An insight into the marking process...

In this chapter you’ll gain an insight into the marking process so you can see how things look from the tutor’s perspective. In particular, we’ll be looking at:

- The importance of bearing in mind that your tutor will have lots of assignments to mark and limited time to mark them
- The marking process at universities (which may involve up to three stages)
- Consistency across markers, and why some inconsistency might actually be a good thing
- Different types of markers (‘hawks’ and ‘doves’), and sources of bias that can influence the mark you’re awarded (including what you look like…)
- How the transition from school/college to university may be a culture shock for some students

Marking assignments: four in an hour…?

Let’s start by putting things into context. How many assignments does a typical tutor mark at the end of a typical term? Well, it varies of course, but from a personal point of view, I decided to take stock of my own marking at the end of a recent term. I compiled a list of:

- all the courses I taught (there were five courses with a total of seven written assignments)
- the number of words for each assignment (most were 2,000 words but some were 8,000; the average worked out at around 3,000)
- the number of students on each course (200 students in total)

I then multiplied the number of words for each assignment by the number of students and finally summed up the total to reveal a staggering 510,000 (over half a million)
words. Now, I’m not presenting these statistics for the sympathy vote, rather, the aim is to illustrate where your assignment stands in the grand scheme of things. The point being that, in the midst of this deluge of marking, assignments which are poorly presented and/or difficult to follow may receive relatively short shrift, especially when there is limited time in which to mark them.

This raises another question: How much time do you think a tutor spends marking an assignment? Well, although it may have taken you weeks to prepare and write your 2,000-word assignment (or not as the case may be...), the tutor will probably spend around 30 minutes reading and marking it. This includes writing up the comments. Obviously, this will vary depending on the tutor and the assignment. Some tutors will spend less time on each assignment, believing that ‘you should be able to mark four in an hour’. Really. According to one study by Norton (1990), the average time spent marking an assignment of 1,250 words, was about 20 minutes; three of the six tutors in the study took less than 15 minutes: four in an hour.

The marking journey: a ‘smooth ride’ or a ‘bone-shaker’?

So, we’ve established two things about the marking of assignments: (1) there are lots of them to mark; (2) there is limited time to mark them.

This being the case, what is a tutor looking for in an assignment? Well, perhaps the bare minimum might be termed a ‘smooth ride’. What does this mean? It means that I can read your 2,000-word assignment in roughly half an hour without having to stop every few sentences to make comments due to lack of clarity, problems with presentation, incorrect referencing, or generally because I don’t have a clue what you’re talking about. Think of it as going on a journey: the easier you make it for me to get from A to B the better; a poor assignment is like a journey in which you’ve made me stop every few minutes – due to traffic jams (unclear language or purpose), red lights (errors) or to check the route (poor structure and presentation). A good assignment gives me a clear run; a very good assignment includes interesting scenery on the way.

The learning journey: are you a hitch-hiker, an explorer, or just plain lost?

Interestingly, a similar analogy is proposed by Walter Skok (2003) and developed by Colin Neville (2009a), in which the grading of assignments is likened to a ‘journey of learning’ whereby the approach to study adopted by students will be reflected in their grade achieved for assignments. I’ve summarised the themes in Table 1.1.
Table 1.1  Learning as a journey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Approach</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Explorer</td>
<td>Someone who explores the destination thoroughly and independently, venturing beyond the ‘given’ into new territories and experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Traveller</td>
<td>Someone who wants to acquire more knowledge of a country – to learn its culture, language, history and current position in the world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Tourist</td>
<td>Opt for the package holiday where they are told what to do rather than discover for themselves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Hitch-hiker</td>
<td>Someone who may often have to wander off the track (or ‘point’) – not adopting the most direct and efficient route from A to B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fail</td>
<td>Lost</td>
<td>Fails to work out clearly where they are going (or why), so becomes lost</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The guidelines in this book are primarily designed to make my journey as a marker of assignments easier, but they should hopefully also make you, as a writer of assignments, a more interesting guide.

An insight into the marking process...

The marking process will vary across different universities and departments, but in the UK it typically involves three stages:

- **Step 1: First marking.** Usually by your course/module tutor.
- **Step 2: Internal moderation.** ‘Moderation’ refers to the process for assuring that marks awarded are fair, consistent and reliable. It’s more commonly known as second-marking or double-marking by another tutor.
- **Step 3: External moderation.** Where a tutor from another university (an ‘external examiner’) comments on the marks awarded.

Let’s have at look at this process in more detail....

