# Developing a Marking Guide for Critical Analysis and Essay Writing to Address Students' and Markers' Assessment Needs

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## Abstract

The coronavirus and lockdown challenges have reinforced the need to strengthen academic teaching and assessment, to help meet the skills and remote learning needs of students, to develop clear, fair and consistent marking, and to help overcome the increasing odds of building a more equitable and sustainable society, and world. If we are to survive, and even avoid, further pandemics. Having adapted an existing Marking Guide (for remote Honours assignments and postgraduate chapter drafts), with the ongoing lockdown I revised the Marking Guide further, to teach and assess a massive English 101 module, that had to be marked by a large group of remote markers. This article addresses how the Marking Guide was revised, to develop more effective assessment methods as all participants (students, lecturers, and markers) needed to deliver sound work remotely. Even as most of us met each other for the first time, with all participants communicating online. The article outlines the process of guiding a large and diverse range of postgraduate student markers, some new and from other disciplines, who needed to be rapidly trained and supported in preparation for quick and effective marking of over 800 critical essay assessments. The revised marking guide is also effective for the standardization of marking, for mentoring marking, and moderation. Finally, the article deals with how guiding comments were added and integrated into the Marking Guide to enable new markers to evaluate and grade an essay as well as simultaneously offer constructive guidance to help each student understand and improve upon specific challenges identified in the essay.


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Given the extent of our challenges, the more literate and skilful we all are, the better for all of us, our society, and world. The significance of core academic skills such as reading, critical analysis, argument construction, essay writing, and editing is apparent in a range of postgraduate, vocational, professional, and life skills. Given the widespread needs, and the value and efficacy of such skills, especially in an era of multiple crises (Narismulu 2013), exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic and lockdowns, these skills need to be better integrated into the curricula and assessments, to advance the personal, pedagogical, professional, and life skills of all students. And, as we, our markers, and our students, need to contribute skillfully to overcoming the growing odds against building a more egalitarian and sustainable society, continent and world.

Given the scale of challenges experienced, it was encouraging to find recognition of the value of these skills for dealing with another looming challenge, the Fourth Industrial Revolution, coming from unexpected quarters. The World Economic Forum's (2020) *The Future of Jobs Report* indicates the importance of Critical Thinking and Analysis, currently considered the most important skills group by the companies it surveyed in its study, followed by Problem-Solving Skills. Further indication of the value of the skills being taught are in the World Economic Forum's ranking of the fifteen most valuable skills needed by 2025, with the top five skills being:

1. Analytical thinking and innovation
2. Active learning and learning strategies
3. Complex problem-solving
4. Critical thinking and analysis
5. Creativity, originality and initiative.

This supports the curricular and pedagogical focus on building critical and functional autonomy through the critical reading of texts and contexts (e.g., Fialho 2019), problem-solving analyses, effective argument

construction, and writing skills. These skills have remained core to assessment, as part of an integrated approach to teaching under the impacts of the coronavirus and lockdowns, which necessitated a rapid transition to the delivery of blended remote online learning and teaching in the five modules in which I teach, in addition to supervision. Although there was no time to spare from delivering on intensive and huge level one and level three modules, I am glad to have written up the revisions and initiatives resulting from trying to meet the skills needs of all our students and markers.

While awaiting Assignment drafts from many Honours students who were delayed (by having to move off campus during the initial Covid lockdown), I looked at a marking rubric that has been used for some years in English Studies. I initially made some additions to offer clearer guidance to my MA and PhD students, and to Honours students (with about twenty students per module) for tackling their Assignments. I tried to keep all students focused by paying more attention to the primacy of reading, to build the core academic skills of relevant, independent, well-substantiated and clearly communicated analyses and arguments. The first student to benefit was a busy PhD. After the revised guide was applied to ensure more systematic progress, the busy academic found it easier to finalise revisions, and graduated in 2020. While this article focuses on assessment, academics' broader curricular, pedagogical and theoretical concerns can also be advanced by reflective research (as addressed in several other articles of mine, e.g., Narismulu 2013).

Focusing on more productive assessment during and after the pandemic (for the crises only seem to grow), this essay first addresses how I revised and developed the Marking Guide meet the assessment needs of a massive class of over 800 level one English students, to offer clearer and more effective guidance as everyone (lecturers, students, markers) needed to work remotely. In my teaching, the Marking Guide, can be used to help each student better understand the core learning goals, self-assess readiness for formative and summative assessments, interpret a result, improve results, or challenge a result. I have used the Guide to help students relate their (incremental) skills development to the assessment requirements, to help them to systematically improve their answers (through Worksheets, Revision Questions, and unseen Assessment Questions), and their results.

