to show that you've mastered your learning. How valid your assessment is, is judged at least partly by how well the assessment matches the published learning outcomes for your course or module.

Reliable assessment

It should not matter who marks your work, whether it's essays, reports, exam scripts, or anything else. Often there are several different lecturers assessing in parallel, and whoever happens to mark your work is expected to give the same mark as could have been given by anyone else marking it. This is called 'inter-tutor reliability'. When the assessment provision of your university is reviewed by the Quality Assurance Agency, the reviewers take a close look at such reliability, and seek to ensure that assessment is fair, reliable and consistent. They even look for 'intra-tutor reliability', checking that each assessor is consistent from day to day, and doesn't have 'off-days' or 'easy-days'.

Transparent assessment

This is about making everything clear to you. Assessment is required to be as transparent as possible. Among other things, this includes:

• Making sure that the assessment criteria are clear. You are supposed to know what is being looked for in each element of your assessment. You should not have to resort to guessing what's in the minds of the lecturers who assess your work. They are supposed to be using clear criteria to apply to your work, and they're supposed to make sure that you know exactly what these criteria mean. That doesn't mean, of course, that they're supposed to tell you the answers in advance – just the rules.

• Making sure that the rules of the game are clear. This includes letting you know what the balance is between exams and coursework assessment, and what the regulations are about what you can do if you fail a particular element of assessment, and what you can do if you think that you have 'mitigating circumstances' which could have caused you not to do as well as would have been expected in a particular element of your assessment. Such circumstances could include illness (injury, or a bad bout of hay fever, or a viral infection, and so on), family circumstances (illness of a close relative, bereavement, or serious difficulties in a relationship), and so on. Obviously, if there are circumstances, which could affect your performance in any element of assessment, it's really important to get these circumstances logged and witnessed officially as soon as they happen. It's no use waiting till an assessment goes wrong, then deciding that you weren't at your best on the day concerned.

Why am I assessed?

Well, to be honest, it's not *you* that's assessed, it's your *work* that's assessed. However, it often feels as if it's you that's being assessed – there are times where assessing one's performances is close to assessing one's very being.
There are many reasons why assessment is part of the life of every university student. These include:

• Employers want to know how good you are (or how good what you do is) to help them to decide whom to appoint.

• In some countries, including the UK at least at present, university degrees vary in name and standard, and society expects that your qualification should be indicative of the level that you reached while studying for it. There are 'Honours' degrees, which tend to be more advanced, and/or more specialised. 'Honours' degrees are awarded with several classifications – first-class (the best), two-ones (2:1, or upper-second class degrees – the next best), two-twos (2;2, or lower second class degrees – not quite so good), third-class (3rds – lower still). And there are 'Ordinary' degrees, which aren't regarded by most employers quite as highly as Honours degrees. And 'Pass' degrees, where candidates' work is only a little over the pass mark.

• Lecturers regard it as part of their job to ensure that their assessments divide the most successful students from the less successful ones.

• Students themselves are competitive (along with most human beings): if you work really hard and really well, you want to be rewarded above those fellow-students who don't work so hard or so well.

• Other people expect you to prove how good you are. Such people tend to be a nuisance in this respect, and often include parents, other relatives, your former schoolteachers, not to mention the friends of yours that have already got themselves qualified.

Who assesses you?

Don't forget, they're not actually supposed to be assessing *you* – they're supposed to be assessing your *work*, your *performance*, your*evidence*. That doesn't stop it feeling as though it's you that's being assessed, of course. It's worth being quite strategic about being assessed. You know yourself that you really want to do 'deep' learning rather than 'surface' learning, but when it comes to assessment you need to make sure that you are rewarded for the efforts you put in. Being strategic regarding assessment is an intelligent response to the various assessment situations you will find yourself confronted with. There are countless types of people doing the assessing, but it's useful to break them down into two broad categories – those you know, and those you don't know.

