



THE BRITISH
ASSOCIATION FOR
CONTEMPORARY
LITERARY STUDIES

BACLS

HELP

SHEETS

Writing a New Module

This help sheet will suggest some of the key issues to consider when writing a module outline. It is primarily aimed at Early Career academics. It will suggest some of the differences between writing outlines for interview and writing outlines once in post.

Scope of the module

What level of student is the module aimed at? This is important because it will determine the amount of prior knowledge you can expect students to have and also the level of competence with studying literature at University. Typically there are differences in scope across the levels with modules become narrower in focus as students make progress through the degree and toward postgraduate study.

- Level 4 (first year). First year modules are often intended to introduce students to a broad topic area and they're often quite general in scope. However they also need to help students make the transition to university study; they are used to teach students how to learn in a university setting. A-Level students will often study a book for a whole term whereas at University they might be asked to read several books a week. Think about how you could address this when planning a programme of study.
- Level 6 (third year). These are typically more specialist modules and are more likely to grow out of lecturer's research interests. However they should also be more demanding of students and there is an expectation of greater competence. This needs to be matched by the content and by the assessment of the module.
- M-level. Masters-level modules are more specialised again but, in addition, a masters programme is usually specialised. These will assume that students have a basic grounding in the discipline and will try to open up a narrow area to more specialist expertise. Because of this it is really important to think about how to tailor your expert knowledge to the focus of the degree. However, the danger of duplication might be more of a problem and you will

want to ensure that your module offers something that is not already on the degree in another form.

- For specialist modules, especially those that grow from your own research you will also need to think about what generic knowledge your module will provide. This will need to be aligned with the things that the degree programme promises to provide students. So it is well worth having a look at the programme specification and thinking about how your module fits into the level descriptions that you find there.

Making your module interesting

There are different components to a module including its title, the list of set texts and, (usually) a descriptive blurb. Many degree programmes will offer students a choice and you can use all of these things to make your module attractive to students. The module description can give you scope to write an enthusiastic prospectus for the teaching that you want to deliver. Try to set out what the module aims to achieve and what the main features of the content will be. This should be informative but concise.

- Make sure you don't over-promise: the descriptions should accurately set out the content that you hope to deliver. There's no point attracting a lot of students to the module who don't actually want to be there when they find out what it's really about.
- Try not to second-guess your students. There are lots of reasons why students choose to take particular modules which can have little to do with the actual content. A lively but honest presentation of the content is the best way to attract the students that you will want to teach.

Aims and Outcomes

The main difference between aims and outcomes is that aims are aspirational whereas outcomes should be achievable and testable. Another way to think about the difference is that aims will attach to the module whereas outcomes should attach the student.

So, the aim of a contemporary literature module might be to introduce students to the main stylistic innovations of writing in the last decade. An outcome of the module might be that students will be able to critically interrogate the form of selected texts. Outcomes should *normally* be attached to an active verb.

Assessment

The cornerstone of our discipline is still the essay but it is quite common for modules to have more than one assessment. Using an alternative to the essay can be a way of making students engage with the module and it can allow you to test different things.

- Think about the workload of the assessment. How long would you expect a student to spend doing the work? Does that match with what the assessment asks a student to do?

- Remember you will need to grade the assessment too, so you need to think about what demands the assessment makes of the tutor. An assessment with lots of small elements can be really useful in testing a range of outcomes but might put an unreasonable burden on the markers.
- What are you actually trying to test? Can the students demonstrate the things you want to see by doing the assessment that you have set?

Writing a module outline for interview

There are a number of things to consider when writing a module for an interview:

- What were you asked to do? Candidate instructions will often specify the level of study, the broad topic area and/or the aims of the proposed module. Make sure you write to the brief.
- You will want to show how your experience and expertise fits with the module you're proposing but in reality other people may want or need to teach your module. This might be because the module will be team-taught or it might be to cover your leave. So think about how your interests and expertise can engage with wider questions in the discipline.
- Interviewers will be looking for lots of things from you at interview. They will want to be confident that you know your material but they will also be looking to see whether you can work with colleagues and whether you can engage with students. So think about how your module can connect to the interests of people already in the department and think about how you can make it speak to the likely interests of students.
- Think about the type of institution that you're applying to. It might be possible to get a sense of what kind of students they accept. Published information about A-Level tariffs can be one guide but treat these carefully because institutions that take students through clearing can often accept students with lower grades than their published offer. You were probably a very successful student so thinking about how to address students who are not as competent as you might be necessary when designing a programme of study. How to cope with this can often be a question at interview.
- How long will you realistically have to talk about your module? There will be lots of things that you want to say but you won't want to be hurried or too cursory. Think about how to indicate areas where you could give a fuller answer if you had more time. This can help shape the questions you will receive about the material afterwards. Preparing a hand out for the interviewers might be a way of leaving them with information that you cannot cover in the time. It will also serve as a mnemonic to help interviewers remember your content.

Writing a module for your institution

- Higher Education Institutions are increasingly looking to standardise module content across degrees and the institution as a whole. A lot of Universities have recently undergone a curriculum review where degree courses and individual modules have been mapped onto an institutional framework. Paying attention to what your institution demands from individual modules is really important. Look to existing module outlines as a guide to how to supply the information that you are required to provide.
- Think about the existing module and watch out for any obvious overlaps with what is already taught. Complementary modules can be really useful and students often like to see pathways through the degree that allow them to expand their understanding of similar or related topics. However, you want to make sure that a student is not able to keep studying the same text all the way through their degree. If a text is essential to your module but is already being taught by a colleague can you be imaginative about how to include that material in ways that will push students in different directions. Being mindful of what your colleagues are teaching and being able to compromise to ensure that both your work supports one another will make the student experience of the whole degree a better one.
- Don't reinvent the wheel. Talking with colleagues about the shape of the degree will help you to get a sense of how the programme has evolved. Sometimes decisions about how to structure a degree won't seem like the best ones to you but they will be the product of long discussions and collaboration. It may be the case that similar modules have previously been taught and no longer run. There might be many reasons why this module isn't being taught but understanding what they are will help you to write a better module and one that best fits with the aspirations of your degree.
- Talking with colleagues about the degree is also a good way to find willing collaborators. Team-taught degrees can be challenging but they can also be stimulating. Finding colleagues with similar interests may offer you a way to provide teaching that pools your different approaches to the topic and offer students a richer sense of the subject area.

This help sheet was written by Liam Connell.