

Illustration 3

Visual Research



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Course written by Emma Powell

Cover image: Emma Powell

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Introduction

What is research? Research is about looking for something in a focussed and systematic way.

(Lupton, in Noble & Bestley, 2011:7)

Theory provides the basis with which to ask questions not only about work, but also through work. And if nothing else, what design lacks in terms of interesting work these days is not necessarily more visual variety, but rather more provocative questions and polemical answers.

(Andrew Blauvelt, in Noble & Bestley, 2011:165)

Visual Research builds on the skills, knowledge and understanding you've acquired at OCA Levels 1 and 2 (HE 4 and 5) and provides you with an opportunity to synthesise theory and practice through a self-initiated written and visual research project.

For visual communicators, understanding visual language and having your own voice within it is important in being able to communicate effectively, respond to challenges creatively, and define your own practice. In consultation with your tutor, you'll devise a project that focuses on areas of interest from both a practical and critical perspective. This integration and synthesis of your written and visual work will help establish you as a reflective practitioner. This 'notion of designers commenting on their own practice' (Noble & Bestley, 2011:20) is an expanding area within the context of visual communications practice and being able to critically reflect on your own and others' work is an important skill to develop.



Look at the two diagrams from Collins, H. (2010) *Creative Research: The Theory and Practice of Research for the Creative Industries* on the OCA website. These demonstrate the overlaps between critical reflection and the research process.

In this course, you'll be encouraged to develop thorough research skills and generate a body of supporting evidence from which to present your own critical points of view. The course will develop your research skills by exploring:

- Research methodologies – primary and secondary research, written and visual research, exploring approaches to documenting research, and integrating visual research and outcomes.
- Critical frameworks – identifying a range of appropriate theoretical and critical frameworks, outlining and signposting to major ideas, theories and debates around visual communication practices.
- Documentation – developing your ability to document and present your ideas through academic writing skills, identifying sources and analysing appropriate source material, developing analytical and evaluative skills.

This course encourages a high degree of self-motivation and autonomy. The assignments will provide a structure to support your project proposals, research process, writing and presentation. As in previous courses, you'll use your learning log or blog to support the development of visual self-reflection, academic enquiry and evaluation.

Course aims and outcomes

This course aims to support you to:

- synthesise theory and practice through the development of an interconnected body of visual and written work, drawing on shared creative and conceptual ideas and interests
- employ self-reflection, contextual and critical thinking, academic research and presentation skills to effectively document and articulate your visual and written research and ideas
- undertake a body of visual and practical research supported by primary and secondary sources, data collection and other appropriate research methods
- identify and apply a range of methods of research, analysis and critical evaluation of theories and practices that can help inform detailed subject knowledge.

On successful completion of this course you'll be able to:

- demonstrate a coherent and detailed understanding of your chosen area of interest, informed by recent research and your own visual investigation
- use appropriate research and data collection methods to support a written and visual body of work
- analyse, evaluate and synthesise ideas from appropriate research sources
- construct and present a written argument and practical/visual investigation that informs and is informed by your personal visual language.

Bear these learning outcomes in mind as you progress with your project work. Ask your tutor for advice if you're unclear about how to evidence them in your work.

Assessment requirements

The course assignments will ask you to submit work for tutor feedback. Your assignment submissions should build towards evidencing the learning outcomes listed above. The key pieces that the assessors will grade at the end of the course are:

- a final portfolio summarising your body of visual work (50% of your final grade)
- a written outcome of 3,500 words (30% of your grade)
- a final review and analysis of your entire visual and written work on your blog and/or learning log (20% of final grade).

You should support these final written pieces with evidence of your research, investigation, analysis and organisation of the project and process. You'll see from the following assessment criteria what you will need to demonstrate in your complete submission.

Assessment criteria

The assessment criteria are key to the assessment process for this course. You should take note of these criteria and consider how the body of work that you produce during this course will help you to attain these.

On completion of each assignment, and before you send your assignment to your tutor, test yourself against the criteria – in other words, do a self-assessment, and see how you think you would do. Note down your findings for each assignment you've completed in your learning log, detailing all your perceived strengths and weaknesses, taking into account the criteria every step of the way. This will be helpful for your tutor to see, as well as helping you to prepare for assessment.

- **Creativity** – Employ creativity in the process of observation, interpretation, problem analysis, proposing, visualising and/or making; articulate independent judgements and a personal creative voice (30%).
- **Research and idea development** – Source, analyse and assimilate research material and develop, test and evaluate ideas in order to generate ideas and solutions (20%).
- **Visual and technical skills** – Use visual skills in visualising, making and presenting, and materials, techniques and technologies to communicate ideas and information (30%).
- **Context** – Exercise awareness of appropriate historical, critical, professional and/or emerging contexts and debates; be informed by underlying concepts, principles and working practices; and use critical and reflective skills to support a self-directed and sustained personal and/or professional position (20%).

For further information on how to prepare for assessment, please refer to your Level 3 Handbook.

Graphic design, illustration and visual communications at Level 3

The structure and relationship between the three Level 3 courses is different from Levels 1 and 2.

The courses you'll study at Level 3 are:

Advanced Practice (40 credits)

Visual Research (40 credits)

Sustaining Your Practice (40 credits)

You will find an overview of these courses and an overall introduction to the expectations of Level 3 study in your Level 3 Handbook.

The course at a glance

In this course you will produce:

- a portfolio of supporting visual work that documents your visual research in response to your research question (50% of your final grade goes towards this aspect of your project)
- your learning log/blog (20% of final grade), which should document your proposals, research process, data collection, and reflective commentaries evaluating your progress
- an extended written outcome of 3,500 words that responds to your research question and summarises your visual work (this represents 30% of your grade).

Your visual and written work will each feed into the other and explore the same research question. It's up to you to decide the content and direction of these visual and written bodies of work. There are certain restrictions concerning format, word count and academic writing style that you'll need to be aware of (see Part Four). Provided that you refer back to these, and discuss your ideas with your tutor, you're free to present your final outcomes in any creative, yet appropriate, manner.