Those you know: most of your assessment will be designed and done by your lecturers. These are people you see face-to-face, whether in large classes, small tutorials, or one-to-one in personal tutorials, laboratories, corridors, anywhere. Every contact with them can give you clues as to how their minds work. The more you can piece together about how their minds work, the less they will surprise you when it comes to assessments. Use your psychological skills to get into their ways of thinking, and to find out what their preferences are when it comes to answering their questions, especially in writing, in exams, in essays, and in any other kinds of assessment they design. Even if you don't *like* how their minds work, it's worth humouring them in the assessments they set. It's their game, after all. They make the rules – they set the tasks and questions. You need to play their game, and play it well. This means that you can be playing several different games for several different lecturers. But that's life, after all – people are different, and it would be a boring world if we were all the same.

Those you don't know: sometimes you're up against assessment set by people you never see. This is true of public exams, and you've probably done your share of these already. Then, you need to be on-side with your teachers, so that you can tune in as well as you can to the agenda that's likely to be presented by the assessments you're preparing for.

Who else can assess you?

Although most assessment is done by lecturers, it is getting increasingly accepted that there are benefits for all concerned to involve students in some elements of their assessment. The biggest advantage for you of this is that if you're involved in self-assessment or peer assessment, you find out a lot more about how assessment works in general. This means that you get better both at preparing coursework for normal tutor assessment, and getting ready for tutor-marked exams. Please read on for more detail about self- and peer-assessment, especially if you're already involved in these, or know they will be coming up on your course.

What about self-assessment?

Many universities give students at least a little opportunity for self-assessment. This is where *you* mark your own work, making judgements about what you've done armed with the same sorts of marking scheme and assessment criteria that your assessors will use when they mark your coursework or exam answers. What's to stop you giving yourself top marks when you're self-assessing? Usually, there is some form of 'moderation', where your normal assessors will look over your self-assessment, to check that you've been fair on yourself. In practice, students are often over critical of their own work when self-assessing.

You can, of course, *choose* to do a lot of self assessment whether or not there is any official self-assessment in your course. That's where the intended learning outcomes can be really useful to you. You can use them as a checklist, finding out on a regular, on-going basis how well you are matching up to them. You can also set yourself tasks based on the intended learning outcomes, and find out for yourself which areas may need some additional investment of your time and energy to bring you up to scratch, long before any formal assessment measures whether you've got there. You can usually get hold of past exam papers, and check out how well you're getting up to speed at answering questions. Try your library or learning resources centre for past exam papers, or ask your lecturers where in your institution they are made available to students. It's useful for you to check for yourself the match between old exam questions and intended learning outcomes, so that you find out more and more about the likely ways in which the outcomes will be tested on your own course now.

The real benefit of self-assessment is that you learn more deeply. The acts of *measuring* what you've done, and *applying* assessment criteria to your work, and *making judgements* about the quality of your work all combine to help you to understand it a lot better, and to *remember* it more permanently. All of this shows in exams, where the parts where you've done a lot of selfassessment are likely to be the parts where you score most marks. And don't forget, you can do as much self-assessment as you choose to do – it's up to you how much.

What about peer-assessment?

This is where students assess each others' work. It is getting increasingly common for at least some elements of coursework to involve some peer-assessment. For example, many universities encourage an element of peer assessment for presentations you may make to the rest of the class, or to a seminar or tutorial group. Sometimes such presentations may be made 'solo'. Alternatively, you may find yourself part of a small group of two, three or four students, doing some work jointly, them making a group presentation which is assessed by those watching it, including fellow students, and possibly lecturers too.

Peer-assessment has all the benefits to you of self-assessment – learning more deeply as you apply assessment criteria to other students' work, and finding out more about the assessment culture in general, so that you know better how your tutors' minds work when they're assessing your coursework or exam answers. But there's even more to be gained through peer-assessment: feedback from fellow students on your work. You may be surprised how valuable this feedback can be. For a start, fellow-students are likely to have more time than busy lecturers to give you feedback. And quite often, fellow-students can be even better at explaining things to you than your lecturers! And even more important, when you give feedback to fellow students and explain things to them, guess who's learning most? You! The act of explaining something to someone is one of the best possible ways of really learning it, and the explainer benefits even more than the person to whom it's explained. Try it, if you haven't already found this.

What is assessed?

