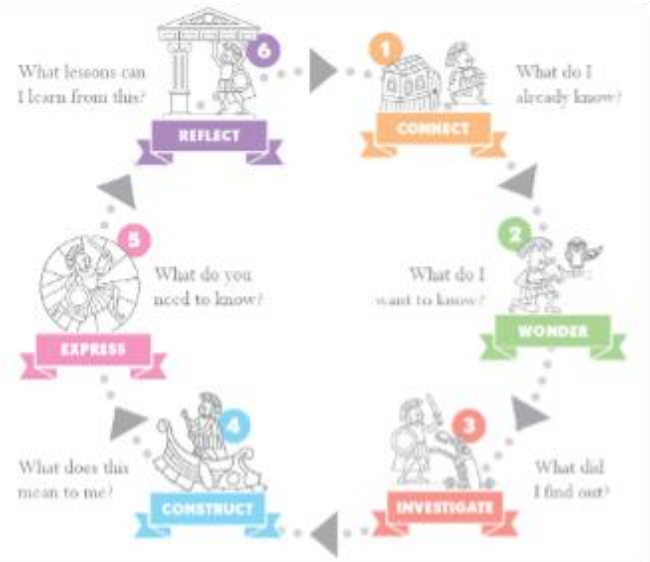
Lessons from the Projects Qualifications for coursework subjects

The Projects Qualifications have no exam. Students need to spend 90 (30 at GCSE) independent hours over a year working on their own projects, plus just 30 hours teaching. These 'coursework max' subjects lead to some important lessons about structuring coursework.

Planning is everything



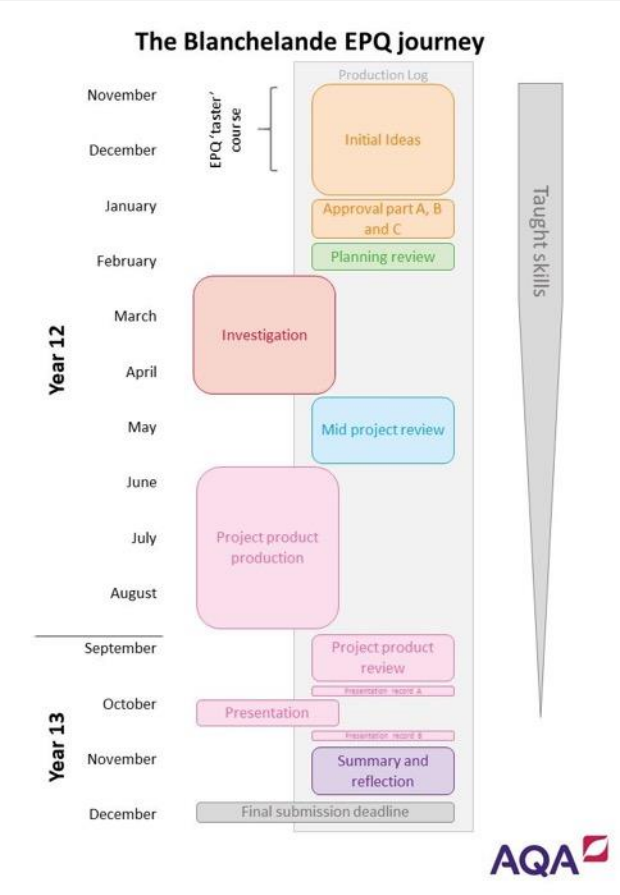
Coursework is an inquiry process and students will need to step through all the inquiry stages. How are you scaffolding this? Is your coursework process structured around these stages? Do you make that clear to the students? How much time you spend on each stage will depend on your particular Assessment Objectives.

In my experience it is common for students not to be given an overview of the whole process, which is disempowering. Do your students have a clear and structured timetable from the start **with interim deadlines to keep them on track?** Do they know what they will be expected to do by when (do you?)?

For the EPQ (and HPQ) we have a very clear process-focused timeline right from the start, which keeps students on track. E.g.

- Students have around two months to come up with their initial topic, because this is make-or-break. Question wording is only finalized in May.
- The product production looks longer than it is because that is over the summer so that is less focused time.
- We plan in a month to Construct meaning from their research – we don't just move straight from Investigate to Express. How do you slow students down and make them think about what they have found? Do you require any written planning?

For the EPQ, students must make their own time plan. This is really hard and is a taught skill with feedback and reflection. If your coursework does not require students to plan, what scaffolding are you giving your students throughout the process to help them stay on track?



Get in touch with their feelings

Research tells us how students are likely to feel at different stages of the inquiry process. This matters because it helps us to understand when intervention is most important (and will be most readily received and acted upon).

FOSIL Stages and ISP Tasks	Connect	Wonder	Investigate		Construct	Express	Reflect
	Task Initiation	Topic Selection	Topic Exploration	Focus Formulation	Information Collection	Presentation	Assessment
Feelings (affective)	Uncertainty	Optimism	Confusion, frustration *and doubt*	Clarity	Direction *and confidence*	Relief *and satisfaction or disappointment*	Sense of accomplishment
Thoughts (cognitive)	Vague			Focussed	Increased interest		Increased self-awareness
Actions (physical)	Seeking *relevant information* *Exploring*				Seeking *pertinent information. Documenting*		

Kuhlthau, C. C. *Seeking Meaning: A Process Approach to Library and Information Services*, 2nd edition, Libraries Unlimited, Westport, CT., 2004. p.82

When things are going well students can make good progress alone, when things feel harder students are more likely to want to give up, to avoid working on the project or to cheat. They may need help to get over their challenges, and are more likely to accept it at these points.

