

## **Go the Distance**

### **Student life**

#### **Episode 4: Academic writing - Nonsy EXTRA**

My name is Nonsy Dube and I'm studying childhood and youth studies via distance learning. My assignments were mainly just, you know, 3000 word assignments. One or two where it was like a report, or it was a proposal. But most of them were just a long assignment, answering a particular question in relation to like maybe a particular study, or book, or review or something like that.

Every time I used to have an assignment, I'd make a plan – I always had a plan, so I'd split up the word count and then pick out the main things of that theme or question that I wanted to address. So I do the overall reading, obviously, and then come back to it and say, "OK I'm looking for, let's say, children learning in the classroom, and then children learning outside the classroom," but then look for those key points in my text

When I split the word count into the paragraphs, it helped me think about, "How much more do I need to add to this, how much more do I need to infuse in terms of text or examples?" So if I went over, I just borrowed from somewhere else or make them – make the remaining paragraphs shorter.

We were given a little formula, so it's P-E-E: point, example and explanation. So any time you make a point, you have to have an example and you have to explain how it relates to the question. So I used that literally religiously with all my assignments, and it helped me just stay on track. So with my P-E-E format I'd have different highlighting colours so 'P' was pink because that was my brightest highlighter, so it was like "This is the main point." 'Example' was orange and then green was my explanation. I'd try and read the stuff and see what I understood from it and that would be my explanation, so not just basically repeating what's in the books. So my intro was always a bit of a skeleton – I'm going to talk about this, this and that. And then the conclusion is like "So from this that I've discussed, this is the general picture of the assignment," and then also they wanted you to always have a point of view of your argument because initially I always used to forget that I need to say, "This is my point of view."

In my last year my two modules were quite different in style. My children's literature module was more: "What did you take from the books yourself?"

So that was a big part of that module. It wasn't as child psychology-based as my other one. So the other one was very much P-E-E: give us an example. So it was trying to find – trying to remember I'm doing two different modules that require two different ways of writing, but there was always key words: a question might say "Discuss the effects of parental separation from a child", so it was 'parental', 'separation' – trying to remember those key words, so I used to sort of have key words that I wanted to talk about, and key words from the text that I thought were quite relevant. So I'd have my key words at the top of my plan, and make sure that each of my paragraphs is coming back to it in some way.

With the child psychology in particular, sometimes it got a bit technical. I remember I did a module where there was – they were trying to do the psychology of the brain, as it were, so they were measuring brain function of children, but the terminology they used with that – I really didn't know what it meant, so then I'd use Google to sort of go out of it and understand it in layman's terms, and then come back to it. Google was good in terms of just adding my – my knowledge and my understanding of things but I didn't necessarily use it to feed into my assignments.

So with academic writing, it took me a while to take to it. And each tutor had a slightly different way of what they expected. It was hard to think in that way because I'm naturally a bit more of a creative – I had to switch my thinking completely. In the second year and third year, I knew what the expectation was in terms of academic writing purely from making so many mistakes, and I always used to think of how I read my texts – my textbooks, how they write, I should try and kind of write similar and that made all the difference – it was like, "Just write the way, that you know, your text is written, your textbooks are written."

I had a little list of words I could use when I was writing my assignments, just to jog my memory 'cos when you're writing an assignment you can't think of all those things. I used to have different groups basically for whichever direction my essay was going. So if I wanted to add another point, there would be 'additionally', 'furthermore', or if I was contrasting that point: 'however'. When I got lost or stuck during my assignment, everything was up on like the wall: my list of words, my plan and everything else, and little key words or like bubble points of what I needed to put in. So for each paragraph, there were trigger words – things I have to include which I got from the assignment sheet. So they'd give you guidance notes of what you need to include, so I'd have those trigger words from that. I'd

page number also where I needed to get my notes from, so all the pages were on my little plan as well.

Feedback for me was important; it helped me. I wouldn't have done it if it wasn't for the feedback. So the P-E-E thing was one of those, the feedback I got because I didn't give examples enough, so it was like: make sure you give an example, make sure you explain, and saying also a bit more about what you think. Whenever I needed help, whenever I was stuck with my assignment I'd email my tutor, one of my tutors or whichever one I'm dealing with at the time and within less than a day, literally, she'd come back to me and say "Ok, fine, I've seen your questions. This is it. This is what you need to do." She wouldn't tell me what to do but just the guidance, and just give me clarity.

I did enjoy academic writing, not initially, but yeah, once I got a better grasp of it: the more you do it, the more feedback you get, the more you start to get a picture of what they expect of you. It's about giving it a go and just taking in the feedback.