All sorts of things are assessed. What is *intended* to be assessed is the extent to which you have mastered the syllabus of each course or module you take. The syllabus is usually available to you in course or module handbooks, and is often summarised in other documentation, such as the university Prospectus. However, it's the fine detail contained in handbooks that provides you with the best descriptions of your assessment agenda.

Most institutions now express syllabus content in terms of aims and intended learning outcomes. Aims give you the broad picture, but don't really tell you much about the detail of your assessment. An 'aim' for this guide could be phrased as follows:

"to help students to find out how assessment works in universities, so that they can prepare themselves successfully for assessment".

That gives you the flavour of this guide, but much more detail could be presented in 'intended learning outcomes' as follows:

"When you've worked through this guide, and put into practice the suggestions offered, you should be able to:

• explain how assessment in universities needs to be valid, reliable and transparent, and fine-tune your own approaches to being assessed to the assessment culture in higher education;

• explore a range of assessment formats, and use those which you meet to your best advantage, to give an optimum picture of the quality of your learning;

• identify and overcome any significant weaknesses you may have regarding your strategy for preparing for assessment;

• become better at managing your time and energy while being assessed in exams, and other forms of assessment".

As you can see from the learning outcomes listed above, it is the outcomes rather than the aims that allow you to find out about the targets for your learning. Most course or module handbooks list intended outcomes in some detail, and many of your lecturers will give further information about exactly what these outcomes actually mean, regarding the standards you are expected to measure up to in assessment. The Quality Assurance Agency requires that universities make a good match between learning outcomes and assessment criteria. In other words, the assessments you meet should all relate to the intended learning outcomes. There should be nothing in the assessment agenda, which wasn't mentioned in the outcomes. There should be no nasty surprises, if you've got yourself really familiar with the intended learning outcomes, and are prepared to demonstrate your achievement of these outcomes. Of course, if you *don't* get to know the intended outcomes, there could be nasty surprises for you. Conversely, anything that is described in the learning outcomes can be regarded as fair game for assessment in some form. This does not mean that *everything* in the intended outcomes is likely to be assessed every year, but it is expected that the various forms of assessment will be spread fairly evenly across the intended learning outcomes.

What kinds of assessment may I meet?

Some will be familiar. You'll already have met such assessment formats as essays, exams, and reports. However, in higher education there are a great many varieties of assessment. It varies a lot from one institution to another. It varies a lot from one subject discipline to another. It can vary from one year of a course to another. It can even vary quite a lot from one lecturer to another – they often have their own individual ways of going about designing assessment.

Some of the assessment formats are described below, with their full technical terms, and a few extra words to explain the differences between them. Let's start with exams.

The table, which follows, shows a range of different types of exam. In the left-hand column is the full name for the examination type. In the second column is what this really means. In the next column of the table are some notes about what this type of exam really measures (often, or usually – there are exceptions) – you may find that these notes help you to start planning how to prepare for them. Finally, in the right-hand column are just a few 'top tips' for handling that particular kind of assessment. However, some of the tips are common to several of the types of exams, so the ones shown in the table tend to be the ones that specifically relate to each kind of exam in turn.

However, it's more complex than just 'types of exam'. In many of the types of exam, there are different possibilities about types of questions. We can't look at all of this at once, so we'll look at types of exam first, then go on to different sorts of questions. The table continues with a summary, in the same format, of the principle kinds of questions and tasks, such as essays, reports, and so on.