The written element of the course can take a variety of forms. This might be a traditional essay format or it might be a career-, design process- or personally-focused report. The choice is yours. You might also wish to present aspects of your imagery and investigatory writing as part of an additional piece of design such as a website, a children's book or a graphic novel. This is fine but you must also present the text, with links to the imagery, as a printed document that meets OCA's basic academic regulations (see Part Four).

Your visual work can take any form that is appropriate to your creative approach. You should gather it into a portfolio which demonstrates your making, ideas and visual exploration. The portfolio can take any form you like. Some of your visual work will also be documented in your written outcome to help make the connection between theory and practice. Your visual material should explore the same research question as your written work, which means you'll need to think of a question that can drive your making as well as your thinking. Your research question might come out of what you're already doing creatively, or it may emerge from your reading and be something you want to apply to your visual work. Depending on your creative process, you may want to make work alongside your academic research or allocate specific slots of time to focus on making.

Part one: Project proposal

In Part One, you'll review your previous work, and the work you've done on *Advanced Practice*, and develop the research question that will inform your visual and written work on this course. You'll use techniques like SWOT, PEST, mind-mapping and concept mapping to identify some potential areas of interest; you'll then narrow these down to a proposed research question. For Assignment One, you'll submit a 1,000-word project proposal outlining your proposed research question, your visual work options, the resources you expect to use and your expected timescales. (All of this can be revised later.) For this and all subsequent assignments, you'll also submit a brief (200–300 words) reflective commentary on your progress.

Part two: A theoretical framework

In Part Two, you'll decide what format your final written and visual work will take. This could be a traditional essay format or you might want to do something different. You'll then think about the theoretical perspective that will inform this work and decide what research methodology you'll adopt to gather the data that will form the basis of your report. You'll explore research sources and gather your findings together into a draft literature and resources review. Assignment Two will ask you to write 1,200–1,500 words outlining your choices and your plans for your visual and written work and incorporating your draft literature and resources review.

Part three: Gathering data

In Part Three, you'll develop and initiate data-gathering methods appropriate to your research question and analyse, present and interpret this data. For Assignment Three, you'll summarise this in a document of around 1,200–1,500 words, which will count towards your learning log submission. In tandem with your data-gathering, you'll collect your visual research and work in progress into a portfolio to send to your tutor as part of your assignment submission.

Part four: A working draft

In Part Four, you'll produce the first working draft of your written document so that your tutor can give you some preliminary feedback before you develop the final piece in Part Five. An important task will be to decide what visual work you'll integrate and how you'll do this. You'll continue to develop your visual portfolio as you work on your written draft.

Part five: Finalising your submission

This final part of the course will be your opportunity to finalise your written document, with integrated visual work, and develop your visual portfolio in the light of your tutor's feedback to Assignment Four.

Preparing for initial tutor meeting

As with your other Level 3 courses it is essential that you work closely with your tutor and demonstrate a professional approach to your independent learning. You'll be expected to set and meet deadlines and targets and to plan your workload realistically alongside any other commitments. As soon as you start this course it is important that you set up a dialogue with your tutor.

In the first instance email them to:

- find out how they would like you to submit your work
- set a submission date for Exercises 1–3.

They might request your work to be emailed, put on your blog or physically posted – or a mix of all three. It is essential that you know before you start what their requirements are.

Please don't email large files to your tutor. PDFs are a good format as you can reduce the size of the files. Provided your hand-in date has been pre-booked with your tutor, and you have met the deadline, your tutor will aim to give you your feedback within two weeks.

You'll submit Exercises 1–3 before completing Assignment One. This is so that your tutor can check that you're heading in the right direction. Once your tutor has looked at the work you've produced for these exercises, they will give you brief feedback via Skype, Google Chat or phone.

Before you start the course, we suggest you take a look at this useful guide to research for creative arts students. You'll find this useful throughout this course: [Link 1](#). You'll find a list of links at the end of this course guide. They are listed separately like this for ease of updating.

Visual Research reading list

Essential texts

Baldwin, J. & Roberts, L. (2006) *Visual Communication: From Theory to Practice*. Lausanne: AVA Publishing

Noble, I. & Bestley, R. (2011) *Visual Research: An Introduction to Research Methodologies in Graphic Design* (2nd edition). London: Bloomsbury

Recommended texts

Bell, J. (2014) *Doing Your Research Project: A Guide For First-Time Researchers* (6th edition). Maidenhead: Open University Press

Davis, M. (2012) *Graphic Design Theory*. London: Thames & Hudson

Levin, P. (2011), *Excellent Dissertations!* (2nd edition). Maidenhead: Open University Press

Lupton, E. & Miller, A. (1999), *Design Writing Research: Writing on Graphic Design*. London: Phaidon

Rose, G. (2011) *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials* (3rd edition). London: Sage

Tharp, T. (2006) *The Creative Habit: Learn It and Use It For Life*. New York: Simon & Schuster

You will find key articles from some of these texts on the student website. These are highlighted in the course guide.

Recommended journals

Creative Review: www.creativereview.co.uk/

The Design Journal: www.tandfonline.com/loi/rfdj20#.VdWuJX1je68

Eye: www.eyemagazine.com/

Interactions: Studies in Communication & Culture: www.intellectbooks.co.uk/journals/view-Journal,id=165/

Journal of Communication Design: www.tandfonline.com/loi/rfcd20#.VdWvwX1je68

Journal of Illustration: www.intellectbooks.co.uk/journals/view-Journal,id=233/

Ubiquity: www.ubiquityjournal.net/

Varoom: www.varoom-mag.com/

Visual Communication: <http://vcj.sagepub.com/>

Recommended websites

Adbusters: www.adbusters.org

Association of Illustrators: www.theaoi.com

Brain Pickings: www.brainpickings.org

Bridgeman Education: www.bridgemaneducation.com/ *

The Design Council: www.designcouncil.org.uk

Design Observer: <http://designobserver.com>

International Society of Typographic Designers: www.istd.org.uk

Olga's Gallery: www.abcgallery.com/ *

Oxford Art Online: www.oxfordartonline.com *

Process.arts: <http://process.arts.ac.uk/> *

VADS visual arts resource: <http://vads.ac.uk> *

Visual Methodologies: www.sagepub.com/rose/default.htm

* Log on access via OCA student site: www.oca-student.com/resource-type/online-library

Reflection

Before you start each part of the course, take some time to reflect on your tutor's feedback to the previous assignment. Carefully consider whether there are any areas you need to clarify or alter. Implement these changes before you move on so that you are clear about your direction. Note down any adjustments you make, and the reasons for them, in your learning log.

