

A photograph of a modern Japanese train, likely a Shinkansen, with a green and silver livery. The train is stopped at a station platform. The JR logo is visible on the side of the train. The platform has overhead lighting and structural beams. The image is framed by a thick orange border.

# ARP Presentation

Rethinking the Traditional Unit Brief

Phoebe Stringer

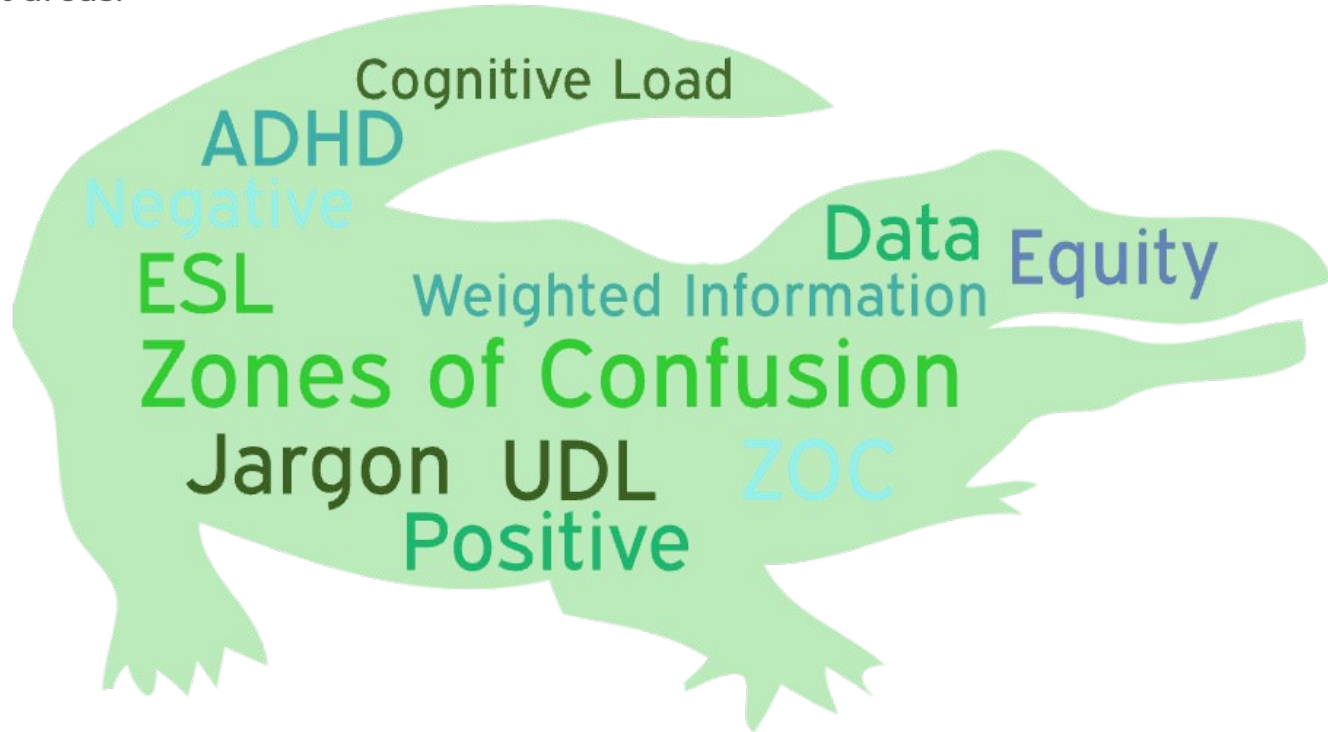
# My Research question

I am looking to research project briefing templates, the outcomes of overly academic language, confusion among students, and ultimately make a reusable project brief template that is data-backed to be as succinct, legible, and informative as possible.