This is the original Guide that has been used in English Studies on the Howard College campus since 2005:

**Figure 1: The Older Marking Guide**

| | | **Expression** | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | **a** | **b** | **c** | **d** | **e** | **f** | **g** | **h** |
| **Argument** | **A** | 92+ | 88 | 84<br>80 | 76<br>72 | | | | |
| | **B** | 88<br>84 | 84<br>80 | 80<br>76 | 72 | 68<br>64 | | | |
| | **C** | 80<br>76 | 76<br>72 | 72 | 68<br>64 | 64<br>60 | 56<br>52 | 48 | |
| | **D** | | 68<br>64 | 64<br>60 | 64<br>60 | 60<br>56 | 52<br>48 | 40 | |
| | **E** | | 60<br>56 | 56 | 56<br>52 | 52<br>48 | 44 | 40<br>36 | 32 |
| | **F** | | 48 | 48 | 48<br>44 | 44<br>40 | 40<br>36 | 32<br>28 | 32<br>28 |
| | **G** | | | | 36 | 36 | 32 | 28 | 24<br>20 |
| | **H** | | | | 28<br>or less | 28<br>or less | 28<br>or less | 20<br>Or | 20<br>or |

**ARGUMENT**

A Sophisticated insight; penetrating identification and analysis of issues; tight, authoritative development of argument, based on enterprising or wide-ranging reading.

B Sound critical insight and analysis; issues sharply and persuasively identified; logical, systematic argument, well illustrated and substantiated by evidence of very thorough reading.

C Coherently thought through analysis, showing clear understanding of the main issues and with evidence of good critical judgement based on careful reading and reflection.

D Limited in its range of reference, but shows ability to grasp and analyse some of the main issues and present them thoughtfully and reasonably systematically. Evidence of a real attempt to read closely and thoroughly. Possibly some repetitiveness or inconsistency.

E Rather limited or incomplete understanding of issues. Inclined to be descriptive rather than analytical. Attempted coherence of argument, but with some irrelevant or inconsistent sections. Rather lacking in evidence of concentrated reading.

F Shallow or frequently confused presentation of issues. Argument weak and/ or disorganised. Likely to rely on mere summary, with or without inaccuracies. Little evidence of concentrated reading. Topic possibly misunderstood.

G Very little sign of preliminary reading. Serious misunderstandings and inaccuracies. Argument very confused. Topic not understood.

H Right off the subject, or plagiarised.

**EXPRESSION**

a Compellingly readable. Command of vocabulary, register, idiom, tone, all strikingly reinforce cogency of argument. Flawless presentation.

b Lucid, confidently phrased writing, appropriate to the argument and effectively free of errors in vocabulary, idiom, grammar, punctuation, etc. Thoroughly efficient academic presentation.

c Careful, fluent writing, appropriate to the argument, and with few errors. Fully complies with the academic conventions for quotations, acknowledgements, references.

d Style and idiom fairly well controlled. Spelling, punctuation, vocabulary, grammar reasonably correct. Has been carefully edited for obvious errors. Possibly some awkwardness in complying with academic conventions for quotations, acknowledgements, references.

e Errors of vocabulary, punctuation, grammar, etc., but they do not block intelligibility. Stylistic control and handling of idiom rather insecure. Weak sense of paragraph construction. Possibly some uncertainty about academic conventions for quotations, acknowledgements, references.

f Linguistic faults rather frequent and interfere with intelligibility. Style and idiom often inappropriate. Possibly careless about editing and academic presentation.

g Many errors. Meaning seriously obscured.
h Little familiarity with English. Hardly any intelligible language use.

The Marking Guide was introduced when the UKZN English Studies disciplines in Durban merged. I was glad to have a rubric to help address assessment challenges (such as, which skills count, to what extent, and at which levels), so that we could focus on how take responsibility for developing the core skills. Until then we did not have an explicit marking guide and had to go by the views, experience, values, or sighs of colleagues involved in joint level one marking standardization workshops. The symbols used in this Marking Guide are idiosyncratic and not the same as the symbols used in results in other education sectors. In this Marking Guide the symbols focus on Argument and Expression, which are scaled via a range of descriptors, so e.g., the grid indicates that a 'C' for Argument could signify a mark over 76%. While a 'd' for Expression could include a mark over 76%, if the essay has an argument that earns an 'A' symbol.

From the outset I have used the Marking Guide in my own marking and have more recently needed to use it to help busy and distracted markers to focus on *assessing* each essay, cue new markers, and systematize marking standards across a range of marks, and markers. Distributing the Marking Guide in advance along with (anonymous) essay scripts randomly selected for standardization has also been quite effective in introducing new markers quickly and fairly easily to what is needed and required in the rapid essay marking and turnaround necessary before students write each succeeding assessment. Along with marking mentoring, where lecturers work check and advise each marker about their initial marking, and make random checks during the process, which helps advance markers' skills upfront, improve the accuracy of marking, and reduce the extent of internal moderation necessary.

