How to be Original

Transform Your Assignments and Achieve Better Grades

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Preparations

Introduction

Anyone can be original but that doesn’t mean it’s as easy as tripping over a wet log.

This chapter explains the initial stages of originality. It depicts a process of closing in, starting with reading and exploring and ending up with something that is focused and structured. I’ll explain three preparatory stages: reading and generating ideas; focusing and anchoring; and planning. I then turn to the way originality can be adapted for different assessments and levels. The difference in what is expected of a first-year exam and an 80,000-word PhD is vast. Originality is required in the latter but widely imagined to be beyond the capabilities of new students. It isn’t. Students at all stages can produce innovative work. In the last part of the chapter, I address a subject that worries a lot of students, the politics of originality.

The three stages

1. Reading and generating ideas

Idea generation is not an exact science. You probably won’t hit on exactly the right idea straight away. It is important not to expect to do so. This initial period is more akin to a fertile muddle than clockwork perfection. What you are aiming for in Stage 1 is to have one or, more likely, a small number (three or four) of ideas that promise to fulfil your assignment brief while being innovative. You can then go ahead to Stage 2 (focusing and anchoring). You will have doubts about some or even all of them, but that’s OK. Doubt is good – it’s not an enemy but a friend; you can accommodate it, adapting and refining your work, or use it to select another path.
Start with targeted browsing. More specifically, combine a word search based on the key terms in your assignment with one or more of the approaches outlined in Chapters 2 to 5.

Let’s break this process down. First, type in the key term from your assignment title, or a closely related idea you are hoping to work with, into an academic search engine. Using the results, write down a short list of the approaches to the topic that appear intriguing. From this process you may arrive at a single chosen topic or several topics (up to four). Second, with the help of one or more of the examples found Chapters 2 to 5, note down the original approach you want to take. Summarise the result of the combination of these two steps in a sentence or two.

You do not need to read all the chapters of *How to Be Original* before you get started on this exercise. You can go straight to any chapter and any section that looks the most rewarding. For example, if using an arts-based approach is what interests you, then go straight to Chapter 5; or, if you want to relocate the topic to another time period, then go to the ‘New places and periods’ section of Chapter 2.

Why do I not call this first stage ‘blue-sky’ thinking? It’s a delightful image: sitting down with a blank sheet of paper and noting down fresh ideas that sprout from your fertile mind; or coming up with a whole bouquet of them from free-flowing conversation with friends. It may sound enticing, but for many students it’s stony ground. ‘Blue-sky’ thinking only works when you have real familiarity with your topic (for example, when you have already done a lot of reading or can build on previous years of study). If you undertake ‘blue-sky’ thinking without background knowledge, you’ll arrive at a list of topics that has little or no connection to the literature. This also tells us that if you are advanced in your studies, then ‘blue-sky’ thinking is more likely to work. Even then, I’d recommend reading as your starting point. Reading is the core technique for generating ideas. That’s what many academics do. That’s what I do. To make a contribution to the literature you have to start with the literature.

‘Reading and generating ideas’ depicts a sequence, or, more accurately, a cycle: you read, then you generate ideas, then you read again, generate better ideas, then you read again, etc. ... until your assignment is complete. To help ensure you are engaging with recent ideas you should focus your reading on more recent publications, such as those from the past 10 years or so. This timeframe is indicative rather than directive: it can be less and it can be more. It’s worth noting that, sometimes, ideas have ‘second lives’; the earliest references may be from 50 years ago but they have, for some reason, come round again, or become popular for the first time only recently. For example, the environmentalist theory...
of ‘degrowth’ was coined by André Gorz in the 1970s, but with the rapid and urgent rise of environmental concerns, it became the buzzword of a new debate in the 2020s.¹

How can you identify the key claim to originality in a paper or book? This key claim will be there in a paper’s title and/or abstract or in the title or on the first few pages of a book. Often it can be found in the blurb on the back of a book (the back blurb of academic monographs is usually written by the author). You are looking for the key words that summarise an innovation. For more on this see the ‘How do you recognise new key words?’ section of Chapter 3.

CASE STUDY

**Discipline:** Health and Social Care

**Assignment:** Write an essay on Health and Place

**Innovative idea:** ‘Therapeutic geographies’.

In this scenario, students have been encouraged to offer a clear and specific argument. The overall topic already suggests that a geographical perspective might be useful. Having read ‘New disciplinary contexts’, one of the six ways of being original introduced in Chapter 2, you begin to search the combination of ‘health’, ‘place’, ‘geography’ and ‘geographies’ in an academic search engine. A brief survey of the first couple of pages of titles shows it’s a diverse site of disciplinary connection and that several sub-fields are being mentioned, such as ‘geographies of health’ and ‘hospital spaces’. However, let us say that it is ‘therapeutic geographies’ that stands out for you, both because it connects to your interests and because it appears most intimately concerned with the assignment topic of ‘place’ (you might also notice that ‘therapeutic geographies’ has overlap with the study of ‘therapeutic landscapes’). This is also a promising candidate because the relevant articles are largely recent and none appear older than 15 years.