Then identify:

- a plan for developing your visual work
- a plan for your written work.

Go back to your time schedule for your visual and written work and make any adjustments you think necessary. Take into consideration how long it took you to complete the previous assignment(s) and what your projected hand-in dates are. Do you need to alter these?

Next, look ahead to the areas you'll be tackling in the part of the course you're just about to start so you know what will be happening when, and in relation to what.

This process of looking back at what you've just done and looking ahead to what you'll do next is all part of becoming a reflective practitioner.

Expectations at Level 3 (HE Level 6)

The course is designed to take around 400 hours to complete. At this level of study, though, you may find that you have to go over and above the suggested time to achieve the outcomes you're aiming for. The amount of time you spend may also depend on your confidence as a writer, so do seek help and guidance when you need it from your tutor.

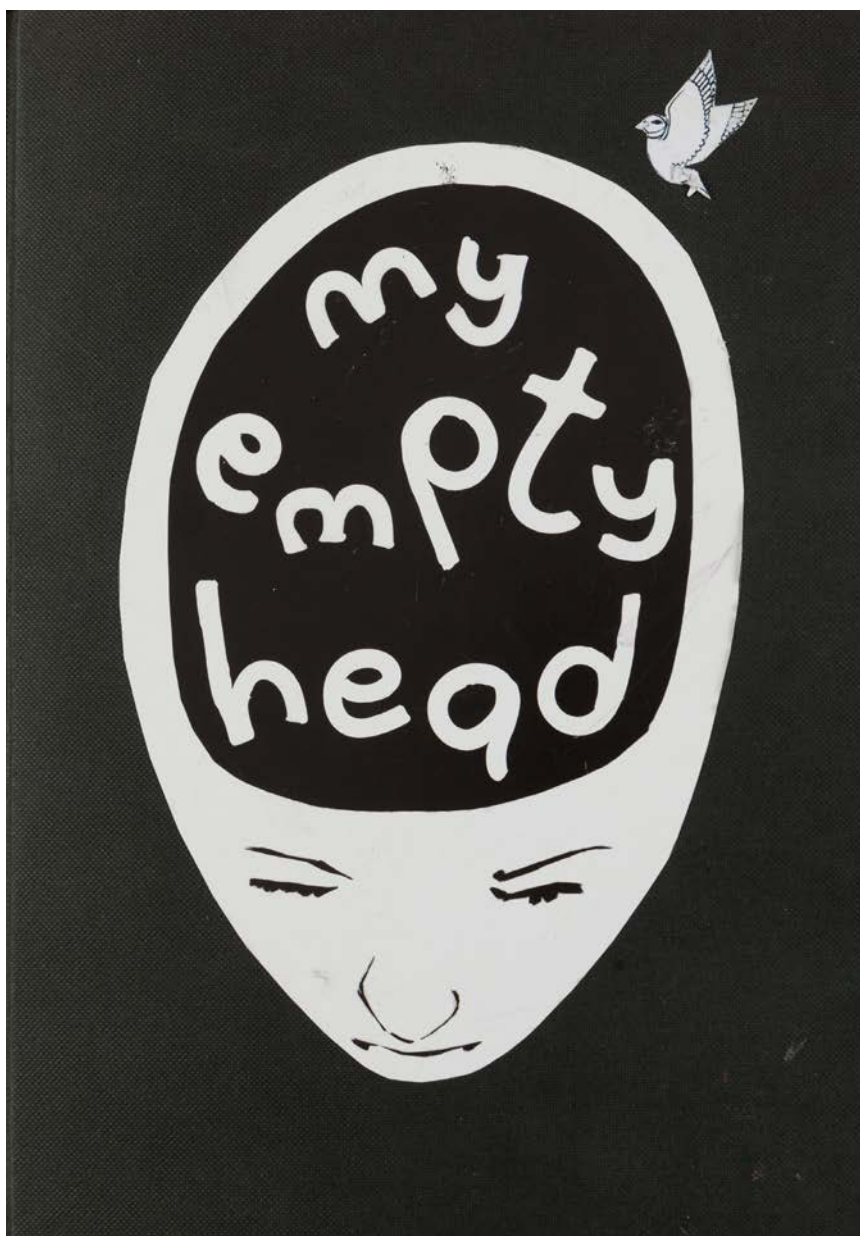
Progressing from Level 2 to Level 3 will be a challenge and you'll be expected to raise the level of the work you produce and demonstrate professionalism in what you do. We expect you to demonstrate a thoroughness and in-depth knowledge and ability and be able to apply this new learning at an advanced level. With the support of your tutor, you'll be setting your own proposal so you'll define your own direction, processes and the analysis that you intend to produce over the duration of the course. At this level, though, there's a particular emphasis on building and taking ownership of your own work as well as the choice of working methods.

You'll be responsible for managing your own deadlines. Your tutor will be working with a range of students from different levels so it's important that you stick to agreed hand-in dates for work. Your tutor can't guarantee to get feedback to you within two weeks if your work is late. If you think you're likely to miss an agreed deadline, let your tutor know as soon as possible so that you can negotiate a new hand-in date; don't leave it to the last minute to let your tutor know there's a problem.

Illustration 3: Visual Research

Part one

Project proposal



OCA Illustration student Penny Rowe

Introduction

Once you start writing, stuff will come to you all the time. You'll see things, hear things, think of things, and read things that strike you as being potentially useful...

(Hallinan, 2006–14: Part 2:2).

Are you the sort of person who is eager to begin a new project or do you come up with as many displacement activities as possible to delay your start? We all have different ways of tackling a new project and dealing with any of the difficulties that we might face along the way.