It is interesting that essay writing continues to be used across the educational sector, perhaps for reasons related to the finding that even the short essay form is able to elicit 'a greater proportion of cognitively engaging strategies, even among younger learners' (e.g., Pearson and Hamm's 2001 case studies, cited in Brookhart, 2010; and Leslie and Caldwell 2014). Many university qualifications use the critical essay, and have an interest in strengthening students' core critical and academic writing skills, and with doing this systematically at each academic level to scaffold further skills' developpment. And, given that the secondary education system has been weakening

for some time, increases our ability to meet tertiary students skills' development needs. Even students from better resourced schools generally need to strengthen their core skills. But where is the time to do all this? This is also why I have attempted to ensure that the marking guide can deal with such challenges.

The Marking Guide focuses on the quality of the critical essay argument, and (to a lesser extent) on expression, and is standardized at Level 3 (majors), which it does not actually mention. As this makes a difference to students marks, as well as to an academic or marker who focuses on teaching and assessing core skills, etc, this has implications for how levels two and one are set and assessed.

The critical essay can be demanding to mark in any field and at any level, especially in our still most unequal society in the world, for many assumptions need to be examined and assessed for how productive they are, then articulated, systematized, and regularly reviewed. This is more so in the more subjective and/or theoretically adventurous fields like literary studies. As short on staff and time I have found assessment (in addition to essay writing practice) important for the development of critical essay writing skills. What I initially found refreshing about the Marking Guide was how it breached the 75% glass ceiling. The Guide goes into the 80% band, and into the rare 90% category which it leaves open-ended, and which I have used for some years in controlled and unseen test and exam conditions, when an increasing number of students have produced exceptional work for their level.

Given that most students (at all levels) are unaware of the core skills required or being incrementally developed in a field of study, and the importance of these skills to their progress, I have long used the Marking Guide to illustrate and reinforce the need for the sequential *development* of the core skills within and across modules and levels. Marking across the levels also taught me that the core challenge, reading, can be more easily addressed by mobilising the Marking Guide. Once I saw how that could work I tried the same with the rest of the core skills. Given that many students at all levels do not read fairly accessible literary texts (which raises questions about how they have been passing, or is the answer perhaps to be found in 'many'), I have also taken to using the Marking Guide to demystify reading and show students that reading is a skill (like walking or weight-lifting). Improving a skill is a *process*. The extent to which anyone focuses on reading

will generally advance the understanding of the primary and secondary texts, and revision and assessment questions, which will improve students chances of passing, and acquiring a vocational and life skill. I clarify how the grid weighs the Relevance - Irrelevance of an answer along eight points of the vertical axis. With five of the eight symbols indicating passes there is plenty of scope to pass (with sufficient reading, critical analysis, argument planning and essay writing), and to pass very well.

The most frequent comments or questions made during marking analyses and arguments in essays refer to the reading of basic texts (or lack of reading) and the relevance of analyses or arguments. The vertical axis of the Marking Grid carries the heading Argument, which is better summarized by Relevance of Argument, to help pre-empt this shortcoming in most students' arguments. Unfortunately, few students (even senior students) realise the importance of reading the primary texts *for themselves* as resources (which has to be actively addressed even in the largely South/African literature and social justice sections I teach and supervise). This helps to teach students (and reinforce even among our willing markers) the importance of *first* reading the primary text/s, ideally more than once, for deeper comprehension and analysis, to record their *own* perceptions based on their own subject positions, for prior knowledge is an important building block of learning. Ideally this should happen before the assessment question/topic is read and answered (to avoid dependency, group think, tunnel vision, etc which are rife). Only then should anyone read lecture notes and secondary materials. The sequence is important, otherwise students, lecturers or markers are unwittingly allowing themselves to be intellectually subordinated, never mind hijacked, by me or whoever else.

There is no use paying lip service to empowerment, liberation and anti-colonialism if most participants are reproducing thoughtless 'shortcuts' evident in widespread dependency on Plagiarism, collusion, mechanical translations, outsourcing, etc. Even as our society and world need all the skills and cultures that generate inde-pendent and robust intellectuals. Especially given the vast amounts of public funding that go into our institutions, salaries, funding, etc. Prior reading of primary materials also impact enormously on the independence, value and strength of anyone's critical analysis arguments, which are also important criteria for passing. Given its relative complexity, essay writing needs argument planning skills. The horizontal axis of the grid, which has the heading Expression, may be

better summarized as Clarity of Expression or simply Clear Expression (as addressed in more detail in the discussion of the revisions to the guide). In the same vein, by approaching the Marking Guide not only as a readymade tool, but as a resource, I have learned to dance with it, to interpret, reread, interrogate, adapt, and reconstructed it to be more effective, as indicated below.

The tutors, comprising a lecturer and a fixed term appointment, and close to twenty postgraduates (including many from other cognate fields), with diverse tastes and marking philosophies (which can be a strength) needed to be quickly cued to deliver effectively on the marking. So I focused on how the Marking Guide could help the new markers and busy lecturers, already distracted by endless crises, to mark each script accurately and consistently, and sustain their focus across vast loads.