- I plan to research learning outcomes and how they're communicated, and how to build them into a brief to mitigate confusion, how academic language can cause frustrations amongst neurodiverse students and damage independent study time and finally, how we mitigate confusion in public life and infrastructure, and the data behind that.
- I plan to gather data via anonymous questionnaires on physical handouts within my student body. The physical hand out will contain a consent section for the student to tick off alongside an explanation of what I am using the data for and how it will be handled.
- I plan to scan and keep the data in a digital storage and destroy it once the PGcert has been graded and completed and there is no longer a need for it.
- Once I've conducted and converted this into data tools such as pie charts I will use it to create a more succinct project brief template for my future use as a teacher.

# The Initial reading

Luckily much research and data collection had already been done into my topic when I began my initial search, whilst the bulk of this reading and reflection is documented on my blog these were the stand out areas:



## Zones of Confusion

The 'Zones of Confusion' are referenced in: "Understanding Difficulties and Resulting Confusion in Learning: An Integrative Review" Lodge, J.M., Kennedy, G., Lockyer, L., Arguel, A. & Pachman, M. (2018)

Simply put the ZOC organise confusion into zones, positive and negative with a spectrum in-between which explain how student confusion can manifest,

- The **Negative zone** known as the 'Non-productive confusion' causes disinterest, disengagement and increases both negative self-talk and cause higher dropout rates amongst students.
- The **Positive zone** referred to as 'The optimum zone' is the spark of inspiration, a desire to read more, the initial step in a larger engagement and journey with the unit

As mentioned, when students enter a non-productive state of confusion this can cause a cascade of further issues, typically a type of 'stalling' (often referred to as brain fog or cognitive overwhelm) which causes a student to not want to reach out for further help, and decrease in independent study. Whilst this is especially common in Neurodiverse students it's also noted to be a large reason for disconnect with English Second language students.

As is mentioned in the study it is normal for confusion to happen within education, especially in the jump from school to HE, but if this confusion is planned for and expected we as educators can lead our students into the optimum zone and notice the signs of non productive confusion early on to try and intervene before further detachment occurs.

# UDL

UDL or 'Universal Design for Learning' is taken from this study on optimising learning for students with Neurodiverse (ADHD specifically) educational needs: [ADHD and Academic Performance in College Students: A Systematic Review](#)

UDL is built around three main neurological/educational learning systems:

- Multiple Means of Engagement: why students are learning (motivation, relevance, safety).
- Multiple Means of Representation: what is being learned (how content is presented).
- Multiple Means of Action & Expression: how students demonstrate what they've learned.

Its creation is designed to focus on reapproaching education to reduce barriers for students rather than bolting on some quick fixes for neurodiverse students. It's approach blends the way education is delivered to the students, providing multiple avenues for engagement and knowledge retention- for example, blending workshops with spoken lecture, having multiple teachers and guests per unit to bring new and fresh approaches to the subject, ect.

# ESL and Diverse Backgrounds

Whilst reading about the outcomes of academic language in unit briefings for students of a diverse background this study: *The Relation Between Academic Word Use and Reading Comprehension for Students From Diverse Backgrounds* (Wood, Schatschneider & VelDink, 2021) brought some stark data into the mix.

This study had a pool of 1,128 Grade 5 students and focused on how academic word use impacted students from diverse backgrounds. They defined academic word use as:

“Uses Coxhead’s Academic Word List (570 word families) — these are words frequently found in school texts beyond basic everyday vocabulary”

Before the study is broken down into key areas for my research I wanted to include this quote:

“Socioeconomic status compounds the effect. Students from lower SES (free/reduced lunch) show weaker gains per additional academic word, meaning language-rich exposure outside school, or scaffolding, really matters. Briefs / LOs should provide scaffolding, definitions, exemplars etc. to help level that playing field”

Key takeaways for structuring unit briefs:

- Provide *scaffolding* (vocabulary lists, glossaries, exemplars) so students can see what academic word use looks like.
- Use simplified initial versions of tasks or LO wording
- Consider “SES and linguistic background” in your design. If students are likely to be from non-native English-speaking homes or economically disadvantaged backgrounds, the brief needs to explicitly supply access to academic vocabulary.

## To Sum It Up

To summarise the data gathered in the literature:

Positive student outcomes are correlated with:

- Weighted information
- Easily seen contact information of their tutor
- Clear information
- Non academic or jargoned language options
- Bullet points
- Tasks are laid out

These positive outcomes track across the whole student body, not just the neurodiverse, ESL or income limited.