As the case study suggests, what you are searching for is a recent and innovative idea to work with, and a topic that does not get zero results – although that does happen – but results that are relatively few in number and relatively recent. The fact that just one, or a few, author names keep on cropping up connected with the idea is also a good sign, as these can provide your anchor authors. Scarcity in older sources but evidence of a lot of activity in recent years is another positive indicator. For example, ‘therapeutic geographies’ produces many more results recently
than 10 years ago and, although there are quite a few (even with ‘include citations’ turned off, when I last looked there are 386), all the key ones are on the first several pages and the same authors feature repeatedly. Compare to ‘human geography’, which produces 822,000 results, from highly diverse authors, with many from a really long time ago (from the 1900s onwards).

NURTURING THE ORIGINAL IMAGINATION

There are different types of learners and different students need different forms of preparation for the exciting but initially daunting task of being original. For the most part, I take a mechanical approach: ‘you do this and that follows’. This is fine for a lot of students, especially the more confident ones. But many will feel that they do not have the right ‘mindset’ to even begin original thinking. This is OK. It’s the place where a lot of people start from. And it is understandable, especially in the context of the uncreative and rigid learning environments that many students will have endured in secondary education. Thus, a wider preparation is sometimes needed; a re-orientation towards the ‘original imagination’. The educators Marten Scheffer, Matthijs Baas and Tone Bjordam (2017) have written about this nurturing process and I have adapted their ideas on the teaching of originality. This list, derived from their work, includes provocations and points of reflection as well as practical pointers.

Collect diverse experiences: Original thinkers are open to the unplanned and the value of diverse experience; they are curious about what they don’t know and what they have yet to experience. An attitude of curiosity towards the world is something to nurture and value. It often means that you prefer to listen than talk, that you find a wide variety of things interesting and that you are willing to admit that you don’t know everything, or much at all!

Make empty time:... Scheffer et al. explain that ‘distracting sounds and other uncontrollable stressors are negatively associated with creativity’, but also that ‘despite its negative connotation, boredom may provide fertile grounds for innovation’. They imply that a period away from tech – especially turning off one’s smartphone – can be helpful. In our era of ‘digital technologies, it may require slightly more effort than before to disconnect, but it is likely worth it’, they write, adding that we should ‘see the habit to make empty time as a way to create distraction-free episodes’ that allow us to make sense of and ‘process’ our diverse experiences.

…but prime the mind: Scheffer et al. take the example of Darwin, ‘who famously took walks along his especially constructed “thinking path”

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every day without exception. He would usually have a particular problem in mind that he wanted to process over such walks. Thus, they recommend doing something restful, quiet and that doesn’t require much thought, such as going for a walk, while bringing the ideas you are working on with you and mulling them over, as a useful part of your everyday routine. Students, unlike Darwin, don’t have a vast reserve of knowledge – their own private mind library – to transform a meander into a paradigm shift. But, nevertheless, the practice of ‘making restful empty time but priming the mind’ can be useful, even if it only involves giving yourself an hour or so of thinking time on a regular basis. A period away from distraction, away from screens and social media, can help reduce the noise of ordinary life and allow your thoughts to form and blossom.

Carry a notebook: Scheffer et al. remind us that ‘the simplest of all habits is to always carry a notebook’ and that ideas ‘often come at inconvenient moments’. This is an excellent tip. Would-be original thinkers need to be prepared to jot things down at any time. It could be after you have read something, but equally it might happen during a TV programme or just as you are about to fall asleep. You never know when it will be, and if you wait, and don’t note it down, you will probably forget it.

Take risks: Being original means going beyond the prescribed reading list and the expected topics. This is inherently risky and means leaving the comfort zone of ‘doing what you’re told’. But it’s a calculated risk and a circumscribed one: you don’t ignore the reading list but look at related reading and related topics. For Scheffer et al., ‘mistakes are a calculated risk of innovation’ and they advise that although ‘far-fetched jumps’ are not advisable, students need to be adventurous, pursuing themes that do not, at first glance, appear certain of any return.