Given the additional challenges experienced by students and markers under lockdown I tried to do more about the longstanding observation of colleagues that our friendly tutors tend to be harsh markers, judging first year essays at their own level, and assigning a mark without any symbols and comments, or only with sketchy, trite, gnomic, dismissive or belittling comments. In the past I have tried to address this challenge during the Markers' Workshop for the standardization of the marking of each assessment. At such a workshop (which takes an hour or two and is well worth the effort) the lecturer can address and pre-empt any common challenges, and advise markers about what is required and ideal. Markers need to familiarise themselves in advance with the section being tested and with using the Marking Guide to mark.

Before the workshop the lecturer needs to select a small sample of a range of representative scripts (at least three scripts, that need to be anonymised) and circulate them with the question to all markers to practice their marking in advance of the workshop. During the workshop the lecturer needs to briefly clarify expectations regarding the texts, material, question/s set, skills and performance levels appropriate to the level, etc, and then encourage all markers to participate freely in open discussions about their experiences of marking each script, along with the symbols, marks, and comments, so that everyone learns. This will help build the markers' assessment skills, confidence, and understanding of the task. If the team is hesitant, it is easier to find agreement on Expression, although even our kind markers can be unnecessarily tough, so the lecturer needs to indicate the

standards appropriate to the level, for we want to ensure deserving students pass. Nor should we fail any student unnecessarily. (Having had first year classes of up to 1600 students and a tiny handful of lecturers means we have to be mindful.) As markers get more confident about learning to assess and motivate their marking the lecturer can focus on building consensus on the marking standards (allowing for an appropriate range of marks). The marking is subject to initial marking being checked by a mentor, usually a lecturer, and subsequent internal checks and moderation, and external moderation depending also on the needs, module level and rules.

While some lecturers like myself have tried to ensure that marking standardization establishes the appropriate assessment norms before each Test/ Assignment/ Examination is marked, experience eventually taught me that our best efforts are undone at the source. The Marking Guide, despite its strengths, focuses markers (especially new or time-stressed markers) on judging critical essays without addressing how to improve them. The judgmental focus of the Marking Guide has influenced many markers over the years, including myself, until I realised this has not produced sufficient improvements to students' analytical and essay writing skills. (Why should it, you may ask, but let's see where expecting more leads us.) The Marking Guide focuses on the achievements and deficits in an essay without offering guidance (to students or even markers) on how the critical essay skills may be *improved*. (While this is implicit in the Marking Guide, to work this out a student needs reading and deductive skills, i.e., the old chicken and egg conundrum. And new markers need to be assisted to do this effectively, for it is challenging enough to assess a critical analysis fairly and accurately, especially with large batches and tight deadlines.)

Fair enough but I felt more could be done for first year students, which meant enabling the markers to strengthen delivery. When my assessment (the second assessment) was eventually underway and about to be submitted, I prepared for a marking standardization workshop with all the markers. I tried to fix some omissions and issues quickly by drawing on the structure of the Marking Guide. Not so fast: approaching the guide from this angle I soon spotted some shortcomings in the Guide. For instance, although reading is core to solving, and pre-empting, the needs and challenges indicated in the rest of the Argument category, only the seventh Argument category (G) under lists reading first: 'Very little sign of preliminary reading'. The eighth category (H) does not refer to reading at all. Yet the core

skills (reading, comprehension, analysis, planning argument construction, essay writing, and editing) develop consecutively, and are far more easily achieved when tackled in sequence. (Students and tutors, markers and even lecturers who do not realize that the skills are interconnected tend to miss the benefits of working systematically, namely, to write a critical essay one first needs to read the primary text/s, and so on. Regardless of how many interpretations and summaries may be found on the internet.) In the Marking Guide the first (A), second (B) and fifth (E) categories list reading later in the lineup, but reading needs to come first, to help any student, tutor, marker, or new lecturer trying to improve critical analysis, argument construction, and essay writing.

This indicated that the Marking Guide needs to be more specific, and more systematically organised. So, I evaluated and adjusted the descriptors in seven of the eight Argument categories to place the core and foundational intellectual skill of reading first. Fixing that soon showed that other issues needed fixing. So I took a step back and checked each category, which indicated that I first needed to fix the mix-ups evident in some of the other Argument descriptors, which could just help address some of the perennial haziness about the learning and teaching goals. For students, tutors, new markers, and lecturers all need to be able to easily focus on several core curricular goals in the bundle that is a critical essay while delivering on tight deadlines, various needs and massive loads.

I then worked on the descriptors in each category, and arranged all consecutively, to align the Argument descriptors and the Expression descriptors more systematically (both horizontally and vertically). That is when it became clearer that some core descriptors are missing. So, I assessed each of the sequences vertically and then horizontally, and the most appropriate descriptor was selected, added and tested, to organise and align the sequence of all the skills. Finally, both axes were checked and aligned.