Part One will help you get started and narrow down your research question. Essentially your research question is the question that your written project will answer. It will inform your visual and written work on this course – and might arise from your visual work and/or your critical thinking. Don't get anxious if you haven't got a definite research question at this early stage; the aim of Part One is to help you formulate it. And if you're not convinced that your research question is the right one, don't worry – you'll probably amend it as you work through the course in the light of how your work is developing.

Your first assignment will be to write an initial project proposal based on your research question. You don't have to wait until you've done that to get some tutor feedback, though. As mentioned in the introduction, you should submit Exercises 1–3 to your tutor as soon as you've finished them so you can get some brief feedback to check that you're heading in the right direction.

Exercise 1 Initial ideas

This exercise will help you to identify your visual voice and your strengths and weaknesses in relation to the visual and written work you've already undertaken at OCA Levels 1 and 2 and your work in *Visual Communications 3: Advanced Practice*. Working through this exercise should help guide you to your research question.

1.1 Identify your initial ideas

Start by writing down any initial ideas you have for this course.

If you don't have any starting points, answer the following questions:

- Is there a specific aspect of visual communications that you're already interested in?
- Are there any particular artists, designers, illustrators, design movements, etc. that you are inspired by?

1.2 Analyse your previous projects

Look at your six strongest pieces of work from Levels 1 and 2 and analyse them for potential starting points and your visual voice. You've already done something similar in *Advanced Practice*. Identify what you could do to extend each project and itemise areas of potential interest from each one.

Now look specifically at the visual pieces and think carefully about your personal visual voice.

- What makes your work different from other people's?
- How do you produce your work?
- Do you have a specific style?
- Do you predominantly use certain media?
- Do you tackle certain topics?

Take another look at the critical reviews you produced at Level 2 and your tutor's feedback to these. What do you need to improve now that you're working at Level 3?

1.3 Identify your strengths and weaknesses

To help you make a start, take a look at Emma Powell's ideas for mapping, mind-mapping and concept mapping: [Link 2, 3 and 4](#).

Now analyse your strengths and weaknesses using four different techniques:

- SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats)
- PEST (Political, Economic, Social, Technological)
- mind-mapping
- concept mapping.

SWOT

Take your six pieces of work as a starting point and analyse them, and your general working methods, using a SWOT diagram system. This can be hand-drawn or digital – whichever you prefer.

In a SWOT diagram you identify your Strengths and potential Opportunities on one side of the diagram and your Weaknesses and potential Threats on the other side. You'll notice that by doing this all the positives are on the left and all the negatives are on the right. Some of your weaknesses and threats might relate specifically back to your strengths and opportunities. In this instance the strengths and opportunities can be seen as antidotes to the weaknesses and threats.

strengths

- I am hardworking
- I try to hit deadlines
- I love printmaking
- I am visually experimental
- I am interested in ethics / sustainability

weaknesses

- I take on too much
- I can get stressed
- I can get carried away with this
- I don't leave enough time at the end
- This might affect the quality of materials

opportunities

- I know some practitioners
- I would like to exhibit my work
- I would like to undertake interviews

threats

- Self doubt – they might not be interested
- Self doubt – is my work good enough?
- Do I have enough time and money?

PEST

A PEST analysis (Noble & Bestley, 2011:190) is very similar to SWOT. Apply these factors to both your visual and your written work to see if you come up with some new directions to explore. PEST analysis can be a useful way of generating questions from initial ideas.

P = political factors

E = economic factors

S = social factors

T = technological factors

Here is a PEST analysis applied to the SWOT diagram above.

strengths

I am hardworking
I try to hit deadlines
I love printmaking
I am visually experimental
I am interested in ethics / sustainability

weaknesses

I take on too much
I can get stressed
I can get carried away with this
I don't leave enough time at the end
This might affect the quality of materials

opportunities

I know some practitioners
I would like to exhibit my work
I would like to undertake interviews

threats

Self doubt – they might not be interested
Self doubt – is my work good enough?
Do I have enough time and money?

political

Is anything I am doing controversial?
What ethical considerations are there?
Do I want to make a political point?

economic

What financial considerations are there?
How can I address these?
Will I need to buy new software?
Will I need to buy other equipment?

social

Is my study biased?
How can I address this bias?
Do I need to address this bias?
Should I involve other social groups?
Who am I involving in my study?

technological

What technology can I use to save time?
Will I need to learn new software?
Any other technological skills to learn?