Type of assessment (academic terminology!)	What this means (in real English!)	What this kind of assessment really measures (often)	Top tips…
Unseen time-constrained written examination	Normal exam, against the clock, where you don't know the questions in advance.	Keeping your cool, memory, speed of writing, speed of thinking, how well you structure your answers, how well you set out your answers, and (most importantly) how practised you are at answering exam questions.	• Practise answering exam questions – that's what you need to do in the real thing. • Don't practise writing out your answers too much, takes too much time – speak them, sketch them, even *think* them (but don't kid yourself that this automatically means you can write them when needed).
Unseen written examination (time-unconstrained)	Similar to the above, but not against the clock (some leeway, at least, in time allowed).	Most of the things above are still measured, but less emphasis on speed of writing and speed of thinking.	• Practise timed answers now and then, so you know how much you can safely leave till the 'extra time' in such exams (they won't let you go on forever!).
Seen timeconstrained written examinations	Exams against the clock, but where you know the questions in advance.	How well you've prepared to be able to answer the known questions; how well you remember your preparations; speed of writing. There's less emphasis on speed of thinking (you should have done most of the thinking beforehand). This kind of exam also measures how well you structure your answers and how well you set out your answers.	Make summaries of all the things which need to go into a 'good' answer to each question. Practise stitching together good answers so that you know you can finish off each answer well in the time available to you for each. Leave yourself some 'extra time' for editing, polishing, correcting, inserting second thoughts, and so on at the end of the exam – this extra time can earn you more marks than you may imagine.

Open book exams	Exams where you can take in your own notes, sometimes with a limit of how many pages you can take in. It's like 'legalised crib notes'.	How well you make your 'open notes' in the first place – your skills at summarising the most important and useful information or data. Open notes exams also measure how quickly you can find and retrieve important material from your own notes.	Stick to what's important, don't fill your 'open notes' with useless detail. Don't write in tiny writing, which will be hard to read in the exam (even though you might be able to put more onto a given number of pages).
Multiple choice exams	Paper-based (or these days more usually computerbased) exams which ask you to pick the right (or best) option from typically four options. There are usually many many questions, but you don't have to write anything, just pick options.	Decision-making skills, spotting the right (or best) option from a range; your speed of making decisions – these exams can cover vast tracts of syllabus! Multiple-choice exams also measure your breadth of knowledge of your syllabus, and how often you've practised doing multiple-choice tests and exams.	Get practising – make your own multiple choice questions continuously as you revise, and test yourself with them. Join in with other students on the above, and test each other. Develop your skills at working back to the best option by working out what's wrong with all the other ones.
In-tray exams	Exams where you find a case-load of information on your desk, but no questions (yet!). After a while, a question is given out, you answer it, then there's another, and so on.	Speed of working through a pile of information, and finding what's relevant and what's not. In-tray exams also measure your speed of applying the most relevant information to solve problems or answer questions, and to some extent, your speed of scan-reading – working out and keeping track of exactly what information and data is there in the pile.	Get skilled at sorting out a pile of case-study data in limited time. If allowed, use post-it notes to help you keep tabs on the more important information you'll need to find again quickly. Just answer each question – don't overdo justifying your answers – there will be another question soon enough.

Type of assessment (academic terminology!)	What this means (in real English!)	What this kind of assessment really measures (often)	Top tips…
Oral exams – 'vivas' from 'viva voce' – live voice	Face-to-face interviews with one (or usually more) of your lecturers. Usually after your written exams, and often following up aspects of your exam performance. Sometimes used to investigate borderline candidates on degree classifications.	Your ability to respond face-to-face to unknown questions, and your quick thinking about difficult concepts or theories. Oral exams also can be used to test out whether or not your written exam performance was justified, or was a fluke! They are also a test of your confidence – they can be quite stressful if you're not used to them, but are very good practice for developing your interview techniques.	Practice makes perfect! If you can get some friends to work with you, it can make a huge difference to grill each other about your understanding of the questions you've all already tackled in written exams. Think back to those exam questions you flunked on, and be prepared to explain exactly what you did wrong. Be prepared to respond to new questions. All borderline candidates may be being asked the same questions. Your response may move you up a degree classification.
Other kinds of assessment Next, think about the different kinds of questions and tasks you could be asked to do. Some of these will be set under exam conditions. Others will be 'under your own steam' but usually with quite strict hand-in dates to be observed. Take these seriously!			
Essays	Writing out an answer in your own way, sometimes with a word limit, and sometimes (in exams) a time limit.	Essays tend to measure your ability to organize your thinking, and communicate your organised thoughts in writing. They also test your skills at making essay plans, and your skills at making a good first impression and reaching a robust conclusion or decision. And, when wordprocessing is not allowed or possible, essays measure to some extent the quality and speed of your handwriting.	Get up to speed making essay plans – plan 7 essays for every one you actually write – it only takes a short time to plan an essay, but you do a lot of useful thinking in the process. Make a good first impression – there's no second chance to do this – make the introduction good! Keep to the topic or brief – anything else loses marks and annoys assessors! Come to a real conclusion – don't just stop in mid flow. Make a good last impression – your assessor is just about to decide your grade!