Destroy your work if needed: Scheffer et al. point out that originality often takes a number of attempts to get right (and even then, it is unlikely to be perfect). Having the courage to say ‘no this isn’t working’ and to redline what you have written is necessary for original outcomes. However, I would add another point: ‘do not waste work’. In other words, even if an idea didn’t work out, keep those references and don’t delete that file. Create a space for it and keep it safe, as you never know when you may want to return to it.

Failing is necessary: Be prepared to admit disappointment, for example by admitting that your ‘new idea’ is not only not new but pretty common and becoming dated. It’s a cliché but true: failure is the mother of invention. Samuel Beckett’s gritty cri de coeur is also worth repeating:

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Being part of a community of learners

You’re not on your own. Students are part of a community of learners and that community includes all the authors of the articles and books you read and all the academics in your institution as well as all your fellow students. All of them are on the same journey, of exploring and finding out more. This is an important re-orientation: do not think about the world in terms of teachers, who have the knowledge, and learners, who don’t, but rather as a commonwealth of scholars. This will also help you think about the authors you have to read, as well as the staff who lecture you, as real people and, in more practical terms, as resources for engagement. For example, when you are provided with a set reading, type the name of the author into a search engine and see what else they have written. To do so will shed light on the set reading; it will no longer appear like a final or fixed conclusion but as one moment, a stage on a journey. This re-orientation can also transform your relationship with your teachers. Taking a moment to look at the staff pages on a department or school website is a good idea. Knowing what interests your teachers and assessors and what they have written can provide all sorts of useful links, ideas and references. It also provides helpful background for talking to them about your own ideas.

2. Focusing and anchoring

Focusing refers to surveying the idea or ideas you have generated and picking out the one you want to go with. Anchoring refers to linking that chosen idea to a specific author or authors. The two often happen together but I’ll explain focusing in more detail first.

The outcome of Stage 1 (reading and generating ideas) I outlined above is fed into Stage 2. This second phase can be thought of as deepening and giving precision to your ideas. You have to work out which of your ideas is the most promising.
PREPARATIONS

A useful way of thinking about which of your ideas will work best is to summarise each in a pithy phrase or short sentence. This will help make clear whether or not they sound meaningful and promise valuable insight. This ‘key statement’ will be at the heart of your assignment and of your claim to originality. Try to make it focused and compelling but also serious. Claims to originality that are ‘over the top’ do not convince. The way you avoid this is through qualification. Look at the following three sentences:

The gendered nature of regional policy is a relatively new area of study.

This study aims to contribute to recent work on the gendered nature of regional policy.

The gendered nature of regional policy has not been studied before, making the present study original.

The first two sentences are much more convincing than the last one. Why? The reason is that the first two contain qualifiers but the last does not. This is indicated by the fact that the first two use the words ‘relatively’ and ‘aims to contribute’. There are many similar terms and phrases: for example, ‘may be useful in…’, ‘can, in part, help to…’. Qualifiers mean you are holding back from an ‘over the top’, all-or-nothing claim, such as writing that a topic ‘has not been studied before’. They tell us you have been reading, that you know the field and that your essay is an act of engagement. The third sentence sends out all the wrong signals because it has no qualifiers. It sounds arrogant and ignorant and it takes an unnecessary risk. No work ever been done? Are you sure? Qualifying your claims makes you sound serious and informed, and thus makes your argument more plausible.

Now let’s look at ‘anchoring’. Not all references are equal. Some are there to evidence a fact or the breadth of your knowledge. The anchor author (or authors) is different. This author (or authors) may have written the paper or book whose insights you are developing and/or they may be the person whose work you are critiquing. In either case you will be using this author or authors to ground your essay and explain its innovation. They can also be thought of as your ally (as discussed in ‘Your allies’ in the Introduction). For example, you may quote them to show that your topic, or your approach to it, is indeed a ‘new field’, ‘emergent’, ‘under-researched’ or some similar phrase.
CASE STUDY

**Topic**: Health and Place

**Focus and anchor**: A contribution to therapeutic geographies through an engagement with a paper by Karolina Doughty (2013).

You have identified the topic of ‘therapeutic geographies’ and found several pages of papers about it in an academic search engine. You have noted down a few potential leads but you are still presented with choices. For example, your focus might be therapeutic geographies in the context and aftermath of war, in hospital settings or in community farms. These are all topics that have appeared over the past 10 years or so and each is associated with specific authors. It would be possible to ‘work with’ any of them. Since they may all fit the bill, my advice is to be led by what interests you. Originality is all about engagement, so it is your concerns and passions that must drive it. Let’s say that you are most attracted to a paper by Karolina Doughty (2013), which is about walking and therapeutic geographies and was published in the journal *Health and Place*. The paper’s abstract notes ‘the lack of attention to embodiment and movement in work on therapeutic landscapes’ and argues that ‘shared movement can produce supportive social spaces that are experienced as restorative’.

