MACQUARIE
UNIVERSITY

FACULTY OF
BUSINESS AND ECONOMICS

HOW TO EMBED DISCIPLINE-SPECIFIC DISCOURSE

Learning through communication

Contents

Introduction

Discourse is the way spoken and written language is used to structure areas of knowledge and social practice. Discourse positions people as social subjects, such as accountants and other professionals. We are all teachers of discourse because when a student undertakes a program of study, part of that journey is learning the discourse of the discipline.

Disciplines and professions use language in a particular way – for example, words are used in a specific way (such as 'derivative' in finance or mathematics), or they are used only in that discipline – this is discipline-specific discourse. Jargon is one aspect of discipline-specific discourse, but it is deeper than the words used – discourse covers the way text is used in context.

All students benefit from the explicit learning of discipline-specific discourse because it enhances the learning of the content of the discipline and helps them to communicate that content in professional life.

This guide helps you to incorporate the learning of discipline-specific discourse in your classes. We look at:

- how discourse is embedded in the curriculum and academic roles
- learning outcomes, assessment tasks and learning and teaching activities that develop discourse skills
- marking rubrics
- how discourse operates.

We have presented case studies through the guide, to give you some concrete examples of how discourse skills have been embedded in particular units.

Learning outcomes of this guide

At the end of this guide you will be able to:

- Explain the relevance of discipline-specific discourse to the curriculum at all levels and in all academic roles.
- Embed discipline-specific discourse in your teaching in:
  - learning outcomes
  - assessment tasks
  - marking rubrics
  - learning and teaching activities.
- Explain how discourse operates.

Terminology

Discourse: a system of social and discursive practices that construct areas of knowledge, identities and relationships, primarily through language based texts[1].

Discipline-specific discourse: the uses of language in university discipline learning and teaching and in professional life in a particular discipline.

Communication: a term used in everyday language; here communication refers to discourse.

Genre: genre is a relatively stable set of conventions that is associated with a type of activity, such as informal chat, buying goods in a shop, a job interview, a poem or a scientific paper. A genre implies not only a particular text type, but also a particular process of producing, distributing and consuming texts[2].

Text: any product whether written or spoken; for example the transcript of an interview or a conversation would be called a 'text'[3].

Macro skills: there are four macro communication skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking.

Learning outcomes are a translation of the **program** objectives into measurable unit outcomes.

Assessment tasks measure the achievement of **learning outcomes** to a standard.

Learning and teaching activities contribute to the learning of the unit **learning outcomes**.

1 Fairclough, N. (1992) *Discourse and social change.* Cambridge: Polity Press, p. 73.

2 Ibid., p. 126.

3 Ibid., p. 4.

Discourse in practice

Discipline-specific discourse is very obvious to students once they enter the workplace, for example when attempting to speak to a non-specialist audience. Here is what a couple of our graduates said:

"Talking to colleagues we can go into a more technical discussion about our field and they'll understand the lingo. Predominantly, it's the lingo … whereas if I was to start an in-depth conversation with a client I'd have to explain to them what every word meant first."

"As soon as you drop a technical term, whether what you are saying is technical or not, if you drop anything that sounds technical then straight away they close up, 'I don't understand, too hard for me'."

These quotes emphasise the most obvious aspect of discipline-specific discourse – (technical) terminology. Addressing the use of terminology is perhaps the first step in strategies for discipline-specific discourse with a non-specialist audience. As shown in the table below, practitioners need to be able to move beyond dealing with terminology towards particular strategies aimed at a single outcome, that is, to the flexible use of discipline-specific discourse skills as appropriate to the context, audience and purpose.

Discipline-specific discourse with a non-specialist audience

	ACTION	INTENTION
Basic Ability to know and translate; definitions, words, symbols, notations, images of the discipline	Omit technical terms and equations.	To be more efficient and friendly. To avoid losing the audience.
	Avoid technical terms and repeat yourself in different ways – observing the response of your audience.	To simplify the language to help the audience to understand.
Simple Ability to know and translate; concepts, ideas, conventions of the discipline	Simplify ideas, use gesture and images.	To give an impression of a specialist concept – the audience will never understand the concept.
	Careful discourse to give an overview without detail.	To give an overview of a specialist concept – the audience does not want and/or need to understand.
	Careful exposition of ideas, explaining in different ways, teaching.	For the audience to understand.
	Inspire and sell ideas instead of explaining.	To win a contract or an argument – audience cannot or does not need to understand details.
Holistic Sophisticated use of discourse	Use discipline and discipline-specific discourse in a flexible way as the situation requires. Check for accuracy and correctness.	Justify the specialist content in an appropriate context so that the audience will understand the consequences of the content. Present ideas ethically and correctly.

Case Study 1

ACCG224 Intermediate Financial Accounting

Context

ACCG224 Intermediate Financial Accounting is a core unit in the professional accounting degree, which is accredited by all three professional accounting bodies in Australia. As a professional degree a key aim of the program is to prepare students for professional practice, and to this end, technical knowledge and skills must be complemented by the communication skills required for students to communicate their knowledge to specialist and non-specialist audiences. ACCG224 addresses this aim by developing oral and written communication skills, as specified in one of the learning outcomes.

The accounting programs at Macquarie University are very popular, and so ACCG224 is a large unit with 1,200 students per year. Classes consist of a two hour lecture and a two hour tutorial each week. There are no more than 25 students in each tutorial.

Assessment

An oral presentation worth 5% is designed to assess oral communication skills. Each student makes a 5 minute presentation to their tutorial group from week eight onwards. The presentations are assessed on the criteria of content, structure, clarity and engagement with audience using a marking rubric.

A research-based business report responding to a case study (worth 15%) is designed to assess written communication skills. One-third of the available marks are allocated to criteria related to communication; that is; structure, expression, presentation and academic conventions.

Learning and teaching activities

The learning and teaching activities in tutorials focus on getting the students to interact through group activities, presenting answers and class discussions, in order to develop their confidence in talking about the subject matter. The two hour long tutorials facilitate this by reducing time pressures. The oral presentations do not start until week eight in order to give students the opportunity to practise talking about the subject matter before they give their presentations.

Specific support is embedded in the unit for both the oral presentation and the business report. For the oral presentation, specific communication support is provided in a lecture on how to develop, structure and deliver the presentation. For the business report, materials (including a YouTube video) are delivered via iLearn.

Outcomes

ACCG224 is designed to develop students' confidence in talking about the subject matter. The more confident students become the more they are prepared to talk, and this facilitates their learning in this and other units as the students are more engaged. Even some of the most able students technically may be very timid about speaking out and thus are unable to demonstrate their ability. Having to give an oral presentation forces students to overcome any reticence they may have about speaking in public on a topic, and many students flourish once they have overcome this barrier. Teaching staff on the 300 level units subsequent to this unit report that students are better prepared to undertake their units.

Elaine Evans & Rajni Mala

1. Embedding discourse skills throughout **THE CURRICULUM**

The importance of discipline-specific discourse in reflected in the inclusion of communication skills at all levels of the curriculum.

Accreditation
· AQF Standards
· TEQSA Threshold learning outcomes
· Professional standards

Program
· University/Faculty graduate capabilities
· Program goals & objectives

Unit
· Learning outcomes
· Learning and teaching activities
· Assessment
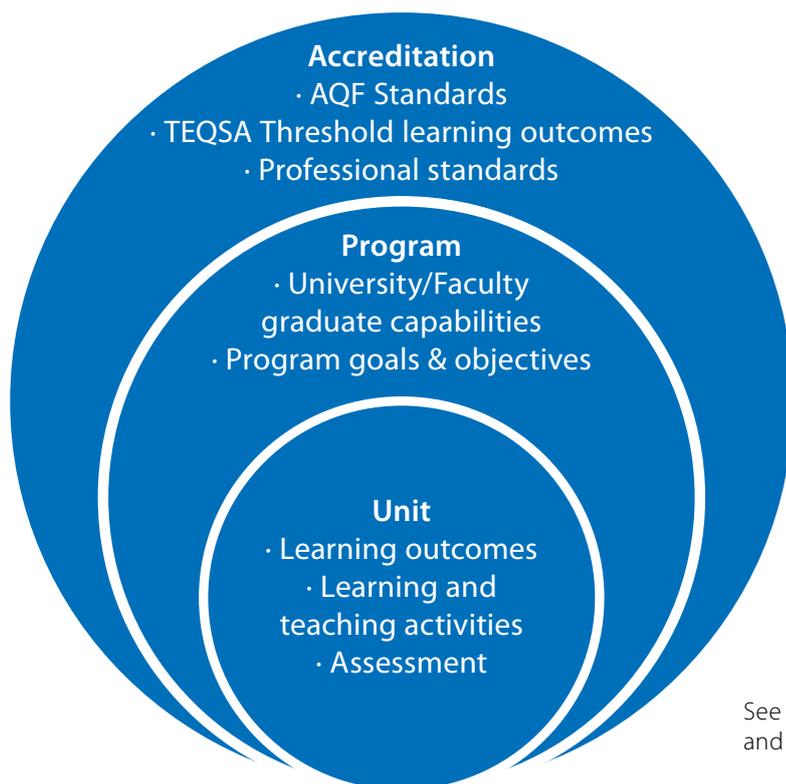
See the opposite page for examples of the standards and other criteria shown in the diagram.

Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF)

Skills graduates of a Bachelor Degree will have: communication skills to present a clear, coherent and independent exposition of knowledge and ideas.

TEQSA Threshold learning outcomes e.g. Accounting

Graduates of a bachelor degree would be expected to justify and communicate accounting advice and ideas in straightforward collaborative contexts involving both accountants and non-accountants.

University graduate capability

Effective communication – We want to develop in our students the ability to communicate and convey their views in forms that are effective with different audiences. We want our graduates to take with them the capability to read, listen, question, gather and evaluate information resources in a variety of formats, assess, write clearly, speak effectively, and to use visual communication and communication technologies as appropriate.

FBE graduate capability

Engaged global citizen – Our graduates will be familiar with the challenges of contemporary business internationally. They will understand the need to respect diversity, be inclusive and ethical. **They will have the ability to communicate and convey their views in forms that are effective with different audiences.**

Program goals and objectives Bachelor of Commerce – Professional Accounting

Goals – Graduates will have acquired the skills to work individually and in teams and to effectively communicate both orally and through other appropriate mediums, with colleagues and stakeholders from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Objectives – Analyse and communicate accounting knowledge and ideas to accounting and regulatory audiences.

Analyse and communicate accounting knowledge and ideas to non-accounting audiences.

Unit learning outcomes – MKTG101

1. Assess the marketing environment and understand its impact upon key theoretic marketing principles including product, pricing, place and promotion.

2. Apply marketing techniques and theories to develop creative solutions to marketing problems.

3. Use oral skills to educate and engage a target audience about marketing.

4. Participate as an effective and involved member of a small group.

5. Use of written skills to integrate key marketing theoretic concepts and to create a coherent and theoretically rigorous argument.

6. Use secondary research skills to collect, collate and integrate scholarly peer reviewed journal opinion on applied marketing topics.

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Program mapping

All units require communication skills, but it is not necessary or advisable to have communication skills as an assessable outcome of every unit in a program, and some units are more suited to the development of communication skills than others. Exactly which units are used to develop communication skills should be established with the program coordinator. The figure below shows one way that the development of communication skills may be allocated amongst units in a typical undergraduate major.

		FOCUS
100 Level Unit **Reading**	**100 Level Unit** **Listening**	**Components of text** ↓
200 Level Unit **Writing**	**200 Level Unit** **Speaking**	**Transforming text** ↓
300 Level Unit **300 Level Unit** **Writing for professional practice**	**300 Level Unit** **300 Level Unit** **Speaking for professional practice**	**Creating text**
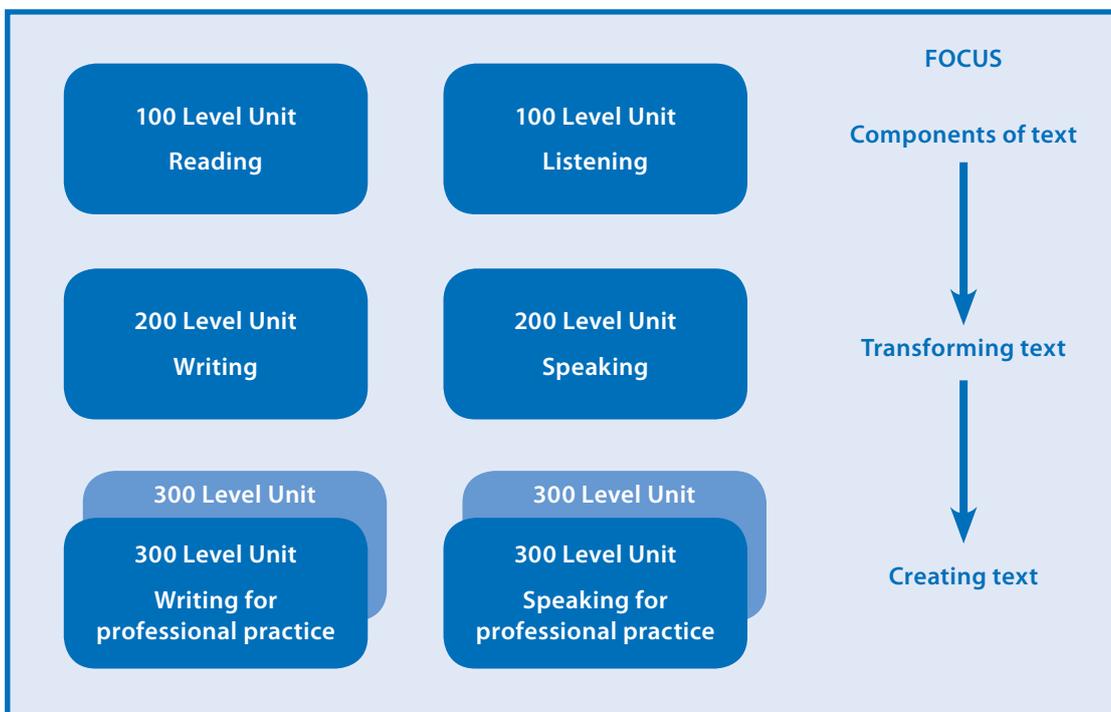
Roles

Clarity with regard to the roles and responsibilities regarding the development of discipline-specific discourse skills can ensure that these skills are embedded appropriately and will actually help successful learning. The following table briefly outlines the roles of the classroom teacher, unit convenor, program coordinator and accreditation coordinator as they relate to planning and assessment practice.

Alignment between roles[4]

AREAS OF ACTIVITY	CLASS TEACHER	UNIT CONVENOR	PROGRAM COORDINATOR	ACCREDITATION COORDINATOR
Design and planning of learning activities and/or programs of study	• Designing and planning classes • Structuring the class and the teaching activities	• Constructive alignment of unit • Liaising with relevant stakeholders • Writing unit learning outcomes • Including appropriate learning activities and resources	• Set program goals and objectives in conjunction with stakeholders • Coordinate the setting and alignment of unit learning outcomes over the program • Ensure program goals are addressed across core units • Differentiating curriculum depending on stage in program	• Ensure program goals meet government and external requirements for the level of qualification
Assessment and giving feedback to learners	• Provide effective and timely feedback to individuals • Provide opportunities for reflection on learning	• Design effective assessment tasks • Provide clear instructions and marking criteria • Moderate between markers • Measure and report on the attainment of the unit learning outcomes • Make changes to unit based on feedback	• Measure the attainment of the program goals and objectives • Implement improvements based on data	• Report on the attainment of the goals • Design improvements based on data

Aspects of the different responsibilities for the development of discipline-specific discourse within each role overlap and link together, so it is important that all involved have a common understanding of each role. A shared understanding will help to promote and maintain continuity and alignment in learning. Increasingly the role of program leader is of paramount importance, because they have an overview of practice from which they are best placed to monitor and direct actions that support both staff and student learning.