Reports	There are many kinds of reports – laboratory ones, field-trip ones, business ones, and so on – each has its own conventions and preferred formats – find out about these.	Assessed reports measure your skills at finding out about, and adhering to, the expected report formats and conventions in your subject discipline. They also measure your ability to put forward an organised piece of writing, coming to conclusions, making suggestions for further work, and so on.	They often test your skills at interpreting data, making sense of your findings, and so on. Reports are usually set as coursework – don't build up a backlog of them. Do them straightaway, while what you did is fresh in your mind – it's quicker that way. Learn from each bit of feedback you get from your assessors – that's how you can tune in to the conventions and expected formats in your subjects' particular kinds of reports.
Calculations and problems	Usually given in sets – with a deadline for tutor marking, or to bring along completed to a tutorial.	These tend to measure (surprise?) your ability to solve problems and do calculations – this is in many ways the least complex form of assessment – and one of the most 'valid' (and reliable to mark).	Do them as soon as you're given them. That way if there's a tricky one, you'll have time to sort it out. Make yourself similar ones to practise on – coursework problems or calculations often appear again in exams: get your speed up with practice.
Presentations	Occasions where you give a solo or group talk to some or all of your class, usually with the tutor present. Sometimes peer assessment is used.	Presentations measure your ability to talk fluently about a topic, and to answer questions from the group. They also measure your skills at preparing visual aids (overheads, handouts, PowerPoint presentations) to support your presentation.	Rehearse and practise: if it's your first presentation, get really used to hearing yourself do it. Get feedback from friends, family – anyone prepared to watch you practise it. Get your timing right – this is more important than you might think!

Type of assessment (academic terminology!)	What this means (in real English!)	What this kind of assessment really measures (often)	Top tips…
Portfolios	An increasingly popular kind of assessment: a collection of all sorts of evidence of your work (often including others' testimony about your work, and feedback you've collected).	Portfolios are intended to be a measure of the work of the 'whole candidate', rather than just particular aspects of the candidate's work. They also measure your ability to *organise* a collection of evidence, in a readable, navigable way. Not least, they test your ability to stick to deadlines with a big, multifaceted job.	Organise your collection of evidence really well – good index, contents pages, and so on. Get well ahead of the timescale you're allowed; this allows you to polish and edit your portfolio while everyone else is scurrying around writing theirs. Make sure that the bibliography is really good: stick rigidly to referencing conventions.
Dissertations	An extended piece of written work, often the write-up of a final-year project.	Dissertations measure your ability to write-up research findings, and demonstrate good research method skills. They also measure your ability to review the related literature, and link your findings into this. They test your ability to set out with a well-defined quest, and bring it to a solid conclusion or verdict.	Get as much feedback as you can, all the way, from your supervisor and any one else who will help you. Do it with fellow students: form a self-help circle, and give each other feedback about dissertations in progress – forget competing, collaborate to your mutual success. Be well ahead of your allotted timescale – keep room for editing and improving.

Theses	A bit like a big dissertation, but usually with higher degree overtones, masters or doctorate.	Writing a thesis tests your ability to undertake a coherent piece of research, and write it up in a scholarly manner. Theses also measure your ability to make a scholarly review of the related literature – this counts a lot in most theses. They also test your attention to detail, cross-referencing, and referencing to the established literature. Not least, they test your skill at coming to a firm conclusion, decision, verdict, analysis, or whatever the research question set out to achieve.	Start writing bits of draft material as soon as you have anything to write about. Writing up the final version always takes longer than people imagine – get off to a good start with this. Get all the feedback you can on draft material. Even someone just checking the grammar and spelling is extremely useful. Don't be defensive when getting critical feedback – the more you get, the better you can make the thesis.