*Sample sentence*: Drawing on the work of Doughty on the embodied nature of therapeutic geographies, this essay argues that the connections between health and place require methodological and interdisciplinary innovation. More specifically, I examine methodologies for practising and researching ‘place therapy’ and show that, while they remain undeveloped, new work on ‘walkscapes’ and other forms of mobility (‘swimscapes’, ‘runscapes’, for example) can provide a helpful framework for future work.

In this sample sentence, an anchor author’s breakthrough is identified and supported but, importantly, it is clearly signalled that it is going to be developed. Doughty’s work isn’t just going to be repeated but expanded. The contribution will come in two ways: in connecting ‘practising and researching’ (the paper by Doughty you cite is focused on the former) and in pushing Doughty’s methodology into new areas with new words (Doughty’s term ‘walkscapes’ is picked out and expanded into ‘swimscapes’ and ‘runscapes’). Chapter 4 is on methodological innovation and this will provide further tips on how you might build on Doughty’s ideas.
3. Planning

Planning is about ensuring delivery. One of the common mistakes made in the pursuit of originality is to make a claim and not deliver it. If you can’t deliver don’t promise.

To ensure this doesn’t happen you need to provide explicit evidence to support your claim to innovation. This requires that you use and return to the terminology you used in the key sentence you used at the start of your assignment and that your innovative argument is made at the start of an assignment and then developed in the body of the text and in the conclusion.

CASE STUDY

**Topic:** Health and Place

**Planning:** A 2000-word essay anchored in Doughty’s (2013) work on walking and therapeutic geographies.

The ‘focusing and anchoring’ stage arrived at the key sentence we saw above (‘Drawing on the work of Doughty on the embodied nature of therapeutic geographies, this essay argues…’). Now it is time to structure the essay to ensure this claim is delivered. In an essay of 2000 words, one simple way of planning the essay is as follows:

*Introduction:* sets out the argument (with key sentence) and why it usefully contributes to wider debates in the health and place literature. Also sets out essay plan.

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Planning also provides a moment to think about the possibility of introducing originality into how you write up an assignment. I am referring to how you divide up and compose your work. The topic of language use is addressed in Chapter 3 and illustration in Chapter 6. However, there are other innovative forms you can use, such as vignettes. A vignette is a short pen-portrait of something, such as a person, place or process. If placed appropriately in an essay – preferably after a more general discussion of the kind of issues that the vignette captures – such portraits can bring life and depth to your work. Vignettes are especially useful in longer work, in dissertations for example, where the word limit is more forgiving. It is useful to make clear to the reader why and how you are using vignettes. This means explaining that you will be using them in the Introduction and, perhaps, placing them in boxes.

Originality for different assessments

(For presentations, posters, podcasts and group work, see Chapter 6.)

As a rule of thumb, the more words you have been given to explore a topic the more space you have to be original. Multiple-choice exams allow no room for originality. Micro-assignments, where you are asked to write a few hundred words ‘describing’, ‘outlining’ or ‘summarising’ a topic, are little better. By contrast, when you have thousands of words...
to play with, originality can come to the fore. Another indication that you are being offered the chance to be original is the freedom given to you to choose your title and topic.

Dissertations, which might be 10,000 words or so and often allow students a choice of approach and subject, provide considerable scope for originality. However, originality, if approached correctly, is likely to be welcome and rewarded in essays and exams. Unlike dissertations and similar long-length assignments, essays and exams are unlikely to be bespoke: titles are often set and markers may be assessing a large volume of scripts. In these circumstances, it is important to keep claims to innovation simple and clear. A pressurised assessor who sees their job as making sure the ‘question is answered’ (and this is the core job of any marker) can be baffled – rather than impressed – by attempts to go off-piste and try out new ideas, especially if these ideas are not anchored in the literature. To avoid this, you should limit the scope of any innovation, for example by rooting it in just one new idea, firmly anchored in the literature, and presented upfront, in the first paragraph. As we have already seen, originality does not work if it is not delivered, so it is also necessary to mainstream your new idea, to return to it at various points in your text, including in the conclusion.