4 Adapted from the Professional development framework in Brown, N. et al. (2010)
   http://www.herdsa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/conference/2010/papers/HERDSA2010_Brown_N.pdf

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Alignment in units

Discourse skills are embedded in units by being articulated in the learning outcomes, assessed in the assessment tasks and developed in the teaching and learning activities, following the principle of constructive alignment[5]. Constructive alignment means that assessment tasks assess achievement of the learning outcomes, and teaching and learning activities prepare the students to successfully complete the assessment tasks. Learning outcomes, assessment tasks and teaching and learning activities for communication skills are considered in turn in the following sections.

```
┌──────────────┐        ┌──────────────┐        ┌──────────────┐
│   Learning   │ ◄────► │  Assessment  │ ◄────► │ Learning and │
│   outcomes   │        │    tasks     │        │   teaching   │
│              │        │              │        │  activities  │
└──────────────┘        └──────────────┘        └──────────────┘
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5 Biggs, J. (2003) *Teaching for quality learning at university* (2nd ed.). Buckingham, UK: Open University Press/Society for Research into Higher Education.

2. Learning **OUTCOMES**

Learning outcomes *are a translation of the* ***program objectives*** *into measurable unit outcomes*

If your unit is identified as developing communication skills in the program, this will need to be articulated in the learning outcomes. The outcomes may include:

- level – degree of difficulty/scope (e.g. basic, broad)
- personal responsibility – degree of autonomy/support (e.g. independently, as a group)
- perspective – discipline, ideology (e.g. accounting, the role of accountants)
- context – definition of scope (e.g. local, international).[6]

Because learning outcomes are measurable, it is useful to begin each one with an active verb; that is, a verb that has a concrete output that can be easily assessed, for example "apply" or "evaluate"[7]. The object of the verb – that is, whatever needs to be applied or evaluated – follows the verb e.g. "Apply marketing techniques to solve marketing problems".

When writing learning outcomes for units that focus on the development of communication skills, you also need to consider the extent to which you make these skills **explicit** and **specific**.

Explicit versus implicit

The extent to which the development of communication skills is a key aim of your unit will inform the extent to which you make them explicit in your learning outcomes, and therefore the extent to which you teach and assess discourse skills.

The following table shows the learning outcomes and the required macro skills for a core first year marketing unit.

LEARNING OUTCOMES	EXPLICIT MACRO SKILLS	IMPLICIT MACRO SKILLS
1. Assess the marketing environment and understand its impact upon key theoretic marketing principles including product, pricing, place and promotion.		Reading
2. Apply marketing techniques and theories to develop creative solutions to marketing problems.		Writing/speaking
3. Use oral skills to educate and engage a target audience about marketing.	Speaking	
4. Participate as an effective and involved member of a small group.		Listening and speaking
5. Use of written skills to integrate key marketing theoretic concepts and to create a coherent and theoretically rigorous argument.	Writing	
6. Use secondary research skills to collect, collate and integrate scholarly peer-reviewed journal opinion on applied marketing topics.		Reading

6 Wood, L. N. (2012) *How to align assessment: Learning through a program approach*. Sydney, Australia: Macquarie University. Available at http://staff.mq.edu.au/teaching/teaching_development/resources/

7 Macquarie University Learning and Teaching Centre (n. d.) *Writing learning outcomes*. Available at http://staff.mq.edu.au/teaching/curriculum_development/assessment/toolkit/

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This example shows that there is a choice between making the communication skills explicit, as for speaking and writing skills in outcomes 3 and 5; or implicit, as for the reading and writing or speaking in outcomes 1 and 2. Of course, this is more of a spectrum than an either / or decision, with outcomes 4 and 6 somewhere between explicit and implicit.

Explicit   **Implicit**

⬅——➡

Use oral skills to educate and engage a target audience about marketing.

Participate as an effective and involved member of a small group.

Apply marketing techniques and theories to develop creative solutions to marketing problems.

If your unit is specifically developing communication skills you need to make this as explicit as possible in your learning outcomes and you will need to assign a significant assessment weight.

General versus specific

An important consideration from the point of view of alignment when writing learning outcomes is the extent to which they are general versus specific[8]. If a learning outcome is too general it is more like a goal or aim rather than a statement of what the student will be able to know or do, and therefore it will be difficult to assess and design teaching and learning activities. On the other hand, if the learning outcome is too specific it will unnecessarily restrict what you can assess and teach from one offering to another. An example of this tension is shown in the diagram below.

Too general   **Just right**   **Too specific**

⬅——➡

Develop communication skills.

Use oral skills to educate and engage a target audience about marketing.

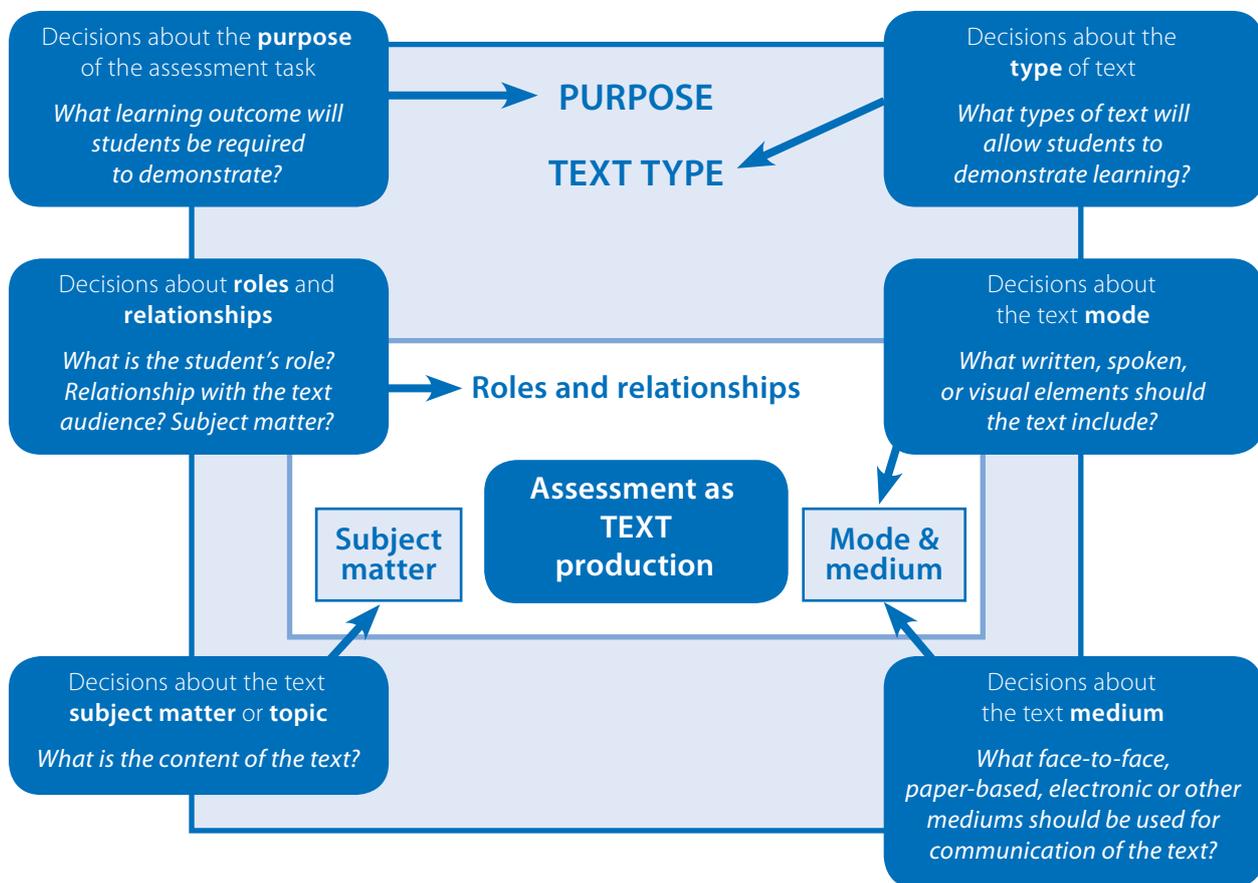Prepare a presentation to inform a group of school leavers about the 4 Ps of marketing.

For more information on writing learning outcomes refer to: "Writing learning outcomes" and "Setting learning outcomes" at http://staff.mq.edu.au/teaching/curriculum_development/assessment/toolkit/

8 University of Tasmania (n .d.) *Questions to ask when critiquing a unit* (Version 9). Available at http://www.teaching-learning.utas.edu.au/ assessment/how-do-i-write-criteria-sheets/ step-1-evaluate-quality-of-learning-outcomes

3. Assessment

Assessment tasks measure the achievement of *learning outcomes to a standard*

Having embedded communication skills in the learning outcomes, the assessment tasks must be designed to assess these outcomes. A useful framework to use is an assessment task design framework developed by Hughes, 2009[9].

Decisions about the **purpose** of the assessment task

What learning outcome will students be required to demonstrate?

PURPOSE

TEXT TYPE

Decisions about the **type** of text

What types of text will allow students to demonstrate learning?

Decisions about **roles** and **relationships**

What is the student's role? Relationship with the text audience? Subject matter?

Roles and relationships

Decisions about the text **mode**

What written, spoken, or visual elements should the text include?

Subject matter

Assessment as TEXT production

Mode & medium

Decisions about the text **subject matter** or **topic**

What is the content of the text?

Decisions about the text **medium**

What face-to-face, paper-based, electronic or other mediums should be used for communication of the text?

9 Adapted from Hughes, C. (2009) Assessment as text production: Drawing on systemic functional linguistics to frame the design and analysis of assessment tasks. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 34(5), pp. 553-563.

In this framework, the purpose of the assessment task is the learning outcome being assessed. Using the learning outcome as a starting point the framework can be used to design an aligned assessment task. In the following table the framework is applied to one of the marketing unit learning outcomes from the previous section.

DECISION	
Purpose – What learning outcome will the students be required to demonstrate?	"Use oral skills to educate and engage a target audience about marketing."
Text type – What type of text will allow the student to demonstrate this learning?	The outcome specifies "oral skills" to "educate'' (inform) an "audience" so the most obvious Macquarie assessment type is a presentation.
Roles and relationships – What is the student's role and what is their relationship to the (hypothetical) audience and the subject matter?	The roles for a presentation are most likely to be student to student. The word "educate" indicates that the student is expected to be in a position of relative expertise to the audience – their fellow students – in relation to the subject matter.
Subject matter – What is the subject matter or topic? What is the content of the text?	"Marketing" defines the broad topic, the expertise required to "educate" indicates that the student will have to present a specific topic in more detail. The student could be allocated a specific topic, asked to pick from a range of topics, or to develop a topic of their own choice.
Mode – What written, spoken, or visual elements should the text include?	"Oral skills" means that the text will be primarily spoken, but presentations can include written and visual elements so the extent to which these are required and contribute to the mark should be specified.
Medium – What face-to-face, paper-based, electronic or other mediums should be used for communication of the text?	Presentations are generally face-to-face supported by other mediums, e.g. data projectors. In an online environment, the presentation could be an uploaded video.