Other kinds of assessment…

The assessment formats listed in this table are just a start. They include the most common ones overall, but most subjects have their own further agendas. For example, you could be assessed on performances, projects, posters, case-study design, or on artefacts which you may make such as models, sculptures, paintings, exhibitions, castings, prototypes, and so on. There is not room in this Guide to go through all of these in the same way as has been done above. However, you can do this for yourself. For any further kinds of assessment you know you will meet, use the format of this table to work out 'what it really is', and 'what is really being measured' and 'top tips' for yourself.

Managing your exams

For most students, time-constrained unseen written exams are still the commonest form of final assessment on university courses or modules. Such exams (along with any other forms of assessment you meet) are intended to measure how well you've got a grip on what you've learned on your course or module. In other words, they're intended to be a good measure of the level to which you've achieved the intended learning outcomes of your course. However, you will already know, from your own experience of exams, that exams measure several other things, including:

• how well you keep your cool during the exam;

• how well you manage your time during the exam;

• how well you edit and improve your own answers during the final minutes of the exam (and it's worth saving up to a third of the total time for editing and improving your answers);

• how well you read the questions, and stick exactly to the questions in your answers;

• how practised you are at answering exam questions against the clock.

Even when you've learned your subject matter really well, exam technique plays a significant part in getting you the marks you deserve. The suggestions which follow are all just plain common sense, but all of them can save stress and earn more marks, so check through them in case there's something you can do to improve your own approach to exams.

Preparing for an exam

Don't try to cover the whole syllabus during the last day or two leading up to an exam. You'll tire yourself out too much if you go over too much material that close to the exam. You need to save energy for the exam itself; it's no use being infinitely knowledgeable, but too tired to write any of it down sensibly! Concentrate on polishing up the most important parts during that last day or two. Work with what you know, don't go looking for what you don't yet know. It's too late to be discovering what you don't yet know – that could lead to panic feelings. Get in some practice at the important areas once more. This adds to your speed in answering the exam questions, and builds your confidence.

When you see the question paper

Take your time to read it really well. When you've got a choice of questions, it makes a big difference choosing the *best* questions for you. You can't choose the best questions unless you read all of the questions well enough to decide which ones you're going to give your best shot. Tackle your strongest questions first but be careful not to spend too much time on them, at the expense of other questions. Don't join the many candidates who end up making a false start on question 5, then find that question 3 is much better for them. Such false starts are not fatal, but they're inconvenient and waste valuable time and energy. Far better to spend that bit of extra time making the best decision in the first place.

When you get stuck

Go on to something you're not stuck with! If you keep trying to remember the fact or figure that's eluding you, you risk going into a mental blank. Human brains don't respond to their owners' attempts to force them to do anything. If you feel yourself getting strung up about a part of a question you're struggling with, leave it for a while, and do another question that's not such a struggle. You'll still be clocking up marks. Most often, after a while, the thing you were searching for will pop back into your conscious mind, and you can then jot it down quickly, and resume where you left off with the earlier question.

Editing and polishing

This can gain you more marks than you might imagine! If you leave, say, 20 minutes for editing and polishing towards the end of a 3-hour exam, the extra marks you gain could be worth 25%! That's more than the difference between a 1st-class degree and a much less distinguished one!

How can you possibly get so many marks in 20 minutes?

• By putting down your second thoughts. It could be two hours or more since you wrote down your first thoughts for your first question. Meanwhile, even subconsciously, your brain will have been working away at the question. When you return to what you actually wrote two hours ago, you could be surprised at how much more is now in your head than was then. Some of this 'extra' will be well worth slipping in to your original answer.

• By spotting where what you wrote wasn't what you really meant. Even if you'd read it again immediately after writing it, you wouldn't have spotted as much as you can a little while later. We all do this, but putting it right can make several marks worth of difference.

• By just tidying up your answers, and rounding off your conclusions, and checking once again that your introductions are good ones.