Traditionally, originality was not something expected of undergraduate students. It was imagined to be the preserve of the highest level of student scholarship, the PhD. It remains the case that for a PhD to be awarded it has to show a significant original contribution to its field. For taught postgraduate courses (such as MA’s) and for undergraduate students, the expectations are lower. But originality is, nevertheless, widely written into assessment criteria at all levels. Moreover, there has been a wider shift towards understanding originality as a core aspiration of higher education. The further along in your studies you are the more creativity will be expected of you. This makes sense, but a purely incremental model, in which you are ‘allowed’ to become more ambitious with each new semester, should not limit your ambition or encourage you to see innovation as something you will ‘get onto’ when older. Originality is not a product of age but of engagement. Given the opportunity, any student, at any level, can make use of the techniques outlined in this book.

The politics of originality

One of the worries students have about originality is that they are entering a politicised environment whose cultural codes and expectations are unwritten and unclear. Such concerns are not universal but it is necessary to take them seriously.
I start with a paradox: the more authoritarian and conservative a society, or institution, the easier it is to be original. It does not take much, aside from courage, to be a pioneer when everyone around you must toe the line. This scenario also points to the global geography of originality. What might appear to be old-fashioned in one place may be bold in another. Readers in the ‘freedom-loving’ West may imagine I am depicting a contrast between them and everywhere else. One of the ways that Western culture has been defined is by its openness and innovativeness. A flip side of this claim on innovation is that the existence and nature of the limits on originality in the West are hard to see and acknowledge.

These are general observations but they result in specific outcomes. Students in the West, when told, yet again, they should be enjoying the intellectual freedom available to them and that their ideas are valued, don’t leap from their seats in excitement. They have heard it all before and they know the truth is not so straightforward. All institutions are conservative but in different ways; some forms of originality are welcome, but not others.

The pathway through this uncertain terrain is to engage. Throughout this book I show that originality arises from engagement. If students are focusing and anchoring their work in the literature, they will, in effect, be being guided and aided by other scholars. Thus, the chances of taking a misstep, of giving offence or blundering, are minimised.

This is a neat solution to the problem and for some it will appear altogether too neat. The Canadian academic and former politician Michael Ignatieff is one of the most thoughtful of those commentators who worry about the death of originality in modern universities. He points to ‘trends, fashions, movements and dogma’, which he pins on various leftist theories that have created ‘closed language games for initiates’ and concludes that ‘[t]hinking for yourself in a university is not easy’. Ignatieff’s concerns channel wider stereotypes of modern universities as overtaken by ‘wokeism’, ‘cancel culture’ and liberal-left norms.

For students trying to navigate these issues, it is useful to distinguish giving offence from intellectual tolerance. It is a common excuse of those who wish to denigrate a liberal opinion or a minority group that they are free thinkers. However, academic originality has nothing to do with ill-informed or insulting rhetoric. Indeed, since it is an act of engagement, it tends in the opposite direction, towards understanding and empathy. What this tells us is that originality is not stymied by limitations on giving offence. But Ignatieff is not saying it is. He is pointing to the development of wider exclusionary norms and forms of ‘group think’. I think he is wrong to imply that such trends are new: the idea that
universities were once places of unhindered ideological diversity is a myth. Nevertheless, Ignatieff’s argument retains its bite, especially for students who find themselves having to work out the opinions of academics who hold almost total power over their success and progress. There is no quick fix for this, but it is important not to pre-judge your teachers or your institution. A quick search online will establish their public convictions, or lack of them. My advice and my experience are that as long as you are engaging the literature and not seeking to give offence, you do not need to be anxious that your ambitions to originality will be rebuffed or ‘cancelled’. However, I do not want to conclude this section with what might sound like a blandishment. Students are told that their ambitions matter and their ideas are valued. But few higher education institutions have yet to really fulfil this promise or acknowledge the range of consequences that flow from it.

Conclusion

Originality is nothing but judicious imitation.

Voltaire (attrib.)

Voltaire was wrong. Originality builds on the work of others; it always refers back as well as forward. But if it was mere imitation, however ‘judicious’, it would be nothing more than repetition. Originality is an engagement: a ‘building on’ and a ‘working with’. The shocking truth about originality is that it is real and within reach.

The form of preparation I have been discussing has been practical and has not shied from the fact that originality comes not from effortless brilliance, but from hard work and knowledge. Originality is not a routine expectation and it is important not to over expect. Don’t beat yourself up if it doesn’t happen in every assignment. No one is pushing forward all the time. It’s OK not to be original. But it is also important to have the knowledge and confidence to know that originality is possible.

In this chapter the preparations for originality have been laid out. To put these preparations in place, students need to have some sense of the kind of argument they will be applying to their material. In other words, this is not a stand-alone chapter: to make full use of it you will need to take a look at at least one of the following five chapters.