Assessment types

The extent to which an assessment type is suitable for developing and assessing discourse skills primarily depends on the extent to which it involves the use of the skill being assessed. The exceptions to this are final examinations and class tests which are not suitable for assessing writing skills, despite the fact they may involve a lot of writing – the production of written texts under exam conditions is not authentic in relation to the production of texts in professional life.

We generally think of essays, presentations and case studies when we think of assessing communication skills, but other assessment types can be used, and may indeed be necessary, to develop and assess the full range of macro skills; that is, to separately assess the reading and listening skills implied in the production of written and spoken texts.

In the table on the next page the assessment types used at Macquarie University (except final exam and class tests) are shown down the left-hand side. The next column gives some examples of the text types we commonly ask students to produce, the purpose of the text, followed in the next column by the macro skills the tasks involve. The final column gives an example of a learning outcome, assuming the unit is focusing on the development of discourse skills.

ASSESSMENT TYPES	EXAMPLES OF TEXT TYPES	TEXT PURPOSE	MACRO SKILLS	EXAMPLE OF COMMUNICATION SKILLS LEARNING OUTCOME
Case study/report	organisation analysis, business report, research report	Provide a detailed analysis of a situation with conclusions/ recommendations using empirical data and research.	writing reading listening	Write a report on a research project.
Essay	discussion, exposition, academic paper review	Present a coherent argument based on thorough research to provide insight into the topic area.	writing reading listening	Write a critique of international and national legal frameworks that address sustainability and climate change.
Presentation	class presentation (peer-to-peer), sales pitch	To inform (and persuade) an audience.	speaking writing reading listening	Use oral skills to educate and engage a target audience about marketing.
Creative production (design a product or procedure, develop a strategy or plan)	design specification, business proposal	Provide a product to meet the needs of a particular situation/entertain an audience.	speaking writing reading listening	Develop a training program, with a group of others, to induct new staff at McDonald's.
Assignment (written responses)	explanations, problem questions	To provide an explanation/ solution.	reading listening writing	Write explanations of the accounting concepts underlying the treatment of financial transactions.
Assessed coursework	calculations, data analysis	Provide solutions/ complete activities.	reading listening	Restate basic accounting procedures.
Class participation	class discussion	Share and develop understanding of the relevance of academic ideas.	reading listening	Discuss contemporary issues faced by learning and development practitioners.
Quiz	calculations, short answers	Provide brief responses to questions.	reading listening	What are the 4Ps of marketing?

Adapted from: Nesi & Gardner, 2012[10]; Wood, 2012[11].

10 Nesi, H. & Gardner S. (2012) *Genres across the disciplines: Student writing in Higher Education.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

11 Wood, L. N. (2012) *How to align assessment: Learning through a program approach.* Sydney, Australia: Macquarie University. Available at http://staff.mq.edu.au/teaching/ teaching_development/resources/

Case Study 2

MKTG802 Marketing Communications

Context

MKTG802 Marketing Communications is a core postgraduate marketing unit that examines the role of advertising and public relations as communication tools to promote brands and products. A key outcome of the unit is for students to be able to present the marketing plans they develop, as reflected in the learning outcome, "effectively communicate each component of the marketing communications campaign in both oral and written forms". Students may complete the unit early in their Masters degree. There is a high number of international students, many of whom have had little or no experience of giving oral presentations (in English). Classes consist of a three hour seminar each week.

Assessment

The communication learning outcome is primarily assessed using a group project worth 30% involving both an oral presentation and a written report. In addition, the first assignment task is an individual presentation worth only 5% that acts as a diagnostic for students' presentation skills.

The group project consists of four different stages. The aim is to enable the students to complete the task in increments, with feedback on each stage that they can incorporate and use to improve the next stage. Students choose their own groups for the project, with the only criterion being that the groups must be multicultural. In order to facilitate this, time is set aside for an icebreaking activity in the first class to give the students the opportunity to get to know each other. Marking guides based on the criteria are given to students before the task is due and are used to provide written feedback. This includes peer evaluation of the student's contribution to the group task.

Learning and teaching activities

The learning and teaching activities in the unit are primarily interactive, e.g. case studies and discussion questions. Students are encouraged and motivated to participate in discussion in order to develop their communication skills and make them feel more comfortable about speaking in public. A key strategy here is to use the students who speak in the first few weeks as models and mentors. Teaching staff approach these students privately to encourage them to keep contributing, but also to ask questions of other students to get them to join in. Almost without exception, such students respond well to the responsibility of this role and are willing to encourage others. At least 15-20 minutes is allocated at the end of each class for group meetings. This allows teaching staff to observe how the groups are interacting and making progress with the project, and answer questions from students. This support helps international students in particular feel more comfortable when interacting with local students.

Feedback plays a very important role in the students' learning and is seen as a learning activity. Feedback on the assessment tasks is given both in writing and face-to-face no later than a week after the task is submitted. This shows students that teaching staff respect the work they produce.

Outcomes

The approach described here has been very successful in improving the learning outcomes for the students. The combination of assessment design, learning and teaching activities, with careful attention to making requirements and expectations clear, and high quality, timely feedback allows students to practise and develop both oral and written communication skills. The quality of the work submitted has vastly improved from the time when students simply submitted a final report at the end of the semester. Feedback from students via learning evaluations shows that they feel the unit is hard work; nonetheless they find it rewarding because they are learning key skills for their discipline.

Stephanie Yimin Huang

4. Marking **RUBRICS**

*Rubrics specify the **criteria** and **standards** for the **assessment task***

A marking rubric helps you to communicate the standards of the assessment task to students and markers and is an effective way to implement standards-based assessment.

A marking rubric contains descriptors of the standards for a number of criteria, usually in the form of a grid or matrix.

Standards

	NA	F	P	Cr	D	HD

Criteria　　　　**Descriptors**
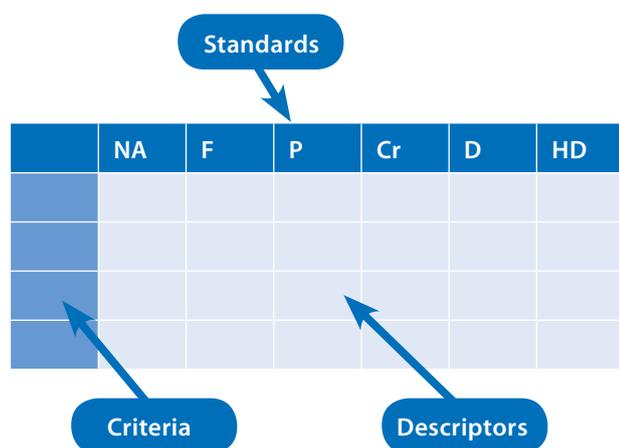
Criteria are the properties or characteristics on which the assessment task is going to be judged[12]. The criteria should be determined by considering the learning outcomes you are assessing and how you expect the students to demonstrate these outcomes in the assessment task.

Standards are levels of achievement and should be set in accordance with the assessment policy.

Descriptors describe the qualities required to demonstrate achievement of each standard for each criterion.

Developing criteria[13]

- State the criteria as simply and concisely as possible (e.g. structure).
- Avoid reference to quality in the criteria by avoiding adverbs (e.g. 'logically') and adjectives (e.g. 'effective').
- Deal with only one property or characteristic in each criterion.
- Keep criteria to a manageable number; 4 is a good guide.
- Focus on what is most relevant to the learning outcomes.
- Keep in mind the graduate capabilities/program goals the assessment is targeting.

Developing descriptors[14]

- Pitch descriptors at a reasonable level (i.e. not unachievable, but not too easy).
- Specify demonstrable qualities (e.g. identifies major issues).
- Aim to be precise and specific.
- Use language likely to be understood by students.
- Use adjectives or adverbs to define achievement at the different standards (e.g. much, some, little, none, critical, appropriate, analytical).
- Frame standards positively (i.e. what is required, rather than what is to be avoided) so that students know what they are aiming for.
- Don't be overly precise or specific, so as to avoid becoming overly complex or trivialising complex learning outcomes.