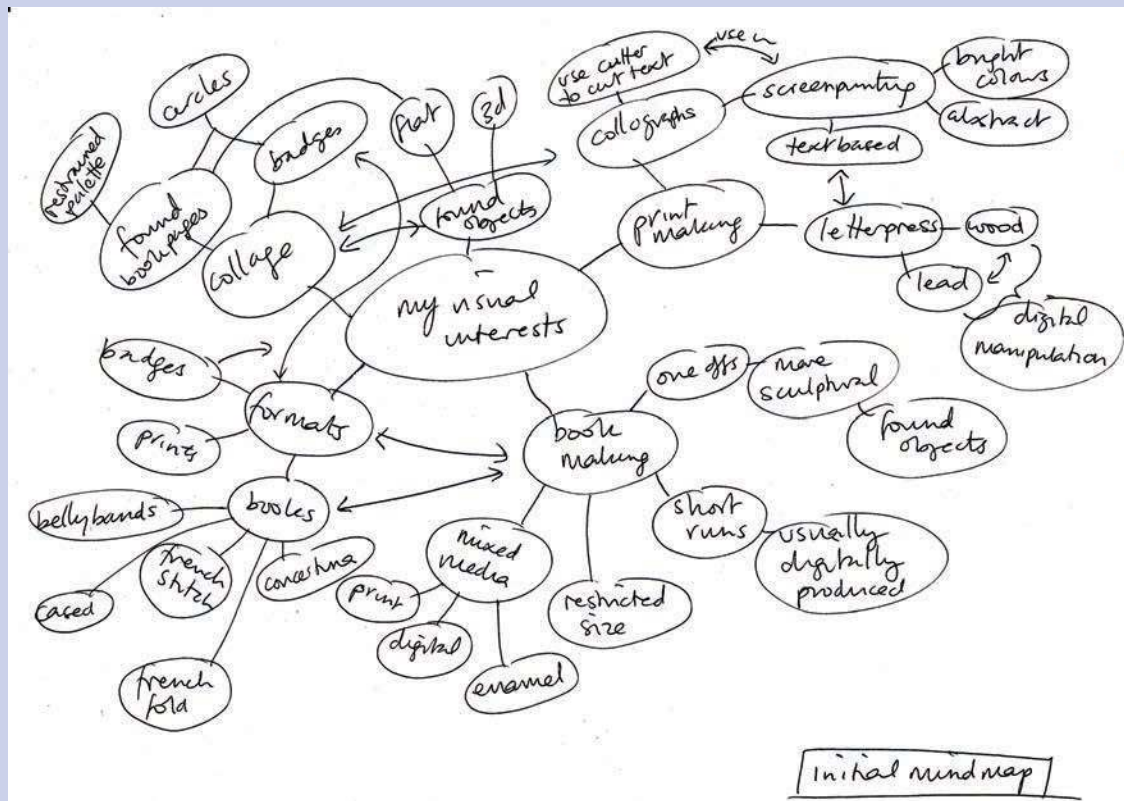
Mind-mapping

You might already be familiar with mind-mapping from your previous courses. In a mind map, you generally have a starting theme or question in the centre of the diagram and a number of options leading out from this. These then continue to branch outwards to the edges of the paper. The idea is to generate as many different diverse threads as possible, all stemming from the initial starting point.

Create a series of mind maps using any relevant pieces of information you gathered about your interests in Exercise 1. Extend these starting points in as many different directions as possible. A successful mind map should lead you to lateral areas ripe for investigation rather than predictable and literal solutions.

You could start with a general mind map that identifies a range of your research interests and then produce a series of more specific mind maps that start to narrow down your potential areas of visual and written study.

This mind map is a general mind map that identifies Emma Powell's initial visual interests.



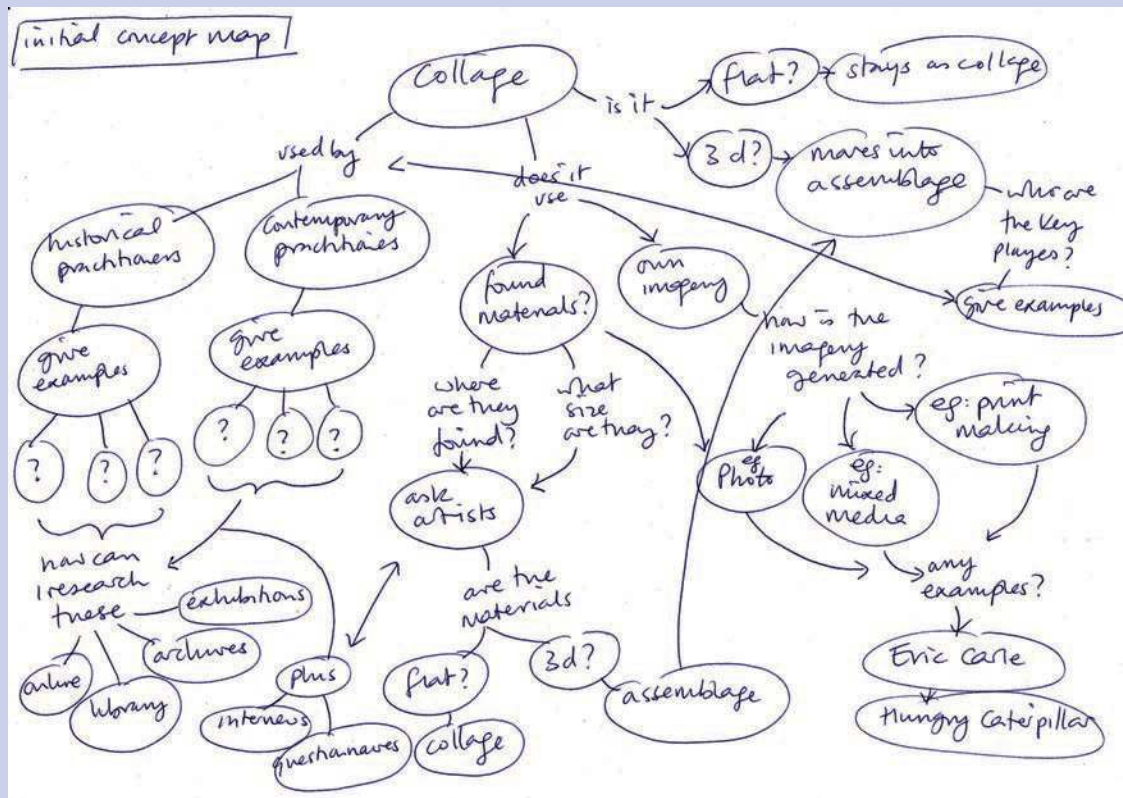
Concept mapping

A concept map differs in its structure from a mind map. It generally starts at the top and spills downwards, exploring how different areas are connected to each other, or not. Each avenue explored in the concept map should explore a specific link or relationship. More general concepts will be closer to the top and more specific ones will be nearer the bottom.

A successful concept map doesn't just explore concepts and links in a downwards and linear fashion; it also creates links across the diagram. These are often more fruitful and may produce unexpected areas that you can creatively explore in your work.

Create one or more concept maps that explore a concept (or series of concepts) from your mind-mapping exercise. This should be an area that you think may be potentially interesting as a starting point for your research question.

Here is an initial concept map on the broad theme of collage.



1.4 Identify a specific area of interest

Look at all your avenues of exploration from the previous activities and the work that you've started to generate. You should have already created a rich range of potential starting points. Select those you think have the greatest potential. Explain, in just a few words, why you've made this selection.

Exercise 2 Getting started

The good news is that if you've completed Exercise 1, you have already started!

2.1 Getting organised

Now that you've started to generate some work you need to think about how you're going to organise everything. This is essential so that you can refer back to any of your notes or visuals if you need to use them in your final document.

