Report Writing Case Studies

The principle of practice-led enquiry is central to the ethos of the LearnHigher project. As learning developers working directly with students, we are able to directly observe student needs and the effectiveness of interventions. We have found case studies to be an effective and interesting way to communicate these observations

Case study 1: Understanding the purpose of report writing

Joe was a first year student in Agriculture. He had recently had his first piece of assessed coursework returned, a report on a farm visit. He was disappointed with his mark of 52% and was keen to improve his report writing, but could not work out from his course tutor's comments what he should do differently.

The study adviser noticed in the report...

- ✓ Good descriptions of the farm visit

- ✓ A few interesting ideas about agriculture

But also...

- x Poor organisation and use of headers

- x No references to evidence from academic reading

- x No discussion or conclusion section

Advice given focused on:

- how to recognise and respond to the purpose of a report
- how to construct a context for findings by providing background from academic reading
- how to give findings 'added value' through discussion and conclusions

Joe was also given a study guide on the purpose of different sections of a report to take away and use as reference for his next assignment.

Joe's next report gained a mark of 62%. He was really pleased, and commented:

"I didn't know what was expected of me when I wrote my first report. I thought that it would be enough to just write down the information, but now I can see that it's important to show how to use it too. It was really helpful to have the guide to refer to, and I'm getting used to remembering what should go in each section."

Case study 2: Getting the balance right

Marilyn was a mature student studying for a Social Work degree after many years in employment. She spent a great deal of time and effort in compiling her report on discrimination against young black women, reading widely and quoting extensively from academic books, journals and websites. She was careful to cite all her sources accurately in the text and to list them according to her department's guidelines in her bibliography. It came as an unpleasant (and frightening) surprise when her tutor told her that her report could not be marked and would have to be rewritten, as it was "excessively derivative" and "verged on plagiarism".

A glance at Marilyn's report quickly revealed that it was mostly constructed from a succession of long quotes, linked with a few sentences of her own. After speaking to Marilyn, it became clear that she was lacking in academic confidence and felt that "other people's words" were always going to explain things better than she could. She had been told to support her assertions with evidence, and felt that providing long quotations was the best way of showing that she had read the relevant books.

Advice focused initially on building her academic confidence, by encouraging her to explain her own (perfectly good) understanding of the ideas. It was suggested that she first read back over her report and listed the questions she was trying to answer. Then she could write a paragraph on each, without consulting her books. Once she had reconstructed a draft report in her own words, she could go back over it and identify the places where she could add a brief quote or citation to support her assertions, or where she might want to expand on or criticise what she had written.

Marilyn redrafted and resubmitted the report, and received positive feedback from her tutor. She returned for more advice when working on her next two assignments, but has now gained enough confidence to judge for herself whether she is getting the balance right between her own ideas and evidence from academic sources.