12 Armstrong, S., Chan, S., Malfroy, J. & Thomson, R. (2008) *Standards-based approach to assessment at UWS*. Sydney, Australia: Teaching Development Unit (TDU), University of Western Sydney.

13 Macquarie University (2009) *Standards-based assessment*. Available at http://staff.mq.edu.au/teaching/curriculum_development/assessment/toolkit/

14 Derived from Armstrong, S., Chan, S., Malfroy, J. & Thomson, R. (2008) *Standards-based approach to assessment at UWS*. Sydney, Australia: Teaching Development Unit (TDU), University of Western Sydney.

Benefits of marking rubrics[15]

Using rubrics has benefits for both students and staff:

- Preparing a rubric enables better and more explicit definition of assessment requirements and expectations of the range of student achievement on particular assessment tasks.
- Staff teams can develop more consistency in the way they interpret assessment tasks and students' work through developing rubrics jointly.
- Rubrics enable clear and consistent communication with students about assessment requirements and the way that grades are differentiated between different levels of performance.
- Students can benefit from more active engagement in and responsibility for their learning through creating and applying rubrics to self-assess and peer-assess, thereby increasing their understanding of assessment processes and particular tasks, and enhancing their metacognitive awareness.
- Richer feedback to students using rubrics provides them with a clearer idea of where they sit in a framework of orderly development towards increased expertise in a learning domain.
- Using an assessment rubric facilitates increased efficiency in marking and grading processes for staff.

15 Macquarie University (n. d.) *Using assessment rubrics*. Available at http://staff.mq.edu.au/teaching/curriculum_development/assessment/toolkit/

Feedback from students about marking rubrics

- *Rubrics definitely give us direction on our assessment tasks, e.g. what you should focus on, what areas you should discuss more and put more effort in. We can therefore produce higher quality work. The structure of the assignment can be improved.*
- *Rubrics help us improve our academic performance. For instance, when the lecturer gives us a question, we can refer to rubrics to double-check the standards or the requirements of that particular task. This lets us know the standards of getting different grades like High Distinction, Distinction, Pass or Fail and understand the grading process.*
- *Actually, all levels (from Year 1 to Year 4) and all units (no matter which disciplines) should have rubrics. I believe rubrics can help us go beyond the expectations of the convenors, so that we can achieve our best. We strive for better marks/grades. We do not just meet the minimum requirements.*
- *It makes the expectations of the assessment tasks more objective. They are certainly beneficial to all the students.*
- *For tutors: if they have criteria to follow, they are able to grade our work consistently and standardise the marking.*
- *For essays requiring more writing skills, rubrics can help me edit my writing and let me know how I can write my paper in a logical way, how I can formulate my arguments and how I can improve the flow of my assignment.*

The Big Picture

The Grading Policy at Macquarie University is essentially a standards-based policy. This means that the grade descriptors (Fail, Pass, Credit, Distinction, High Distinction) provide information about the quality of performance a student must demonstrate in order to achieve their allocated grade. The grades that students get are based on the standards they achieve and demonstrate in relation to the learning outcomes of the unit. (Grades are not determined with any reference to the achievement of other students or to fit a predetermined distribution.) Furthermore, generic grade descriptors in the policy are designed to provide university wide standards for awarding a final grade. .

While the policy specifies the standard for the overall grade for the unit, it is, however, up to unit convenors to develop the standards for specific assessment tasks, taking into account the level of the unit. Rubrics are an effective tool to implement this policy because they involve specifying the criteria on which the assessment task is to be judged and the standards that need to be demonstrated for a particular mark or grade. Thus by aligning the criteria in the rubrics with the learning outcomes and the standards with the Macquarie University Grade Descriptors for the level of the unit, we are effectively implementing the University policy.

The Macquarie University Grading Policy can be accessed at **http://www.mq.edu.au/policy/docs/grading/policy.htm**l

Marking rubrics for communication skills

When we are assessing student achievement of learning outcomes relating to discourse we are essentially assessing the texts that students produce. It is useful to consider some key features of texts when developing marking rubrics. The advantage of using these features is that you can ensure you are assessing all aspects of the text (or alternatively be clear about what you are/are not assessing) and you can define and distinguish criteria more logically.

Here are two different approaches you could use (text function and text structure).

1) Text functions

As indicated in the Assessment Task Design Framework, texts have multiple functions:

- Subject matter
- Roles and relationships
- Mode and medium.

These three functions can be considered in relation to the learning outcomes and the assessment task to develop criteria for your rubric. For example, the table below details possible criteria for the learning outcome "Use oral skills to educate and engage a target audience about marketing" and the assessment task as described in the first part of in section 3.

DECISION	DETAILS	CRITERIA
Subject matter – What is the subject matter or topic? What is the content of the text?	"Marketing" defines the broad topic; the expertise required to "educate" indicates that the student will have to present a specific topic in more detail. The student could be allocated a specific topic, asked to pick from a range of topics or to develop a topic of their own choice.	*Content* Quality – extent to which the content demonstrates expertise in the topic. Appropriate – extent to which the content is appropriate for the audience.
Roles and relationships – What is the student's role and what is their relationship to the (hypothetical) audience and the subject matter?	The role for a presentation is most likely to be student to student. The word "educate" indicates that the student is expected to be in a position of relative expertise to the audience – their fellow students – in relation to the subject matter.	*Roles and relationships* Roles – extent to which language demonstrates relative expertise in the subject matter. Relationship to audience – extent to which language used is appropriate to audience.
Mode – What written, spoken, or visual elements should the text include?	"Oral skills" means that the text will be primarily spoken, but presentations can include written and visual elements so the extent to which these are required and contribute to the mark should be specified.	*Mode* Structure – extent to which content is appropriately organised. Use of other modes – extent to which written/visual elements are used to support the presentation.
Medium – What face-to-face, paper-based, electronic or other mediums should be used for communication of the text?	Presentations are generally face-to-face supported by other mediums, e.g. projectors.	*Medium* Face-to-face delivery – quality of face-to-face delivery. Other mediums – quality of slides etc.

The criteria above provide a starting point. They could be varied by dividing them into more specific criteria, or combining them into broader criteria depending on your focus. For example, the criteria above do not explicitly mention "engaging" the audience although this is mentioned in the learning outcome. In these criteria, engaging the audience is implicit in including the right content and delivering it in the appropriate way. However, if the requirement to engage the audience is considered more important then specific criteria could be added.

In addition, if a task is assessing more than one learning outcome it may be necessary to reduce the criteria for communication skills and replace them with criteria that are appropriate for the other learning outcomes you are assessing.

Once the criteria have been developed, the descriptor for each standard for each criterion can be developed. Below is an example for one of the criteria, "Structure of text".

	NA (0)	FAIL	PASS	CREDIT	DISTINCTION	HIGH DISTINCTION
Structure	1. No attempt, or 2. the answer is copied or substantially copied	Content is not consistently organised into a clear structure	Content is organised into a structure that can be followed by the audience	Content is organised into a logical structure that is made explicit to the audience	Content is organised into a structure that is appropriate to the topic/ the needs of the audience. The structure is made explicit throughout the presentation	Content is organised into an appropriate structure that significantly contributes to the audience's understanding of the topic. The structure is made explicit throughout the presentation

2) Text structure