Step 1: First marking

So what happens to your assignment after you’ve handed it in? Well, once it’s been processed by admin:

1. Tutor comes into work to find four piles of assignments on his desk, each over a foot high
2. Tutor takes gun from holster and puts to head (or...)
3. Tutor takes essays home to mark the next day
4. On a nice summer’s day, tutor sets up sun-lounger in back garden and settles down to marking (with increasing quantities of ‘liquid refreshment’)

AN INSIGHT INTO THE MARKING PROCESS...
5 Tutor gets half-way through first assignment and scuttles back indoors due to: electric chainsaw, house alarms, barking dogs, gusty wind blowing pages everywhere…

6 Having read the assignment and made notes, the marking grid is consulted and the marks are entered accordingly, along with copious written feedback helping the student to address the identified areas of deficit. Repeat 100+ times…

The last point about feedback is important. In order to learn and improve you need good feedback: feedback for learning. So, if your assignment comes back with a mark of 44% and the only comment you get is ‘well done’ or ‘argument rather thin’, you might complain that this is not a great help. What you should be looking for (and asking for) is constructive feedback – comments that will help you to improve future assignments – not only what you haven’t done, but, most importantly, what you need to do in future to get a higher mark. In the final chapter we’ll be looking at the crucial role of feedback (and feed-forward) in more detail.

Step 2: Second-marking (in moderation)

The process for second marking will vary across departments and universities, but once the first marker (usually your course tutor) has marked the assignments a selection may be passed on to another tutor for ‘second marking’ (especially when the marks contribute to your final degree classification). Typically, this will be a sample (10–20%) of the assignments representing the range of grades – top, middle, bottom, including ‘borderlines’ (e.g. 49%, 59%) and all ‘fails’.

Second marking may be done independently or ‘blindly’, that is, where the second marker does not know the grade awarded by the first marker (so they come to an independent decision about the mark), but often ‘second marking’ is more like a ‘second opinion’: the second-marker does see the grade and the comments from the first marker. Their role, then, is to check the reliability of the marks (are they fair, consistent, too generous or too harsh?) and comment on the feedback provided (does it reflect the mark and promote learning?). Where there is significant disagreement about the mark, for example, if the second marker thinks it should be in the 60s rather than the 50s, a final mark may be negotiated – keeping in mind that the first marker will usually have the most influence, having taught the course and set the assignment. Sometimes the mark might be averaged, or if there’s serious disagreement it might be passed on to another tutor for a third opinion.

Step 3: External moderation

In the UK, a further check is used to help ensure the marking is fair and comparable across universities. ‘External examiners’ (tutors from other universities) are asked to look at a cross-section of work from all courses and comment on the standard of the assignments and the marks awarded.
Marking is not an objective science

Now as we all know, if you ask two different tutors to mark the same assignment you will get two different marks, but hopefully they won’t differ too much. Marking assignments, particularly essays in the arts, humanities and social sciences, is not an objective science. All tutors will have their own particular values about what’s important in an assignment, which is why specific marking criteria can help to make the process more ‘objective’ (there’s an outline of some typical marking criteria in Chapter 7, Tip 40). But the idea of arriving at a particular percentage point for a 2,000-word essay will always be an approximation (which is why many tutors find the idea of marking in broader grades or marking bands preferable).

Overall, though, I think most tutors would agree that the marking of assignments is a ‘justice broadly done’ and that we tend to be charitable, rather than miserly, with the marks (Miller and Partlett, 1974: 42), but that doesn’t mean there might not be a few biases (see Box 1.1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Box 1.1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Marking assignments: the human factor**

**Inconsistency and consistency across markers**

There have been many studies highlighting inconsistencies across markers (Bloxham, 2009), but perhaps you should be more concerned about consistency. When John Garry et al. (2005) compared the marks awarded for 11 essays, they found that ‘second markers’ (who knew the original mark) generally awarded the same or similar marks (within 3 percentage points), whereas independent markers varied quite significantly: for five of the 11 essays the difference was 9 percentage points or greater. The reason for these results? Well, to put it simply, we have a tendency to ‘adjust’ and ‘anchor’ our judgement about something based on a prior judgement, such as the mark awarded by the first marker… (Though they also point out that it may simply be ‘easier’ to agree than disagree…)

‘Hawks’ and ‘doves’ – and other forms of bias in markers

We all know that some tutors are ‘harder’ markers than others. In medicine, for example, examiners are sometimes referred to as ‘hawks’ or ‘doves’: ‘hawks’ are hard markers who tend to fail candidates (sympathises with the patient – ensuring competent doctors); ‘doves’ are more lenient examiners (sympathises with the candidate). Studies (Aslett, 2006; Owen et al., 2010) have also suggested other sources of bias in markers based on:

- **Knowledge of student and previous performance:** If a student who normally gets high marks submits a poor assignment, allowances may be made due to the ‘halo effect’ – which is why many courses use ‘anonymous marking’ where the identity of the student is not included with the assignment. (The ‘halo effect’ is discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.)

(Continued)
• **Order/contrast effects**: Several studies have found that the mark awarded to an essay may depend on the quality of those marked before it. If it follows a poor assignment, there’s a tendency to award a higher mark, but if it follows a really good assignment, there’s a tendency to award a lower mark (Spear, 1997). Though it should be added that the extent to which this actually applies in practice, rather than experimental situations, may be debatable.