Plagiarism and cheating

The short answer – don't do it!
Cheating is relatively easy to define – for example, taking unauthorised material into exam rooms, or copying someone else's coursework, or even copying in an exam room. Students who are proved to have cheated are usually treated very severely, as a deterrent to others. They may, for example, be expelled from the institution, or at the very least may have the whole 'diet' of examinations declared null and void, and have to take them all again, at their own expense, a year later. However, very few students actually cheat. It's usually relatively straightforward to prove whether or not someone suspected of cheating did actually cheat. A short viva (oral exam, or face-to-face interview) where the suspect is questioned about the work concerned usually reveals quite clearly whether or not an offence did occur.

Plagiarism is harder to define. It overlaps with cheating, but sometimes the boundaries are unclear. Plagiarism is about using other people's ideas or words *without due acknowledgement.* For example, in essays where you quote from someone else's work, you need to make due reference to this. For example:

A further explanation was proposed by Smith and Jones (2001) as follows: "the cat sat on the mat because that was what the cat believed would lead to the supply of more cat food in due course".
However, it can be argued that this view is diametrically opposed to the work of Felix (1999) who found that food was not as fundamental a driver to cat psychology as believed to be the case in human psychology.

Then in the list of references (bibliography) at the end of the essay, report, dissertation, or thesis, there needs to be the exact details of the work cited: for example

Felix, Arthur (1999) *Cats and cat people*
Heineken Press, Wigan, UK.

Smith, B and Jones, G (2001) Links
between felines and foodstuffs, *British*
Journal of Feline Studies, 5 224-8.

It's a firm rule of academic scholarship that other people's work must be acknowledged carefully and exactly. Most of the people assessing your essays, reports and so on are academic scholars in their own right, and are publishing their own research findings in academic journals or books, and are well aware of the rules regarding plagiarism. However, they sometimes don't make these rules crystal clear to students, so quite a lot of instances of plagiarism could be said to be accidental rather than deliberate. However, it is still a crime in academia.

A better definition of plagiarism is the intentional use of other people's words or ideas without due acknowledgement. But it is often quite hard to prove whether such occurrences are accidental or intentional, so there's the chance of being found 'guilty' even if the crime happened accidentally.

However, where does plagiarism stop? It can be argued that the incidence of really new ideas is relatively rare, and that most people's ideas are a product of things they have heard, read, and seen, often without even remembering where they first saw them, or whose ideas they were supposed to be in the first place.

There are instances where plagiarism and cheating merge. For example, if you've been working collaboratively with fellow-students on the planning of an essay or report, but your final individual version happens to contain, word-for-word, some of the same thoughts or conclusions, you could end up being accused of cheating, whereas in fact it might have been just the case that some of your early jottings had appeared word-for-word in your final submitted work. The moral is clear enough, however – when your work is going to be assessed as individual work, make sure that the final version of your thoughts are rearranged into words that are definitely your own. Don't let all this put you off talking to fellow-students about your studies. It might be safer being a complete hermit, but it's not very enjoyable to live your university life that way, and indeed you can learn a great deal from the students around you – and they from you – and that influences your assessment results positively rather than negatively.

Last words…

Remember you're measured on what you show, not just what you know. Getting credit for your skills and knowledge depends upon practising your technique, not just on preparing your brain. Everyone tends to be better at some forms of assessment than others, but everyone can improve their techniques with a bit of effort and practice.

A note for Lecturers

What's this for?

This is a guide written for students to help them to know how assessment works, and provide them with some practical pointers about how best they can tune themselves in to the main kinds of assessment they are likely to meet, and show themselves at their best. The guide aims to be user-friendly to your students, so that they feel it is 'on their side' helping them to develop their approaches. It aims to demystify assessment, so that students don't feel as if it is the 'great unknown', and can consciously work towards being ready for each different form of assessment they meet.

Most students have nowadays got a highly developed level of 'strategic' approaches to assessment, and it is these students that the material is aimed to help. There is nothing wrong with having a strategic approach to assessment. Perhaps the main target audience of the booklet is the many students whose assessment tactics are not yet sufficiently developed, and who might all too easily become victims of higher education assessment systems principally due to this lack of development.

How can you use it with your students?