Assessment tasks often require students to produce a particular type (see the table of "Assessment Types" at the end of the previous chapter), and these text types have conventional structures consisting of required typical elements in a particular order[16]. For example, a discussion essay would be expected to have an introduction outlining the issues; multiple paragraphs presenting alternative arguments; and finally a conclusion that puts forward a final position based on the issues[17].

The typical structural elements of a text can be used as a starting point for the criteria in your marking rubric. For example, in a 200 level Psychology unit students are asked to produce a research report. In the marking rubric, the criteria are organised around the structural elements: introduction, hypothesis, method, results, discussion and references, with an additional criterion for low level spelling/grammar issues. Here is an extract from this rubric for the hypothesis element.

	NA (0)	FAIL	PASS	CREDIT	DISTINCTION	HIGH DISTINCTION
Hypotheses **Are hypotheses clearly stated? Do the hypotheses flow logically from the introduction?**	1. No attempt, or 2. the answer is copied or substantially copied	No hypotheses presented	Hypotheses present but not clearly stated	Clearly stated hypotheses. No link with introduction (i.e. the hypotheses are not clearly justified by the foregoing information)	Clearly stated hypotheses. Link to introduction is present but not strong	Clearly stated hypotheses which flow logically from the introduction

You can see that the criterion and descriptors specify the key expectations for the hypothesis element of the text.

16 Hasan, R. (1985) The structure of a text. In M. A. K. Halliday & R. Hasan (Eds.), *Language, context, and text: Aspects of language in a social-semiotic perspective*. Melbourne, Australia: Deakin University Press, pp. 52-69.

17 Nesi, H. & Gardner, S. (2012) *Genres across the disciplines: Student writing in Higher Education*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 100.

Case Study 3

ACST402 Actuarial Control Cycle

Context

ACST402 Actuarial Control Cycle is one of two units that actuarial students take in their final (fourth) year of study which aim to give an overview of actuarial work, in both conventional and emerging fields. Students are expected to integrate the statistical and actuarial models and computational techniques covered in their previous three years of undergraduate study, and apply these to the ongoing management of financial products, services and schemes. The ability to present this application in verbal and written forms is embedded in the learning outcomes of the unit.

Assessment

In order to assess communication skills, students have to define the context and scope of a major actuarial task and present this to a client in the form of an executive summary and slides, as well as an oral presentation. The context of the assessment varies each offering across real and hypothetical scenarios – in recent years it has covered the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), a proposed National Health Savings Scheme, and a hypothetical State Insurance Scheme protecting against catastrophic weather events. Students generally work in groups. The presentation sessions are convened by actuaries who are industry practitioner experts.

The assessment criteria focus on the appropriateness of the content and delivery for the target audience and context. For the oral presentation, students receive feedback from the industry practitioner convenor on what was good and what area could be improved. Written feedback is provided on the slides and executive summary.

Learning and teaching activities

ACST402 builds on the presentation skills developed in the 300 level actuarial capstone unit, but focuses closely on application of actuarial knowledge to real tasks, taking into account the constraints of the commercial, regulatory and professional environment. Each topic in the unit addresses aspects of these environments and hence equips the student to complete the tasks.

In addition, students are encouraged to participate in the Actuarial Students Society (ASSOC) critical thinking competition, where teams of students receive a question in the morning and debate the question the same afternoon. The Department funds experts in presentation skills to provide assistance to students participating in the competition.
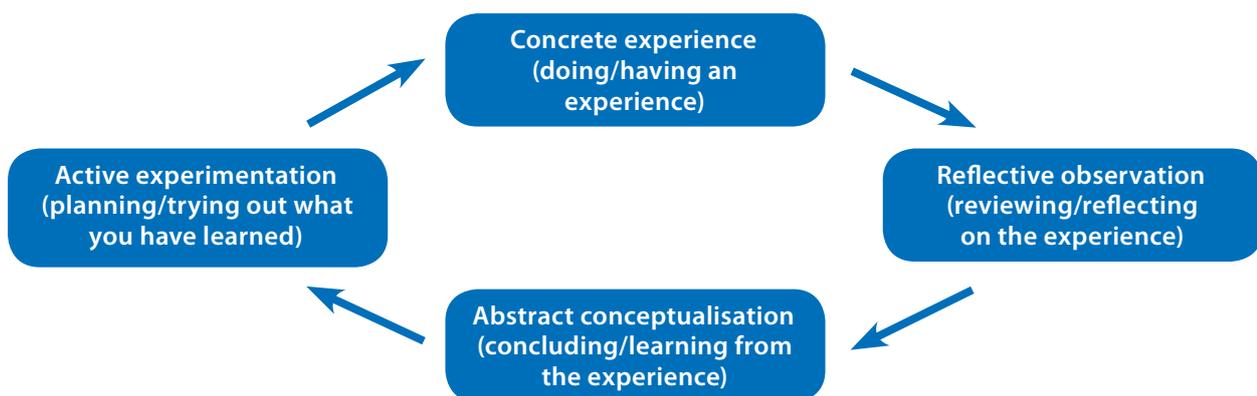
Outcomes

Students enjoy the applied nature of the task, the opportunity to be creative, the freedom to work individually or in groups as they choose and the opportunity to present their work to an industry expert. Almost all students achieve a Pass and the average mark is 70%. The industry experts are always impressed at the quality and creativity of student presentations.

Leonie Tickle

5. Learning and **TEACHING ACTIVITIES**

Learning and teaching activities develve the communication skills students need to meet the required standards in the assessment tasks

This section outlines some strategies and techniques we can use in our learning and teaching activities to develop communication skills. An overarching principle for designing and delivering these activities is that students have opportunities to practise the skills and reflect on their efficacy. To ensure there are opportunities to practice and reflect, the experiential learning cycle developed by Kolb[18] is a useful way to think about and plan your activities.

Concrete experience
(doing/having an
experience)

Reflective observation
(reviewing/reflecting
on the experience)

Abstract conceptualisation
(concluding/learning from
the experience)

Active experimentation
(planning/trying out what
you have learned)

18 Kolb, D. A. (1984) *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development.* Upper Saddle River, USA: Prentice-Hall.

Talking the talk[19]

Model the use of discipline-specific discourse – When delivering content to students it is important that we model discipline-specific discourse. Much of the time this is inherent in the content we deliver, however, it is important to model the discourse correctly and consistently. It is also helpful to let students know when you are moving between discipline-specific discourse and natural language.

Draw attention to and name the discipline-specific discourse practices – Be conscious of using discipline-specific discourse, and take the time to stop and explain the practices you are using.

Rephrase students' everyday language in discipline-specific discourse – When students use everyday language when speaking this technique can be valuable, because it demonstrates engagement and understanding. Help the students rephrase their contribution in discipline-specific discourse by asking prompt questions such as, "So how would you explain that using the concepts in the reading?".

Activities

Semantic web (Concept map) – As a class, construct a semantic web to develop familiarity with key terms and concepts. The semantic map can be used as a resource for future written or spoken tasks.

Dictogloss – Read a short (1-2 minutes read aloud) text to students 3 times (the students should be familiar with the ideas and vocabulary in the text). During the third reading students take notes. Students then work in pairs to reconstruct the text. Finally, as a class or in larger groups, compare the reconstructions to the original text, discussing differences.

Jigsaw groups – Students research an aspect of a topic in groups to become experts. The class re-forms so that there is one expert on each aspect in each group. Each student takes turns to educate the rest of the group in their aspect of the topic[20].

Joint construction – Work as a class to write a short text (e.g. an abstract) or part of a text (e.g. introduction or conclusion) together. It is helpful to get a few students to act as scribes, as this will allow you to facilitate contributions from the class and prompt the use of discipline-specific discourse.

Cloze exercises – A cloze exercise is a text with words taken out and replaced with gaps that have to be completed by the students. You can take out the discourse features you want to highlight, and hence focus the cloze exercise on the discussion of these features.

Key sentence translation – Select complex sentences that contain key concepts or ideas in your discipline. Ask students to translate them into everyday language. Get students to pair up to compare their translations.

Thinking sheets – If your discipline involves the solving of problems with limited language use, you can develop your students' discourse and critical thinking skills by getting them to explain their thinking. Thinking sheets facilitate this with a series of questions and prompts that the students have to respond to such as, "What are the key terms in this question?", "What processes do you need to use to solve the problem?", "Write down the steps you took to solve the problem".

Derived from Gibbons, P. (2009) "English learners, academic literacy and thinking: Learning in the challenge zone". Portsmouth, USA: Heinemann.

19 Gibbons, P. (2009) *English learners, academic literacy and thinking: Learning in the challenge zone.* Portsmouth, USA: Heinemann.

20 Wood, L.N. & Dixon, P. (2011) Stakeholder analysis: Using the Jigsaw method for ethical dilemmas in business. *Asian Social Science,* 7(4), pp. 77-83.

Focus on reading

