



Improving your marks

Find out where you're at

If you are unsure where to begin, then find out your current level and invest some time in planning your steps to improvement.

- Undertake some self-assessments to find out your current level of understanding and ability. You might find the *Study Skills Priorities Planner* (Cottrell, 2019, p. 25-26) helpful to gauge where you are now and the steps you need to take to improve.
- Ask your lecturer how you are doing **before** formal assessments. Race (1992) states that many students fear finding out that they aren't doing as well as they should be; but you won't know unless you ask!
- Understand that all courses progress across the years or 'levels'; therefore, assessments will be crafted so that you can demonstrate this progression. Broadly, the distinctions between the years are:
 - Year One – clear understanding of concepts
 - Year Two – critical analysis
 - Year Three – synthesis of theory and evidence

(Wyse, 2006, p. 146)

Preparation

Leave yourself plenty of time to complete an assignment. Your best work will not occur when writing an essay overnight!

- Task management – try not to concentrate on one assignment at a time, even if it is urgent, as once the urgent assignment is complete, the next one becomes urgent too! Spread out your time evenly (Race, 1992).
- Work backwards from deadlines – count the number of weeks between now and your assignment and plan what you can achieve week by week. Be realistic! (Bassot, 2019).
- Read widely in preparation for the assignment, and then use what you have read to form your argument. Strong assignments make use of evidence from the literature, which can only be done if you are prepared.

Help is available

If you are struggling to improve your grades, then remember that help is available!

- Use Studiosity – submit your assignment to Studiosity to receive feedback on several areas. This might highlight the need for improvement in a particular element, which might help to lift your marks.
- Attend a Study Skills Drop-in – speak to your Study Skills Librarian for advice on areas for improvement in your assignments or bring your assignment feedback to turn it into action.

Understand the assignment

One of the most common causes of low marks are failure to understand the assignment question or brief (Wyse, 2006).

- Keep a copy of the assignment question close to you when writing. That way, you can revisit it regularly to make sure your writing is staying on track and you are answering the question.
- Make sure you find out how much of the overall mark your assignment is worth; then ensure the time you spend preparing and writing is proportionate (Race, 1992).
- Understand what markers are looking for in your assignment. Most module assignments will include the marking criteria for you to follow. This indicates what you need to do in order to achieve a certain mark. (For further advice on this, see Chapter 13 in Redman and Maples, 2017)

Make your reasons clear

Another cause of low marks is student failure to explain significance or demonstrate what is indicated by their argument.

- If you have included evidence, then make sure you clarify why it is included and what is indicated. If this is unclear then state your limitations or leave it out (The University of Edinburgh, 2016).
- Don't let the evidence speak for itself! A string of quotes in an assignment doesn't provide much worth without your own analysis and evaluation. This is where higher marks lie!

Structure

Another reason for low marks is poorly structured assignments. This can be easily rectified by leaving yourself time to edit and redraft.

- Consider your reader's perspective! Your reader is likely to feel frustrated and confused if your assignment doesn't follow a logical order, or simply jumps from topic to topic. Spend some time making sure your paragraphs flow and the argument you are creating is clear, ordered and well-crafted.

- Don't see introductions and conclusions as separate to your assignment; they are essential to the structure of your assignments. Your introduction should set the scene and provide a little bit of background for the reader, whilst your conclusion should summarise your argument and draw inferences.

Follow faculty guidance

Another common reason for low marks is failure to follow faculty/programme or even University guidance, such as style, spelling and grammar and referencing.

- Know your APA – all courses at Marjon use the APA Referencing system so make sure you understand how to cite in this format correctly.
- Follow any stylistic guidelines set out in your faculty in terms of how your assignments should be presented i.e. font family, size and line spacing.
- Proof read for pesky spelling mistakes and lengthy sentences. Some marking criteria stipulates accuracy so don't lose marks when it can be fixed so easily!

Use feedback & reflect

Make use of the feedback given to you at various stages of your course, plan to action the advice given and then apply it to your following assignments.

- If something is unclear, contact your lecturer and ask if they are able to go through the feedback with you, as having some examples to illustrate the feedback will help you identify the issues in further writing.
- Try using a proforma to analyse your feedback, as this will help separate what has been *said* from what you *think*. (For a pre-existing proforma, see Race, 2007, p. 102-103).

References

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