# Gathering My Own Data

After investigating the wider known literature, it was time to investigate my own student body to find out what they felt and how their input could shape the outcomes of this project.

I handed out 10 questionnaires (with consent forms added) with these questions for students to fill out:

1. What course/year are you currently studying?
2. How clearly do you understand what Learning Outcomes mean in your course?
3. When you read a project brief, how confident are you that you could explain the Learning Outcomes in your own words?
4. Do you feel that the language used in Learning Outcomes is easy to understand?
5. What makes Learning Outcomes difficult to understand? (*Tick all that apply*)
6. When starting your project, how clearly did you understand what you were expected to submit for the final hand-in?
7. How well do you think the brief explained the final submission requirements (e.g., format, number of pieces, written elements, documentation, etc.)?
8. Did your tutor discuss or explain what would be expected at the final hand-in during formative feedback or tutorials?
9. When completing assignments, how often do you refer back to the Learning Outcomes?
10. How useful do you find Learning Outcomes in guiding your creative process?
11. Have you ever discussed Learning Outcomes with your tutor or peers?  
Do you think Learning Outcomes and assessment briefs are written in a way that supports all students, including those with learning differences (e.g., dyslexia, ADHD, autism)?
12. What would make Learning Outcomes and submission information easier for you to understand or use?
13. Do you have any suggestions for how tutors could explain Learning Outcomes or assessment requirements more clearly in class?
14. Is there anything else you'd like to share about how project briefs, Learning Outcomes, or final submissions could be improved?

# The Student feedback

The full breakdown of the data and the student feedback is up on my blog, so to summarise:

The Students gave mixed feedback; it seems they understand the LOs and what's required of them most of the time, but when it came to writing in their own words, they agreed that the language is overly academic, and visual information would be deeply appreciated (from both a neurotypical and neurodivergent perspective).

Academic language was repeatedly mentioned as a barrier for learning- the students almost universally asked for visual assurance (previous submissions and examples) and they regularly talk with their peers and tutors about what's expected of them to reassure themselves of what they should submit.

Overall, the feedback was very positive; the barriers aren't impossible to overcome, but as they are, the delivery could be more accessible if it were visual, the requirements were weighted for importance, and if they had simpler language.

The main takeaway here is that students want clearer, less jargoned and more visually based briefs and learning outcomes.

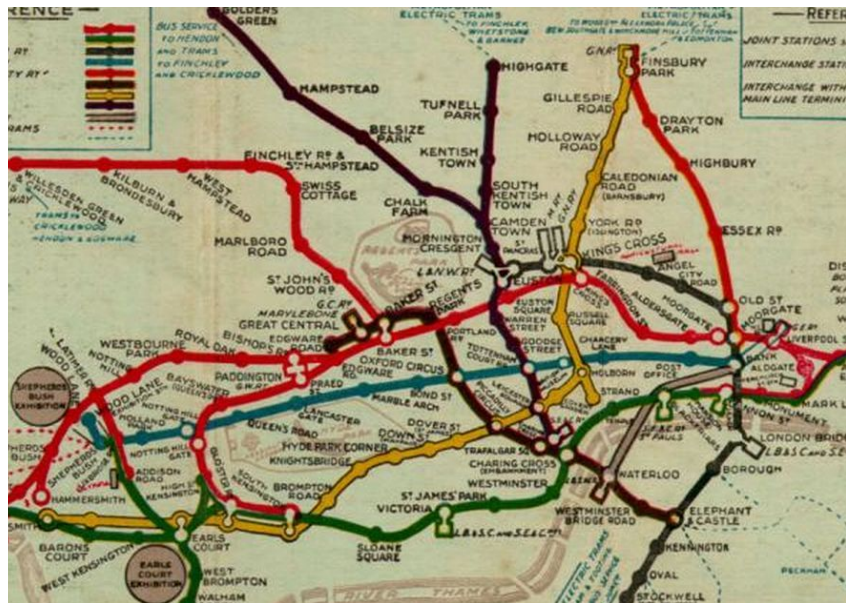
As the students were anonymous in this instance, I cannot be sure there were any English second-language students. However, I will refer to the previous studies, which indicate that visual representations and succinct language result in better outcomes for students.