Reading at university can present a significant challenge to many students, as they do not have the discipline-specific skills to read and understand academic texts. At best, many students take far longer to read the journal articles and textbook chapters assigned to them than academics expect. We can extend students' reading skills by providing scaffolding activities before, during and after reading.

BEFORE	DURING	AFTER
Predict content from title, keywords, first sentences or images.	Scan or skim read text for a limited time before word-by-word reading.	Quizzes based on content.
Share personal narratives related to topic.	Pause during reading and predict what comes next.	Represent information in text in a graphic form e.g. timeline, cause and effect diagrams, similarities and differences Venn diagrams, graphic information summary, symbolic image.
Develop semantic web of existing knowledge of topic.	Identify text and/or paragraph parts.	Summarise text.
Develop a list of questions the reading might answer.	Margin questions added to give clues to work out text meaning e.g. "How could you rephrase this?".	Rewrite text for a different context.
Develop an outline view of the text e.g. headings, tables, and/or figures.	Prompt questions to encourage critical reading e.g. "Whose perspective is represented in this text?".	
Preview text by developing outline.		

(Derived from Gibbons, 2009[21])

Developing critical reading

When we ask students to read we are in fact asking them to consume an example of discipline-specific discourse. Therefore, it is helpful to use a framework based on critical discourse analysis[22] to design learning and teaching activities to develop critical reading skills. Wood and Petocz (2003) describe the following three levels at which students can read texts[23]:

• description of the text
• interaction with the text, involving interpreting the text
• explanation of the interaction with the text, by referring to its social and discipline context.

Wood and Petocz suggest that reading is divided into two distinct stages: preliminary reading and in-depth reading.

Preliminary reading involves identifying the author and the type of publication, finding signposts provided by the author and skimming quickly through the whole article.

In-depth reading is scaffolded by questions about the aims, audience and content of the article, for example:

• What is the author's main aim in writing the article?
• What audience is the author writing for?
• What are the key points of the article?
• What research methods/theoretical frameworks are used?

You can tailor these activities and ideas for texts in your discipline to develop your students' critical reading skills.

21 Gibbons, P. (2009) *English learners, academic literacy and thinking: Learning in the challenge zone.* Portsmouth, USA: Heinemann, pp. 92-104.

22 Fairclough, N. (1995) *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language.* New York: Longman.

23 Wood, L.N. & Petocz, P. (2003) *Reading statistics.* Sydney, Australia: University of Technology, Sydney.

Focus on listening

Many of the activities for developing reading skills can be applied to spoken texts e.g. (recorded) lectures and videos for developing listening skills. If you are using your lectures to develop listening skills, you can design activities for the students to complete. In addition, listening may vary from reading in that the texts may be live (only one opportunity to hear the text) and/or may be part of an interaction.

Live listening

As for written texts, before and after activities can greatly assist students' understanding of live texts. *Before activities* can be designed to develop scaffolded note-taking sheets that can be used when listening to the text. Another good strategy for note taking is to use a concept map layout. This encourages students to focus on the main points and the relationships between them. Students can then compare their concept maps with those of other students as an *after activity*.

Interactive listening

Class discussion and group work are activities that involve students listening in a live interaction with one another. There is a body of literature on active listening arising from the area of counselling and mediation that can be taught to develop students' listening skills, to support interaction and group work and to improve student learning.

Five key elements of active listening[24]

The key elements of active listening listed below will help you listen to the other person and increase the likelihood that the other person knows you are listening to them.

1. Pay attention
- Ensure you face the speaker
- Give the speaker your undivided attention and acknowledge their message
- Don't look at your watch, other people or activities in or beyond the room
- Refrain from side conversations (even if they are whispered).

2. Show that you are listening
- Be aware of your body language – crossed arms can make you seem closed or negative
- Encourage the speaker to continue by 'short' verbal comments
- Ensure your posture and demeanour are open and inviting
- Offer some facial expressions, such as a nod or a smile.

3. Provide feedback
- Ask related and relevant questions
- Reflect on what has been said by paraphrasing
- Seek clarification
- Summarise the speaker's comments.

4. Respond appropriately
- Assert your opinion(s) respectfully
- Avoid attacking the speaker verbally or otherwise putting them down
- Avoid interrupting the speaker unnecessarily
- Respond openly and honestly, with an appropriate tone of voice
- Treat the other person as you would want to be treated.

5. Defer judgment
- Avoid making assumptions
- Be empathic and non-judgmental
- Consider the communication from the perspective of the speaker
- Let the presentation run its course
- Listen to the entire message before interjecting with your own comments.

24 The University of Adelaide (2010) *Active listening*. Available at http://www.adelaide.edu.au/ writingcentre/learning_guides/ learningGuide_activeListening.pdf

Focus on writing

The text type we want students to produce should be specified in the assessment task, and we generally have an idea in mind of the generic conventions that the text should follow based on our own discipline-specific discourse skills. We can develop these skills in our students by explicitly teaching these conventions. Of course, the extent to which these conventions are descriptive or prescriptive in the context of your task will depend on your marking criteria and the standards you set. Gibbons[25] identifies four stages in developing students discourse skills for specific text types/genres:

Stage 1	**Develop knowledge of the topic** – This stage involves building up knowledge about the topic itself and is already the focus of many of our learning and teaching activities. The strategies and techniques for developing reading and listening skills will help students engage with texts in order to develop knowledge.
Stage 2	**Model the text type** – This stage involves the students becoming familiar with the form and function, the purpose, organisation and language feature of the text type being produced. Choose a model text that can be analysed using the strategies and exercises. Previous student answers are good models.
Stage 3	**Joint construction** – This stage involves you and the students working together to produce the text type, perhaps for a different topic. While it may not be possible to jointly construct the whole text, you can focus on key elements of the text. Jigsaw-style activities and other group work can also be used for joint construction exercises.
Stage 4	**Independent writing** – This stage involves the students writing their own texts. Students will have the knowledge from the previous stage to guide them. In addition, preparing a plan, submitting a draft, getting feedback from others and reflection/self assessment can be used to support students through this stage and achieve a better outcome.

Focus on speaking

Spoken texts can be monologic, for example a presentation; or dialogic, for example a meeting.

Monologic	**Dialogic**

←——————————————————————————————→

| Highly prepared, written to be spoken, little or no interaction | Produced in the moment, highly interactive |

Monologic speaking

As monologic texts can be written or prepared in advance, the same principles and stages for developing writing skills can be used to develop speaking skills or at least the creation of spoken texts. However, there is the additional element of performance in delivering the text, which can be developed by the explicit teaching of how to prepare for and deliver presentations:

• Preparation – notes, visuals, equipment, space
• Delivery – voice, body language, interaction with audience.

Dialogic speaking

Traditionally, these skills have been developed at university in tutorials and more recently in group work. In both cases students will benefit from the explicit teaching of how to contribute to class discussions and in groups. A key part of interaction is listening, which is covered in "Focus on listening" above. In addition, you can teach students how to prepare for a discussion and how to participate in the discussion.

Preparation for discussions

• Begin by identifying the main issues to be discussed.
• Carry out reading/research to develop your understanding.
• Make notes as you read to focus your thoughts.
• Keep track of useful evidence (i.e. data, examples or quotations).
• Make a list (about 3) of key points, questions and/or problems you would like to raise.

To help you use more discussions in class, there is a booklet on *How to lead discussions*[26] available in this series. For student resources on writing, reading, speaking and other academic skills go to: http://www.students.mq.edu.au/support/learning_skills/postgraduate/academic_skills_quickguides/