You'll need to consider how to organise written information such as notes from books, quotes and references. You will also need to organise your visual research, idea generation, experimentation and developments.

This organisation might take the form of a series of folders, sketchbooks, journals or boxes. Whatever you choose, use a system that will work for you. Emma Powell used the box in the photo below to start organising all the books she needed to start writing this course. This soon overflowed and she moved on to a series of cardboard box files instead!



Before you can think out of the box, you have to start with a box...The box is the raw index of your preparation. It is the repository of your creative potential, but it is not that potential realized

(Tharp, 2006:79–88)

This is an important distinction to make as the box is just an initial holding pen for all your potential starting points and ongoing developments. These will help guide you to the final outcome. Tharp also sees the box as providing evidence – ‘proof that you have prepared well’ (p.90).

In her book *The Creative Habit*, choreographer Twyla Tharp covers all sorts of other aspects about the creative process and has many tips and exercises to get your creative juices flowing. She also explores distractions and fears and how to deal with them. It is well worth hunting a copy down if you are able to; for copyright reasons, we are unable to include sections from it on the OCA website.

The author Timothy Hallinan also gathers potentially relevant items along the way:

You DO NOT want to lose any of this material. I set up what I call “the bucket” when I start to write a book. Actually, it’s two buckets: a cardboard box and a folder on my computer. Anything I can clip out, or anything that came to me while I was driving, let’s say, and I made a note of, goes into the box. Anything I think of while I’m working goes into the computer folder. You have no idea whether this material will eventually be useful, but it’s much better to have it at hand.

(Hallinan, 2006–14: Part 2:2).

He also suggests the following:

Carry a notebook all the time. When you get an idea, write it down. Next time you sit down to write, look at those notes, figure out how to use them, or mark them for later use and drop them into the bucket – the box, or notebook, or computer file — whatever the catchall is for your book.

(Hallinan, 2006–14: Part 5:3).

2.2 Identify a time schedule

Find yourself a calendar or diary and start to map out your initial time schedule. Your computer should have a calendar app if you’d rather work with a digital version. Pencil in your assignment hand-in points and your final deadline. Factor in extra time for inevitable last-minute delays such as unexpected printing issues or illness. At this early stage this will be a guideline only; you’ll probably need to adjust it as you work through the course.

2.3 Identify your learning style and writing habits

Creativity is a habit, and the best creativity is a result of good work habits.

(Tharp, 2003:7).

Start by answering the following questions:

- How do you kick-start the process of writing?
- Do you have any strategies for writer's block?
- When you're writing an essay, what is your method and/or where do you start first?

You can see a range of previously filled in questionnaires (by students and practitioners) on the OCA website.

There are two for you to take a look at now on the next pages.

Please can you help me with some research I am doing for a document for the OCA? Your answers may appear in the Visual Communications Student Handbook and/or on the OCA blog. By submitting this document you are agreeing to the use of your information in this way. Thank you for your help.

If I have sent this to you digitally please can you handwrite your answers and email me a scan or photo.

Dr Emma Powell, OCA Visual Communications Tutor Jan 2015
emmapowell@oca-uk.com

Name: Melanie Bush
(that you are happy to appear in the public domain – could just be initials)

Profession: Retired lecturer + Book Artist (sometimes!)

How do you kick start the process of writing (an essay / research or funding proposal / research document etc)?

- read existing good examples
- read around subject - take notes - select good quotes
- start structure by writing (working) chapter titles (+ diagrams / flow charts)

Do you have any strategies for writer's block?

- move to another section
- keep reading

When you are writing an essay / research or funding proposal / research document what is your method and/or where do you start first?

- write small bits in various sections
- describe selected quotes to sections to write around
- build up sections
- review as go along to maybe amalgamate sections or change order.
- after building up - then review + edit / cut if necessary

Please can you help me with some research I am doing for a document for the OCA? Your answers may appear in the Visual Communications Student Handbook and/or on the OCA blog. By submitting this document you agreeing to the use of your information in this way. Thank you for your help.

If I have sent this to you digitally please can you handwrite your answers and email me a scan or photo.

Dr Emma Powell, OCA Visual Communications Tutor Jan 2015
emmapowell@oca-uk.com

Name: JWP
(that you are happy to appear in the public domain – could just be initials)

Profession: LECTURER

How do you kick start the process of writing (an essay / research or funding proposal / research document etc)?

SEARCHES, JOURNALS,
MY OWN CACHE OF COLLECTED ARTICLES } READ
(IN EMAIL) } LOTS
BOOK CHAPTERS.

Do you have any strategies for writer's block?

DEADLINE - I DO IT TO MEET THE TIMESCALE
AND IF IT'S OPEN-ENDED I
STRUGGLE TO SPEND TIME TO
COMPLETE THINGS.

When you are writing an essay / research or funding proposal / research document what is your method and/or where do you start first?

- OUTLINE A STRUCTURE
- BREAK DOWN KEY COMPONENTS INTO DISCRETE PARTS
- MAP LINKS / RELATIONSHIPS
- MAP SOURCES TO STRUCTURE / PARTS

Now start to think about your learning style and writing habits. Have you identified certain habits that make starting written work easier? Do you need to have a rethink? Habits can help or hinder us, so spend a bit of time analysing what yours are and whether they are negative or positive.

See: [Link 5](#)

If you experience writer's block, take author Neil Gaiman's advice and move on to another part of the project.

In my experience, writer's block is very real. You'll be writing something and suddenly it stops. The characters stop talking. You've been happily just transcribing everything they've been saying, and suddenly they sit down and shut up. Suddenly, you are in deep trouble. It does happen. It's very real. It's not something (in my experience anyway) that happens on everything at the same time. It's just that sometimes a project needs a little time to think, a little time to breathe. So what I tend to do when that happens is I always have two or three other things that I'm doing at the same time.

(Gaiman, quoted in White, 1999)

2.4 Start getting visual ideas down

Refer back to your earlier mind map(s) and concept map(s). Highlight elements that you think have creative potential and are worth exploring further. Use these as starting points to generate some initial visual ideas in your sketchbook. Don't worry about whether they are good ideas at this stage – just get everything down and investigate these starting points in lots of different directions.