The revised structure and arrangement allow for easier understanding of the core skills (in the programme and marking rubric) by students, as well as tutors, markers, lecturers, and moderators. It also allows for far easier recognition of the *progression* of skills, and how to improve each skill, individually, sequentially, and within a range of other skills. Then I evaluated the gaps around a few vague descriptors, weighed up more effective options and some appropriate adjectives, added what was necessary (with much testing of terms), to try to close the gaps with clearer, more comprehensible

terms. It was necessary to weigh up each descriptor and align these sequentially (horizontally) and then to ensure vertical coherence, as our Marking Guide needs to be more coherently supported by all its parts, as clear, well-articulated sets of parallel and interconnected steps to advancing the core skills in critical essay writing. This is when the Marking Guide for Critical Essay Writing (below) began to emerge as a more accessible and curriculum-centered tool.

Next, in each category of Argument and Expression I highlighted the five core skills in bold font, to indicate their importance, interrelatedness, and contribution to the category of pass (horizontal); as well as their vertical function representing the sequential levels of a skill, either for improving or judging the relative performance of each skill. (All the additions are shown underlined in Figure 2, below.)

Similar processes were followed to evaluate and fix the second category: Expression. For reasons of space in this article I will let the work done in this category speak for itself (in the revised Marking Guide below). However, I should address work done in two areas that showed significant omissions. It was surprising to realise there is no reference to essay writing in the whole of the Marking Guide, so I added this to the first five levels of the Expression category, as the first descriptor, as all students need to strengthen this skill in a world crying out for more thoughtful critical thinking and more effective writing. There was also no reference to that staple of essay writing, paragraph construction, except in category e: Weak sense of paragraph construction. Given the centrality of paragraphs to articulating critical analyses, reasoning, problem-solving and effective arguments, I fixed the omission in seven levels, and located it second, after the descriptor essay writing and ahead of syntax and diction (which are consecutively smaller units *within* any paragraph), followed by references, and editing (which come after all of these). It is no longer surprising that many students have not followed through on most of the extensive marking comments I previously made. And it is no longer surprising that markers have fussed about the relatively smaller challenges of syntax and diction, at the expense of rewarding or dealing with sound analysis and argument *planning* for paragraph construction and critical essay writing. Given the surprising omissions in the Marking Guide (which I see I had just been making up for in my own marking), such omissions need to be fixed systematically, as generations of students and markers may benefit.

On reflection, one of the most productive changes made to the Marking Guide arose from trying to teach students (from 101 to PhD) to make pertinent analyses of texts, and construct sound arguments in response to a specific question. The first criterion for passing is relevance of argument, followed by clear expression (however simple, even at PhD level). While trying to use the revised Marking Guide to teach students to focus first instead of rambling, I realized I could add those two words to the heading Argument to emphasise this, i.e., Relevance of Arguments. This was easily done through sequencing the horizontal axes of all the Argument descriptors. And the Marking Guide could clearly indicate the value of the other criterion: Clarity of Expression (through the sequencing of the vertical descriptors). It was a relief to articulate the overall goals of assessment clearly. This also chimes well with the pedagogical work that many lecturers. Having raised this focus in just about every discussion of marking and curriculum over the years, I have been encouraged to find broad agreement on this. As well as in more formal communication with moderators and internal/ external examiners.

These additions are included in the revised Marking Guide for Critical Analysis and Essay Writing (see Figure 2 below). Before I concede that this is more an expression of creative thinking, note that even the World Economic Forum (2020) indicates that Creativity, originality and initiative rank fifth in its list of Top 15 skills for 2025. Even as its members rate Active Learning and Learning Strategies second, and Complex Problem-Solving third. Our staples of Analytical Thinking and Innovation are rated first (of course), while Critical Thinking and Analysis is ranked fourth on the list of Top Skills for 2025. Which some may think allows a few years for catching up, although our society and world deserve much better, especially as we ourselves run on public funds. As Amina Mama recognised when addressing fellow intellectuals and academics well over a decade ago: The challenges facing our society, continent and world require 'a much higher level of intellectual, strategic and creative capacity' (2006: 28).

There was more to contend with. As I evaluated and resolved various challenges to make the Marking Guide more effective and consonant with the pedagogical values, and as the parts and the overall structure of the Marking Guide improved, another limitation became clearer. The Argument descriptors, particularly in symbols E-H are quite bleak and can de-motivate a student (and more so when working in lockdown isolation). So, I weighed

the efficacy of the judgements in these descriptors, for learners also need to also be encouraged and informed about how to improve their basic skills. I realized I needed to add constructive comments to guide students to what is required to pass, and to assist any student working alone. Academics too can and should use assessments and the Marking Guide not just to judge essays, but to help students improve their proficiency, by guiding each student to strengthen their skills to achieve the assessment, module, curriculum, life skills, and vocational goals. Given that too many of our students' essays are in the E-F bands, that the majority of efforts that fail are in the 40-49% bracket, and that most efforts that demonstrate uncertain skills are in the lower 50% bracket, it is worth paying attention to them. For motivated students in these ranges can be relatively easily assisted to make significant improvements to their skills and results in a module. Students with 44% upwards can even double their marks with more clarity and effort, as I have found. Students and staff can achieve better results with enough time and attention to more systematic skills development within a module, and across the modules in a programme. Not least as the skills are meant to be transferable.