• **Physical attractiveness**: Studies have shown that we tend to attribute more favourable character traits to people who are physically attractive, e.g. more intelligent, friendly, sensitive, etc. (Miller, 1970). When David Landy and Harold Signall (1974) attached a photograph of an attractive student to an essay, they found it received a higher grade than the same essay with a photograph of an ‘unattractive student’ or ‘no photograph’ attached! A case for anonymous marking perhaps…?

In your own words…?

There is one other issue that should be mentioned with regard to the marking process: a check for plagiarism. Is it your own work, in your own words? But we’ll leave discussion of this increasingly prevalent and time-consuming problem until Chapter 11.

If at first you don’t succeed, try again (and again? and again?)

What happens if you fail the assignment? Well, on many courses you may be allowed one re-submission and, assuming that you have no justifiable extenuating/mitigating circumstances (suspicions are raised when the third grandmother dies), this may mean that the highest mark you can get for your re-submission is the minimum pass mark (since it would be unfair to those who passed first time if you were to achieve a higher mark upon re-submission).

Now obviously, failing an assignment is a bit of a disaster, so if you have some anxieties about a piece of coursework make sure that you talk to the tutor before submitting the assignment (don’t ‘bury your head in the sand’). Check what’s expected to ensure that you will be addressing the key ‘learning outcomes’ and assignment guidelines.

For those of you who are really pessimistic, it’s also worth checking exactly how many chances you do get to re-submit a piece of work. I know of some courses where students may be allowed up to four attempts at an assignment (that’s an initial fail and then three subsequent attempts). After failing at the third attempt the feedback involves an electrical current….

How degrees are classified in the UK

For those unfamiliar with the UK university system, the terms ‘a two-one’ and ‘a two-two’ may sound like a foreign language, but they are used to represent a particular class
of degree. Table 1.2 provides an outline of the degree classification system, along with the percentage of students in the UK who were awarded each class for the year 2008/09 (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2010).

Table 1.2  Degree classification in the UK

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Also Known As</th>
<th>Represents average of marks for course</th>
<th>Equivalent grade</th>
<th>Percentage of UK students awarded each classification (2008/09)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First-Class Honours</td>
<td>‘a first’</td>
<td>70%+</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper Second-Class Honours</td>
<td>‘a two-one’ (2:1)</td>
<td>60–69%</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower Second-Class Honours</td>
<td>‘a two-two’ (2:2)</td>
<td>50–59%</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third-Class Honours</td>
<td>‘a third’</td>
<td>40–49%</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1There may be some discretion for borderline cases.


It’s important to be aware that, for most universities, it is only the marks from years 2 and 3 that count towards final degree classification, and that these may be weighted, for example, where year 2 counts for 30% but year 3 counts for 70%. The particular system used at your university should be explained in your student handbook. It can vary considerably (Curran & Volpe, 2004).

From school to college to university: learning to help yourself

The American poet John Ciardi (1916–1986) once quipped that ‘a university is what a college becomes when the faculty loses interest in its students’. Now hopefully this isn’t the case, but many students do notice a reduction in ‘contact time’ compared to their experiences at school or college. This is partly because many university tutors are also engaged in research, but also because you are expected to take more responsibility for your own learning. As the Head of Student Satisfaction at Poppleton University recently pointed out in his address to new undergraduates:

Speech to new undergraduates by the Head of Student Satisfaction at the University of Poppleton (excerpt)

You are now embarking on a great adventure, perhaps the greatest adventure of your life. But before you can embark upon that adventure, you must say goodbye to the life you knew before university.

No longer can you expect to be molly-coddled in the way you were at school and at home. No longer can you expect to be told what to do. No longer can you expect the answers to your questions to be readily available. No longer can you rely upon someone else to help you out. No longer can you expect to know where you are or
what’s happening to you or why it’s happening to you and where you might go to find any sort of answer.

Now, for the first time in your life, you are on your own. Left to your own devices. In a jungle without a map. At sea without a rudder. Up a creek without a paddle. Totally abandoned. Thrown to the wolves. Hung out to dry. Welcome to higher education at Poppleton…

(Laurie Taylor, *Times Higher Education*, 2009, 8–14 October)

Now hopefully, it’s not quite as bad as this satirical account of life at the fictional Poppleton University, but you are moving from an environment where you were probably told what to do, how to do it, and when to do it, to a more liberal environment. You’re going to have to manage your own time and become more of an independent learner: you need to learn to help yourself. This means attending the lectures (at least some of them) and going away to apply the principles. It means using your initiative. If you don’t, you’ll become the victim of that terrible slur on students purveyed by some tutors: ‘s/he needs “spoon-feeding”’. Hopefully these tips will help you to help yourself. As the poet W. B. Yeats (1865–1939) reputedly said: ‘Education is not the filling of a bucket, but the lighting of a fire’.

Now, let’s have a look at an interesting survey....