25 Gibbons, P. (2009) *English learners, academic literacy and thinking: Learning in the challenge zone.* Portsmouth, USA: Heinemann.

26 Wood, L. N., McNeill, M. & Harvey, M. (2008) How to lead discussions – Learning through engagement. Sydney, Australia: Macquarie University. Available at http://staff.mq.edu.au/teaching/teaching_development/resources/

Case Study 4

ECON111 Microeconomic Principles

Developing listening skills in Economics

Skills in listening to the discipline-specific discourse of economics can be developed using a dictogloss exercise. Use a short text that discusses a key concept, such as the one below on the marginal rate of substitution.

Text

*The **marginal rate of substitution** is an important concept in the **microeconomic theory of consumer behaviour**. The marginal rate of substitution is the rate at which a person will give up good y (the good measured on the y axis) to get an additional unit of good x (the good measured on the x axis) as we move down an **indifference curve**. In other words, the marginal rate of substitution is the rate at which the person is willing to give up good y, to get an additional unit of good x, as the quantity of good x increases while **utility** remains constant. Economists presume that there is a general tendency for the marginal rate of substitution to diminish. As the quantity of good x increases, a person will be willing to give up less of good y to get more of good x, while at the same time remaining **indifferent**.*

Before

Explain the activity to the students. The students need to be familiar with the ideas and terminology in the text (highlighted in the text above) so choose a passage about a concept that has been covered before. You could also conduct a quick brainstorming activity to revise the idea and the terminology. Be particularly aware of terms such as **good** that have a different use in everyday language and can be especially difficult for those whose first language is not English.

During

Read (or podcast) the passage slowly and carefully three times. During the first two readings the students must listen only, during the third reading the students take notes.

After

The students work in pairs to reconstruct the text as closely as possible to the original. As a class, or in larger groups, compare the reconstructions to the original, discussing differences. As part of this discussion, ask pairs who did the most accurate reconstructions to explain how they were able to be so accurate. Similarly, ask pairs who were the least accurate what they struggled with. Prompt students to reflect on and explain the strategies they used to remember and reconstruct the text.

As well as developing the students' listening skills, this exercise will give you will insight into how the students are conceptualising the information in their own minds, and therefore their understanding of the concept. By using a key concept to develop listening skills you are also consolidating the concept and the terminology around the concept.

6.How discourse **OPERATES**

In order to understand how and why we need to embed discipline-specific discourse skills in the curriculum, it is helpful to consider Fairclough's explanation of how discourse works (1992) in relation to the disciplines we teach[27]. Fairclough identifies three dimensions of discourse: social practice, discursive practice and text.
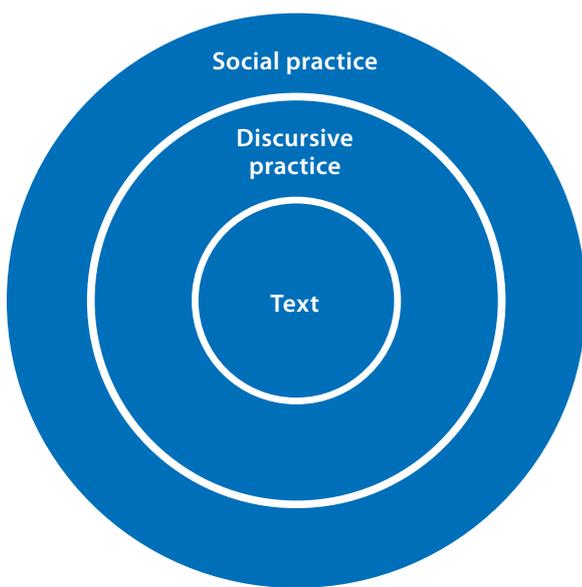
Social practice involves seeing discourse as a way in which people act upon and represent the world and each other. As such, discourse is the means by which individuals function in a particular area in a particular way. So our students need to develop the discipline-specific discourse skills to function as professionals in their chosen areas.

Discursive practice is a form of social practice that involves the processes of text production, distribution and consumption. Students need to understand the way texts are produced, distributed and consumed in their chosen field. We can teach this by using learning and teaching activities and setting assessment tasks that are authentic to the processes of production, distribution and consumption as they occur in their professions.

It is important to remember that discourse can be conventional or creative, that is, discourse that reproduces conventions reinforces accepted social practice, whilst discourse that is outside of conventions contributes to changing accepted social practice. Although as educators we need to help students develop the discourse skills to function in accordance with current practice in their area, ultimately students will need to be able to use discourse skills to change accepted practice.

27 Fairclough, N. (1992) *Discourse and social change.* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Discursive practice, and hence social practice, is demonstrated in the form of texts; by text we mean any product written or spoken. Language is generally accepted to have multiple functions, which Fairclough aligns with the constitutive effect of discourse as follows:

CONSTRUCTIVE EFFECTS OF DISCOURSE	FUNCTIONS OF LANGUAGE
systems of knowledge and beliefs	Ideational
social identities social relationships	Interpersonal (identity and relational)
	Textual – how information is ordered, organised, fore/backgrounded, linked to other information in the text and linked to situation.

When we ask our students to produce texts we are asking them to use language to:

- construe experience as the systems of knowledge and beliefs that constitute discipline-specific knowledge
- enact an appropriate relationship between themselves and the (hypothetical) audience, and thus enact appropriate identities
- deliver this information in a way that is appropriate to the context[28].

While this may seem rather technical, when we come to judge the texts that we ask students to produce as part of the assessment process, these are the criteria that inform our judgement when we talk about content, appropriate language and structure. In our teaching, we need to provide learning and teaching activities that allow students to develop the skills to use language in the production of texts that are appropriate to the discourse practice in their discipline, and in this way we are teaching discipline-specific discourse skills.

28 Halliday, M. A. K. & Matthiessen, C. M. I. M. (2004)
    An introduction to functional grammar.
    London: Arnold.

Final word

Discourse is intertwined with disciplines. Each discipline and profession has specific discourse that distinguishes members of that group.

Our role as educators is to induct students into the discourse of our discipline in a structured and supported fashion so that they gain the skills to become productive members of our disciplines and professions. More than that, structured learning of discourse will help with learning the discipline knowledge so that students achieve higher levels of understanding in the discipline. By explicitly teaching communication skills, we enrich learning for all our students and support a successful transition to professional work.

This has been recognised by the Australian Qualification Framework, the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Association and professional associations, and so they have developed standards that require students to demonstrate communication skills at the end of their qualification. At Macquarie University, communication skills are listed in program objectives and unit learning outcomes.

So take some time to investigate how to embed discourse in your programs, units and classes. There are some fantastic techniques that will liven up your classes and achieve better outcomes.

This booklet is one of a series produced for the Learning Excellence and Development (LEAD) program. The program brings together as a team a multi-disciplinary group of university staff working on projects to enhance student learning. The program is managed by the Faculty of Business and Economics.

The guides are available online at
http://staff.mq.edu.au/teaching/teaching_development/ business_and_economics_teaching_resources/

Other publications in the LEAD series include:

How to run a LEAD project – Learning through innovation

How to lead discussions – Learning through engagement

How to create exams – Learning through assessment

How to give quality feedback – Learning through dialogue

How to collaborate with peer observation – Learning from each other

How to teach with inclusive practice – Learning through diversity

Research enhanced learning and teaching – Learning through scholarship

How to align assessment – Learning through a program approach

Do you want to:

- develop your students' reading, writing, speaking and listening skills?
- align your curriculum to specify, assess and develop communication skills?
- design and deliver learning and teaching activities to develop communication skills?
- apprentice your students in the discourse skills of your discipline?

Discipline-specific discourse is the way disciplines and professions use language in a particular way. A key part of a student's journey is learning the discourse of their discipline. In this guide we show how discourse and communication skills are embedded in programs and how learning outcomes, assessment tasks and learning and teaching activities can be aligned and designed to develop these skills.