To ensure that the assessment function of the Marking Guide is well integrated with the pedagogical goals of the assessments, I re-evaluated the revised Marking Guide. As it was now more systematically organised, with some added skills descriptors it became easier to evaluate the judgments. (For easy reference all additions are shown underlined in Figure 2 below.) Then it became clear that I could add more value to the skills assessments by including skills *development* guidelines, to help markers do more than evaluate and comment on a student's current performance, by further advising the student how to strengthen particular skills. This increases the pedagogical value of the marking guide for markers and students. Formative marking is valuable for advancing skills development although it needs more time, as I have seen (even in summative marking at all levels). Moving beyond assessment to guide further skills development focuses students on the process of advancing their skills and results. I tested a range of guiding comments to find the best fit, within a category, and aligned across all levels (horizontally and vertically). For I realised that is how students may easily see the value of (and use) the skills development guidelines. A student could even use this independently, in self-study, and in and beyond self-assessment. And this is also how tutors, markers and lecturers may easily, during

marking and commenting on individual scripts, draw on the skills development guidelines.

As the revised Marking Guide's parts and overarching structure became clearer, more logical and more student-friendly, as well as tutor, marker, lecturer, and moderator- friendly, I realised it would help stressed and time-challenged students and tutors/ markers to see how the building blocks of critical analysis and writing are interconnected. In addition to the changes made within each level, I also made five overarching additions to enable easy comprehension by all users of the Marking Guide, to strengthen the reliability and validity of the assessment processes, including marking and moderation as observed (i.e. Quality Assurance):

*First*, I made a parenthetical addition to the title, i.e., standardized for level 3 majors (which almost no one seems to remember and take into account, but this is what we were advised when the original guide was first discussed with us).

*Second*, I considered adding RELEVANCE OF to the first subheading ARGUMENT, then tested these for an easier and more active verb, and changed it to RELEVANT ARGUMENTS. Capitals were retained from the initial guide to emphasise the core focus (argument construction) and skill (relevance).

*Third*, to strengthen the awareness and focus of students, tutors, markers, new lecturers, and moderators, the core skills are summarised, in the sequence in which they may be optimally built. I then added numbers for quick assimilation of the incremental sequence of skills development (to help students and markers, and guide students proactively against irrelevance, vagueness, rambling, plagiarism, or failure) by focusing on what works for relevant arguments.

RELEVANT ARGUMENTS:

1. Read
2. Comprehend Question ⇨
3. Text
4. Analyse
5. Argue

(The arrow is used as an abbreviation for the words: in relation to.) This addresses the challenge that most students write vague, rambling answers that have little to do with the set text or the set question, when easily achieving the fundamental skill of relevance requires reading, along with relating the text to the set question.)

*Fourth*, to the second subheading Expression, I had initially added Clarity, and then realised that the students who need this most will understand the following descriptor better**:** Clear Expression. Plain English can help communication, teaching, analysis, and argument construction.

*Fifth*, to strengthen the subheading EXPRESSION I summarised the basic skills, in the logical sequence, i.e., CLEAR EXPRESSION: Plan arguments: thoughtful paragraphs, sentences, word choice; references; editing.
*Sixth*, I strengthened the title of the Marking Guide to read Marking Guide for Critical Analysis and Essay Writing, for we all need the core skill of focus to achieve more clarity in our busy, distracted lives. In this I drew on the more synoptic view that comes from teaching across the levels, although it does take much time away from research and needs better attention, especially as research driven teaching is core and non-negotiable for effective university-level delivery at every level.

My efforts to adjust and rearrange sequences to systematise them, identify omissions and gaps, make bridging additions, add missing skills, and add guidelines for students' quick and independent skills' building, are indicated in the revised Marking Guide (Figure 2, below). To quickly review the changes and additions made to the Marking Guide, the core skills are in bold font, and my additions are underlined (the underlines are for article readers, and are not necessary if using this guide with students or markers). Having been disappointed for years at the failure of students at all levels to use the Marking Guide to improve their work, I hope this more student-centered guide supports students more effectively in the ongoing challenge of difficult staff-student ratios, and the more recent (and possibly ongoing) challenge of remote learning.

*Finally*, note that the symbols used in this (and the previous) Marking Guide are delineated by the Argument and Expression descriptors alongside them,

so a 'C' for Argument could indicate a mark over 76%. And the 'd' for Expression could indicate a mark over 76%. The numerical grid is the same.