As a child I experienced too much scope for divergent thinking, which resulted in a reckless approach endlessly growing ideas and changing my mind. As a rejection of this, I clung desperately onto a convergent, minimal, pared down approach to design but in the process lost some of my valuable abilities to emotionally connect. I now feel able to draw from both ends of this spectrum and even attempt to experience a subtle approach to my work, should it be in keeping with the message, of course.

(Meara, 2015:33).

When you start any visual project, you should spend some time thinking about the bigger picture – not just the details. In other words, as Hannah Meara suggests, it's important to do both 'divergent' and 'convergent' thinking.

- Divergent thinking occurs right at the start of any creative (including written) project. Divergent thinking is outward-looking – where your research, initial ideas and experimentation go off in lots of different and creatively interesting directions. At this stage of the creative process, anything is possible and there are few, if any, restrictions.
- Convergent thinking comes later in the creative process when you start to bring selected elements back together towards a coherent focus. This is where you tie up loose ends and implement any restrictions or functional considerations. There might also be a convergent part in the middle of the creative process where you make decisions, after researching the brief, about which route to follow. This would then lead to another period of divergent activity leading to the final convergent stage.

The Design Council advocates the 'Double Diamond Model'. This has a convergent part in the centre of the creative process and at the end. See [Link 6](#).

In an interview in 2000, the author Terry Pratchett talked indirectly about divergent and convergent thinking in relation to his working methods:

For the first month or so of writing a book I try to get the creative side of the mind to get it down there on the page. Later on I get the analytical side to come along and chop the work into decent lengths, edit it and knock it into the right kind of shape. Everyone finds their own way of doing things.

(Pratchett, quoted in White, 2000)

Look online and in printed material to collect some different examples of infographics exploring the 'design process' and divergent/convergent thinking. Make a start by looking at Emma Powell's diagrams of the design/creative process at [Link 7](#).

Now create your own creative process diagram, drawing, image or illustration – whatever is relevant to your proposed body of work. This can be hand-rendered or digital and should clearly communicate to your tutor the different general stages that your project will go through.

If you suffer from creative block at any time, take a look at Danielle Krysa's *Creative Block* (2014). This is a really informative book, full of interviews with all sorts of artists. In her interviews she specifically asks the artists for their tips about overcoming creative block and there is also a series of activities to do.

Here are some top tips:

Canadian mixed-media artist Jessica Bell: 'I have to have a lot of space and quiet in my head to think my best thoughts' (p.19).

American sculptor Adam Wallace: 'I just switch to a different thing I like to do when I'm stuck on one thing' (p. 34).

American painter Lisa Golightly: 'I give myself permission to just make for the sake of making without any thought to the outcome...'. (p.44).

German photographer Matthias Heiderich: 'For me, a creative block is a sign of overthinking. When my brain feels blocked, I try to distract it by doing something completely different – usually that's riding my bike or swimming' (p. 56).

British illustrator Ashley Percival: 'I love to go out walking to refresh my mind. I also find that visiting art galleries and museums is very interesting and inspiring' (p. 67).

Exercise 3 Identify resources

This exercise is about identifying initial secondary sources – key creatives, key texts, resources, gatekeepers (see 3.5).

3.1 Online search

Start your resources search by accessing information online. Your first port of call should be the OCA student website. Take some time to re-familiarise yourself with the resources available. Note particularly the new online library of scanned texts (see 'Library articles' in the Resources section of the website.)

Once you have a wide net of starting points, start to narrow this down to what you think might be the key, most important, resources. Make full reference notes about relevant websites and texts as you go along so that you don't have to go back and try and find resources again later. If you haven't already done so, visit this link on the OCA website for full information about academic referencing: [Link 8](#).

3.2 Local library search/access to inter-library loans

If you can, move on to a library resources search. Start to gather together potential key texts and any other resources.

Your local library may be able to access inter-library loans for you and some libraries have texts, especially academic journals, online. You might also be able to register for reader access at your nearest university library. There should also be a national library in your home country where you could access specialist texts if you register as a reader. In the UK this is the British Library – see [Link 9](#).

3.3 Physical search

Your earlier online search should also have identified relevant exhibitions, practitioners, design groups, conferences, etc. Explore these resources further and select those you think will be key to your research. What is your plan for how you might access these?

3.4 Skim-read initial key texts /resources

Start to skim-read all the resources you've collected and identify key areas of interest. Don't read in too much depth at this stage; target your specific reading later on when it will be more useful and relevant. The purpose of skim-reading is to get just enough information to decide if the resource is relevant and worth keeping for more in-depth study later.

You'll also need to identify any resource gaps at this stage and think about how you might remedy these.

3.5 Research key gatekeepers, organisations and creative practitioners

The final activity in this exercise is to identify the key gatekeepers, organisations and creative practitioners relevant to your area of research. You might have already started to do this in your previous searches. A gatekeeper is an individual or organisation that can grant you access to relevant people or other resources. If you can find appropriate gatekeepers you'll be able to spread your research further and more efficiently.

Identify relevant gatekeepers, organisations and creative practitioners that might be key to your research and specify how you will approach them to ask for their help.

Send work to your tutor

Now you have completed Exercises 1–3, compile them into a single document (in Word or as a PDF). You should have agreed a hand-in date with your tutor, so you can now send it to them by whatever means they have requested. Your tutor will then give you some brief feedback via Skype, Google Chat or phone to reassure you that you are on track and ready to carry on with the projects. You will get your full feedback at the end of Assignment One.

Exercise 4 Narrowing down your visual topic

Your first job now is to narrow down your visual topic. You have three tasks to do here:

1. Look back over the work you've just submitted to your tutor, consider their feedback and implement any changes that would improve the work. Now start to look at how you could interlink your visual and written projects. Explore a range of options and record your thoughts. Will your visual work drive your written work or will it be the other way round? It doesn't matter which it is, so long as you are working to your strengths.
2. In Exercise 3 you investigated a range of different resources. Now is the time to explore these in more depth and identify the resources you'll need to access to help you carry out your visual work. Make a plan of action for accessing these resources. Will you need to visit a specific location, exhibition or collection? Can you access a record of these resources online?
3. Now identify what you would like to achieve from your visual work.