There are several ways you can put this guide to work for your students, each with their pros and cons. They include:

• make copies of the whole thing available to your students, either on paper, or by placing it on your intranet or website;

• copy particular parts for your students, to meet giving circumstances, for example the paragraphs on self- and peer-assessment, or the advice on preparing for exams, or the table contrasting the main forms of assessment, and so on;

• issuing the whole document, or parts of it, and then running part of a class session live with your students, adding subject-specific suggestions to help them further develop their approaches in your own subject discipline;

• building the document into the reading for study-skills or key skills elements of your courses (or passing the document to other staff at your institution who run study-skills sessions for students).

How can *you* use it yourself?

You might find that the act of explaining assessment to students helps you to rethink your own approaches to designing and implementing assessment with students. For example, the suggestions to students in the guide about linking assessment to published intended learning outcomes might prompt you into thinking about how you, in your own teaching, can make the links between such outcomes and assessment criteria more specific and tangible. This in turn might help you if faced with the need to make such links specific in the context of QAA Subject Review.

Alternatively, the guide might be a useful resource for staff development sessions on the design of assessment in your own department, as a 'window' on students' perceptions of assessment, or as an aid to use alongside designing course or module handbooks for students.

Further Reading

Chambers, E. and Northedge, N. (1997) *The Arts Good Study Guide.*
Milton Keynes, UK: Open University Worldwide.
Specially tailored for students of arts and humanities subjects. Covers all the usual study skills areas, with the addition of many arts-specific extras, such as how to get the most out of visits to museums, galleries and theatres.

Northedge, A. (1990) *The Good Study Guide.*
Milton Keynes, UK: Open University Worldwide.
A wide ranging study-skills book, especially useful for students studying a range of different topics at University, aimed to help you develop your reading skills, note-taking strategies and exam techniques.

Northedge, A., Thomas, J., Lane, A. and Peasgood, A. (1997)
The Sciences Good Study Guide.
Milton Keynes, UK: Open University Worldwide.
Aimed at students of maths, science, engineering and technology. Offers advice for just about all the situations science students are likely to meet at University.

Phillips, E. M. and Pugh, D. S. (2000) *How to Get a PhD.* 3rd Edition.
Buckingham, UK: Open University Press.
If you're really set on flying high, this bestselling book will help you tune in to the assessment culture that you will meet if you go in for a Doctorate.

Race, Phil (2000) *How to Win as a Final Year Student*
Open University Press, Buckingham, UK
This contains some advice about revision and exam techniques, particularly relating to final exams. The book also addresses writing essays to score marks well, writing your CV to get you onto job shortlists, and applying for jobs in general.

Race, Phil (1999) *How to Get a Good Degree.* Buckingham, UK: Open University Press.
This book helps you to sort out your motivation for being at University, and offers a range of advice about how to go about assessed coursework of various kinds to maximise the marks you gain for it.

The Learning and Teaching Support Network Generic Centre

The Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTSN) is a network of 24 Subject Centres, based in higher education institutions throughout the UK, and a Generic Centre, based in York, offering generic information and expertise on learning and teaching issues that cross subject boundaries. It aims to promote high quality learning and teaching through the development and transfer of good practice in all subject disciplines, and to provide a 'one-stop shop' of learning and teaching resources for the HE community.

The Generic Centre, in partnership with other organisations, will broker information and knowledge to facilitate a more co-ordinated approach to enhancing learning and teaching. It will:

- Work with the Subject Centres to maximize the potential of the network;
- Work in partnership to identify and respond to key priorities within the HE community;
- Facilitate access to the development of information, expertise and resources to develop new understandings about learning and teaching.

The LTSN Generic Centre Assessment Series Guides for:

Senior Managers
Heads of Department
Lecturers
Students

Briefings:

Assessment issues arising from key skills
Assessment of portfolios
Key concepts: formative and summative, criterion and norm-referenced assessment
Assessing disabled students
Self, peer and group assessment
Plagiarism
Work-based learning
Assessment of large groups

Published by
Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTSN)

For more information, contact the Generic Centre at:
The Network Centre, Innovation Close, York Science Park, Heslington, York, YO10 5ZF
Tel: 01904 754555 Fax: 01904 754599
Email: gcenquiries@ltsn.ac.uk
www.ltsn.ac.uk/genericcentre