**Figure 2: Marking Guide for Critical Analysis and Essay Writing (Standardized for level 3)**

| | | **Expression** | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | **a** | **b** | **c** | **d** | **e** | **f** | **g** | **h** |
| **Argument** | **A** | 92+ | 88 | 84<br>80 | 76<br>72 | | | | |
| | **B** | 88<br>84 | 84<br>80 | 80<br>76 | 72 | 68<br>64 | | | |
| | **C** | 80<br>76 | 76<br>72 | 72 | 68<br>64 | 64<br>60 | 56<br>52 | 48 | |
| | **D** | | 68<br>64 | 64<br>60 | 64<br>60 | 60<br>56 | 52<br>48 | 40 | |
| | **E** | | 60<br>56 | 56 | 56<br>52 | 52<br>48 | 44 | 40<br>36 | 32 |
| | **F** | | 48 | 48 | 48<br>44 | 44<br>40 | 40<br>36 | 32<br>28 | 32<br>28 |
| | **G** | | | | 36 | 36 | 32 | 28 | 24<br>20 |
| | **H** | | | | 28<br>or less | 28<br>or less | 28<br>or less | 20<br>Or | 20<br>or |

**RELEVANT ARGUMENTS: 1. Read 2. Comprehend Question ->3. Text 4. Analyse 5. Argue**

A Independent/ wide-ranging **readings** of primary and secondary texts evident in insightful/ enterprising **analytical responses to the question/** topic**, contexts,** and identification, critical judgement and evaluation of relevant issues. Precise, authoritative development of well-structured and well-substantiated **arguments**.

B Thorough **reading** of primary and secondary texts. Sound critical grasp of the **question**/ topic, **contexts,** evident in incisive iden-tifIcation of issues. Perceptive critical **analyses** and well-reasoned **arguments.**

C Evidence of sound **reading** of primary text/s. Clear understanding of **question**/ **main issues, contexts** evident in thoughtful critical **analyses**, and logical arguments.

D Evidence of attempts to **read** closely and understand the primary text/s and **question**/ topic. Tries but limited range of **analysis** of the main issues. Reasonably systematic **arguments**. Possibly some repetitiveness or inconsistency. [Relate the primary text thoroughly to the question. Improve Plan.]

E Lacks evidence of focused **reading** of basic text/s. Limited or incomeplete understanding of **question** or issues. Descriptions and examples rather than **analysis**. Attempted coherence of **argument**, but with some irrelevant/ inconsistent sections. [Read primary text/s well. Then read the question well, and carefully relate to the primary text. Then Plan analyses and arguments. See Guides & pass well.]

F Little evidence of **reading basic text/s**, possibly relying on summary, with or without inaccuracies. **Question**/ topic possibly misunderstood. Shallow/ frequently confused **analysis**. **Argument** weak or disorganised. [Improve preparation: Read text well. Understand question well. Use a Plan to improve analyses. Use clear and logical arguments. Use Guides to strengthen skills and results.]

G Very little evidence **of reading basic text/s**. **Question**/topic not understood. Serious inaccuracies in **analysis**. **Argument** very confused. [Read text well. Then read question well. Plan well to improve reasoning, answer question well, analyse carefully, and make careful, sound arguments to pass.]

H No evidence of **basic reading**. Ignores **question. Right off the subject, or plagiarised. Irrelevant/ No analyses or arguments.** [First read the text well. Then read the question well. Plan well, answer the set ques-

tion, analyse the text carefully, build sound arguments, and then write to pass.]

**CLEAR EXPRESSION: Plan arguments: thoughtful paragraphs, sentences, word choice; references; editing**

a Confident, articulate **essay writing**. Command of **paragraphs**, **syntax**, **diction, academic style** and tone all reinforce the strengths of the argument. Flawless **academic presentation**.

b Fluent, well structured **essay writing** advances the argument effectively, free of errors in paragraph construction, grammar, vocabulary, punctuation, etc. Thoroughly efficient **academic presentation.**

c Careful, coherent **essay writing**, appropriate to the argument, with few errors of syntax or diction. Complies with the **academic conventions** for quotations, acknowledgements, and references.

d Fairly well controlled **essay writing**. Paragraphs and sentences carefully edited for obvious errors. **Words**, **concepts**, grammar, spelling, punctuation are reasonably correct. Possibly some awkward uses of **academic conventions** for quotations, acknowledgements, and references.

e Weak **essay** paragraph construction [Read carefully. **Plan overall essay argument before writing, then plan the argument/ analysis in each paragraph**]. Errors in sentence construction, word choice, punctuation, grammar, etc., but intelligible. [**Practice using clear, simple sentences in Revision questions**. Possibly improve **academic conventions** for quotations, acknowledgements, and references.]