Write down answers to the following questions:

I want to develop skills in ...

I want to consolidate skills in ...

I want to produce ...

I want to promote my work to ...

I want to refine ...

I want to explore ...

I want to prove that ...

I want to involve ...

I want to integrate ...

Add any other questions you think might be relevant. You might be interested to read how two established practitioners responded to these questions. (You'll find some further examples in the Appendix to this course guide.)

Emma Powell

In 2009 OCA tutor Emma Powell completed a practice-led PhD in rejectamenta (found objects). This research explores how contemporary creative practitioners, including Emma, select, locate and collate rejectamenta (found objects) in their creative practice. Here are her answers to the questions you've been asked to answer.

- I wanted to develop skills using a wide range of found objects as starting points for a body of visual and written work.
- I wanted to consolidate skills in environmentally-friendly printmaking, book-making and collage.
- I wanted to produce an extensive body of experimental work that presented the use of rejectamenta to an audience.
- I wanted to promote my work to a wider community – not just an academic audience.
- I wanted to refine my working methods.
- I wanted to explore data collection methods.
- I wanted to prove that using rejectamenta can produce aesthetically pleasing outcomes.
- I wanted to involve contemporary practitioners as direct participants in the study.
- I wanted to integrate my visual work with my written investigation

Hannah Meara

Hannah Meara is a graphic designer and illustrator who recently completed an MA in children's book illustration (2015). Here are Hannah's answers to the questions in relation to the work she undertook on the course (in email correspondence with the course author 23.06.15):

- I wanted to develop a visual language that could assist in telling a story that literally travelled around the world. This involved a broad colour palette and an invisible hero (a yawn) that moves through the double-page spreads.
- I wanted to consolidate skills in visual storytelling, creating a readable sequence using colour shape and pattern – experimenting with creating tension, rhythm and humour.
- I wanted to produce a 32-page book that captured the feeling and culture of the eight cities the yawn travelled to.
- I wanted to promote my work to publishers all over the world.
- I wanted to refine my illustration skills, especially looking at transferring my personality into my work.
- I wanted to explore pace, humour, sequence, colour, shape.
- I wanted to prove ... hmmm I don't think I wanted to prove anything I just wanted to artistically explore and develop my own visual language.
- I wanted to involve ...hmmm it was a very personal exploration so I don't think this applied to my particular work.
- I wanted to integrate my personality into my visual language.

Exercise 5 Narrowing down your research topic

Now think about how you can narrow down your research question. Once again, you have three tasks to do:

1. Look through everything you've done in this course so far and identify your main areas of interest. If it helps, print out everything you've done, read through it and highlight interesting elements that grab your attention as you go along. Assemble all these potential starting points in one place.
2. Take each of these starting points in turn and form it into a series of research questions. Once you've generated a selection of research questions, see if you can narrow it down to just one or two.
3. Make a full resources list in response to your research question.

If you're not sure how to write a research question, then start with a theme or topic. For example, you might have selected the themes of 'photomontage and collage' as an area of interest. At the moment these themes are very broad and unfocused and lack a specific direction. Refine them over a series of research questions that become increasingly specific, but still of interest to you.

This might go something like this:

Version 1 – I want to investigate photomontage and collage

The first problem with this statement is that there is no question to answer. Secondly, the themes of photomontage and collage have not been qualified and so are very far-reaching. As your word limit for your written project is 3,500 words, it would be difficult to cover such broad ground in so few words.

Version 2 – How has the history of photomontage and collage influenced the work of artists?

This is a good starting point as there is now a question and the themes have been qualified, but it is still rather broad as there is no time frame. The term 'artists' is also extremely wide. How can you narrow these areas down further? Can you link photomontage and collage together somehow?

Version 3 – How has the historical photomontage and collage work of Hannah Höch influenced the work of contemporary illustrators?

This version is getting somewhere as it has narrowed down the historical research and it has also identified that it is not artists in general that are of interest but illustrators. However, the question could still be more specific and it could also relate to your own practice if that is relevant.

Version 4 – How has the historical photomontage and collage work of Hannah Höch influenced my own practice and the work of contemporary illustrator Sara Fanelli?

Now the question has identified three specific areas of interest. These are Hannah Höch, yourself and Sara Fanelli. This means that you can now target your research in a more focused and time-efficient fashion. This final version of the research question is much more achievable given the word count of 3,500 words.

Assignment one

Before you start Assignment One, please make sure your tutor knows when you plan to submit it.

Submit an initial project proposal summarising a range of visual starting points and exploring your research question. Write around 1,000 words.

This should be a summary of your findings from Part One, to include:

- your chosen research question and how/why you selected it
- a clear indication of your visual work options and how this will relate to the research question
- your key texts, resources, key creatives and gatekeepers – and how you will access them
- your time scale and plan of campaign
- a clear indication of your strengths and weaknesses in relation to your previous visual and written work and how you'll tackle these if they are a threat to your progress, e.g. time-keeping issues

You should also complete a review and analysis of your progress on your blog and/or learning log. Aim to summarise your review and analysis onto one side of A4 (approximately 200–300 words). You might find it useful to write more text before picking out the key points to include in your condensed version.

Once you've completed all the elements for Assignment One, save them as Word documents or as PDF files. Provide you've pre-booked the hand-in date with your tutor, you can now submit it. Please find out from your tutor how they would like to receive your files as they may want them posted and emailed, or added to your blog.

Reflection

This assignment doesn't count towards your final assessment grade, but you might still want to check your work against the assessment criteria listed in the introduction to this course guide before you send it to your tutor and make some notes about how well you believe your work meets each criterion.

Reworking your assignment

Following feedback from your tutor, you may wish to rework some of your assignment. If you do this, make sure you reflect on what you've done and why as this will demonstrate responsiveness and learning to the course assessors. See the introduction to this course guide for further guidance.