# The Outcome

As independent reflection and study are vital to an accessible brief, I think having an additional “TLDR” (Too long didn’t read) addendum template that can be attached to the otherwise successful and well-understood existing briefs explicitly for at-home or clarification reading could be helpful.

I initially imagined a one-page ‘check-list’ / ‘make the grade’ that was graphically designed with all the requirements for the student hand in carefully placed on the document (weighted information, bullet point, ect) as a reusable and editable template. When thinking over the design, I was thinking about what other reliable templates have been made over the years that are focused on being multilingual, quickly legible, concise, and backed by psychological data. Tube Maps! A single universally tried and tested visual map that is explicitly designed to help people around the world know where they are and where they’re going at a glance.

A quick read onto the history of the tube map design proved insightful, designed for the London Underground system in 1933 by Harry Beck to reduce the confusion caused by the geographically accurate system used at the time. Beck was an engineering draughtsman and used the blueprints for electrical circuit boards as his template. He mostly ignored actual geography and focused on legibility, clear separate colours, even spacing between stations and 45 - 90 degree angles.



Pre and Post Beck design

# My Final Template

This is my reusable template for making unit briefing more accessible and clear for independent learning, accommodating second language students, neurodiversity and general anxiety.

The 'Pocket guide' template I've made above is the culmination of the small-scale research I've done in this unit. It includes: visuals, redirection to the larger Moodle page, contact information, bullet points, and examples of previous hand-ins. The flow of information is laid out to be sequential; to further the analogy between learning and travel it is designed to help students understand where they are in relation to the hand-in. It's also designed to lessen cognitive load, keeping information free of jargon, quickly explained, and without complex descriptions.

I've filled out an example below to display how the template can be used in a real unit briefing;

If I were to apply changes, I'd make time blindness accommodations such as laying out the ideal placement with which week we are in. for example;

*Week 1–2: Research*

*Week 3: Experimentation*

*Week 4: Refinement*

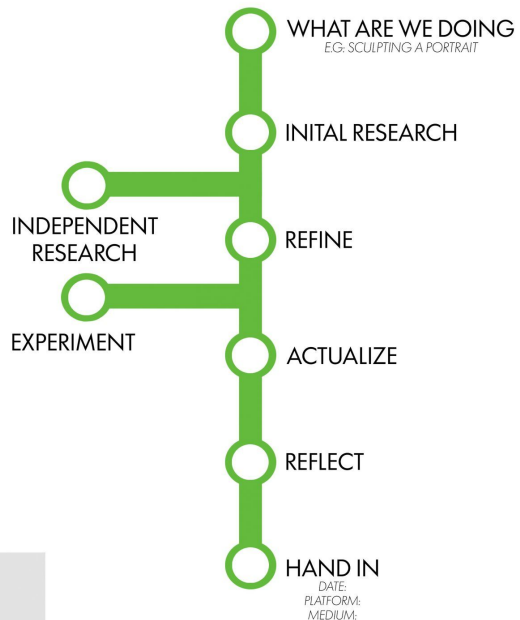
*Week 5–7: Sculpting*

But I fear this will overload students with dyslexia and dyscalculia, and it could also accidentally cause a freeze within students who feel 'left behind' if they aren't in the perfect place that I've allotted.

For now I'll keep this little pocket guide as is and see if it needs further work as I go ahead –

# HAND IN POCKET GUIDE

UNIT:



QR CODE TO EXAMPLE  
HAND INS

CONTACT  
INFORMATION:

QR CODE TO UNIT  
BRIEF MOODLE PAGE

Blank template

# HAND IN POCKET GUIDE

UNIT: UNIT 3 CHARACTER SCULPT



QR CODE TO EXAMPLE  
HAND INS

CONTACT  
INFORMATION: P.STRINGER@ARTS.AC.UK



QR CODE TO UNIT  
BRIEF MOODLE PAGE

Filled template