f Unclear writing: many errors interfere with meaning. Possibly careless about editing and academic presentation. [Read carefully, and i**mprove basic reading, analysis, argument, and paragraph planning, and writing skills. Practice answering Revision questions. Use simple, clear language.**]

g Many writing errors: meaning is very unclear. [**Read daily. Improve preparation of basic reading, planning, and writing of essays and**

**paragraphs while answering Revision questions. Plan well before writing. Practice using simple, clear and short sentences**.]

h Insufficient familiarity with English. Hardly any intelligible language use. [**Must read daily. Improve preparation. Practice using a Plan for effective paragraph construction, see Guides in Tutorial notes, Test & Exam info. Practice using simple, clear and short sentences**. **With enough practice you can pass.]**

The Marking Guide for Critical Analysis and Essay Writing attempts to deliver clearer and more relevant feedback, to improve the capacity of students to understand and respond more effectively to the marking. It seeks to offer clearer parameters for assessing an essay: ranging from self-assessment by students (before or after completing tasks, e.g., Worksheets or Revision); to formative revision marking by tutors and lecturers and summative assessments by markers and lecturers. It identifies each issue in relation to one of the core skills. And it attempts to offer solutions to the most common potential challenges, so that each student can address such challenges more easily, with greater clarity, and with greater expectation of improved skills, and results. The focus on better comprehension, learning, skills and task delivery, by students, tutors, markers, marking mentors, lecturers, and moderators seeks to contribute to supporting the development of each student, marker, lecturer, module, and programme. It offers an integrated academic dimension to the strengths of experiential learning (as may be found in diverse reading and writing-centred modules and curricula). It seeks to contribute to systematically improving the quality of students' learning in the somewhat challenging area of critical essay writing, where skills are acquired by systematic practice, and ongoing learning iterations.

The revised marking guide also suggests that, despite the ongoing and more recent challenges, sound assessment and feedback do not need to be among the more neglected teaching strategies. After writing this paper in the midst of vast teaching and online administration overloads and endless crises, it was good to eventually be able to find more closely related research (in addition to the various studies cited earlier). Bloxham's (2015) research deals with the importance of strengthening the reliability of marking and academic judgements, to ensure that students are marked fairly and accurately. Significantly she refers to research (Ashworth *et al.* 2010, in

Bloxham 2015) that deals with the importance of lecturers constructing their own explicit Standards Frameworks, to make norm referencing explicit (rather than leaving the norms vague and random). This is important. But of course it is also clear that this is not sufficient, for our challenge in higher education in one of the most unequal societies in the world is to do better than merely set standards and demand delivery on those standards. So there is a lot of work to be done by all who are interested.

Although mindful of concerns that university closures across the continent and world have impacted on skills development (e.g. Kigotho 2020), the public funding that has supported higher education despite endless crises in our very unequal society requires intellectuals and academics to go much further. To honour the hope and trust patiently invested in the development of tertiary education, such curricular, pedagogical and assessment initiatives try to help repay those debts by actively supporting and improving the efforts of our students, tutors, markers, lecturers and moderators. Even under lockdown, engaging with such pedagogical and structural (as well as technical) challenges in a concerted way can be valuable and generative, as such improvements at the lecturer-tutor-marker-mode-rator-lecturer levels cascade to strengthen the delivery, skills and achievements of our students, while also strengthening the value of teaching and learning in our programmes and scholarship. This is why sound training of all markers, along with ensuring the return of a set of marked assessments well before the next assessment is also important. Investing an hour or two in a well-structured Marking Workshop for each assessment and for skills development benefits all. And saves time as markers and lecturers become more proficient before tackling the work. It helps to have a relatively stable set of well-trained markers for at least each year (especially as our loads are known in advance and markers can be secured early). Bloxham and Boyd (2007) engage with useful research about training methods, and the importance of training all markers. For public higher education needs to generate the rising tide that raises all boats.

Finally, I was grateful and encouraged when the other lecturers and some of the markers in English 101 responded to the initial revisions with enthusiasm, expressing relief at being able to mark more confidently and easily. I have also used versions of the revised Marking Guide in formative and summative assessments in my level 3 module, as well as in Honours Assignments, and in supervision, with some indications of uptake by stu-

dents. The revised Marking Guide was shared with some other markers and colleagues, and some have indicated they have been using it in their formative and summative assessments in other modules. Anyone is free to use and adapt the marking guide to serve their assessment work or critical writing. Enjoy the self-reflexive work, for we need a range of skills to arrest and reverse the pandemics, not least the climate change that has been devastating the planet and resulted in the viruses (Vidal 2020). Critical essay writing is intellectually challenging and at least as much fun as setting and reading critical essays; despite the various challenges, let's help all our students strengthen their (written) voices. For, academic work is based on sound, insightful, critical, clear and timely judgements. By actively engaging with improving how our students develop the core and related skills, we also strengthen our own critical and creative skills.

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