From the table above you can see that danger points are:

- **At the start of the project**, particularly when there is a significant degree of choice. Good questions take time - students don't have much experience of making their own educational choices. How much freedom do they genuinely have in your coursework? The more freedom they have, the harder it will be, the more scaffolding they may need and the more time you need to allow for it.
- **As they begin looking for (and trying to understand) resources**

Less clear, but equally important intervention points are where there are risks of overconfidence, such as when moving from information collection to presentation where students may need help to slow down and make sure they understand what they have read BEFORE they start to make their final product.

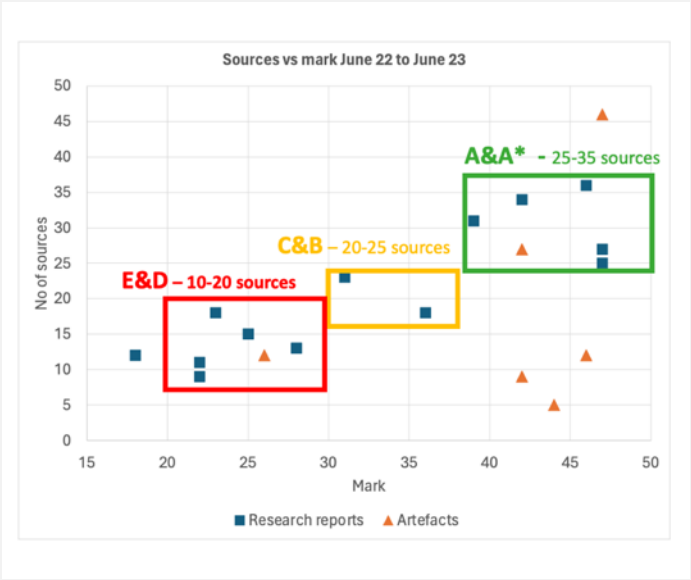
In coursework you are *always* 'Guide by the side' not 'Sage on the stage'. Make sure you understand what your specification allows.

- What help and scaffolding are you allowed to give? Can you use extra scaffolding tools at each stage to make the tasks clearer (e.g. an investigative journal for note-taking, an essay planner)?
- Can you show them examples of good (and bad!) previous coursework?
- How much direction and advice can you give when choosing a topic (e.g. examples of the kinds of topics that work or don't and why)?

Know your enemy

For exams you will spend time training students to know and work to the mark scheme. How much do you do this with coursework? Do they understand what the marks are for and are you allowed to give them examples?

What can **you** learn from the mark scheme and from standardization training? Are there lessons that are obvious when you have been marking for a while that students doing this for the first time will never get by themselves?



For example, for the EPQ I did an analysis (that I shared with students) of how many sources the projects from the standardization training cited. Although AQA give no guidance at all about how many sources to use, this clearly shows a strong correlation between number of sources and grade, and gives students an idea of what to aim for.

Are there key assessment objectives from your coursework where you can pick up clues about what the board is looking for from standardization samples to help you to advise your students?

Assume makes and ASS of U and ME

We often assume we know how students think. What 'fatal assumption' traps might you fall into? How can you avoid them?

E.g. 1: Coursework is important. They know the deadline. They will regularly make time for it.

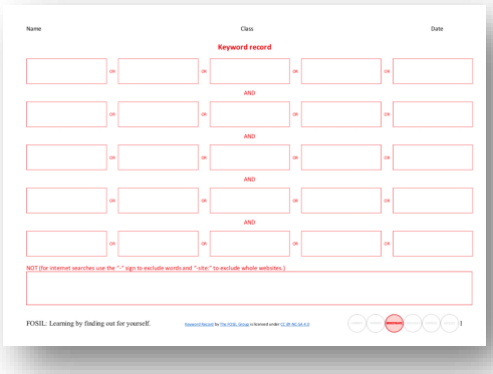
If you have relatively unimportant jobs that are urgent and jobs that are really important but have long deadlines, which do you do? Why should teenagers be different? If they are going to get demerits for not doing other homework this week, but your coursework deadline is far away, then your coursework will get left to the last minute.

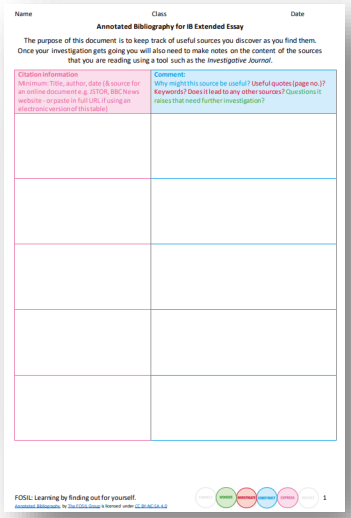
- Have regular accountability 'check-ins' where you expect to see something **in writing** (e.g. a list of sources they have found, some of their notes, an essay plan).
- Expect them to keep an inquiry journal which you check regularly, showing what they have done every week.
- Set interim deadlines when you expect particular parts of the work to be done – and sanction accordingly if it isn't, just like any other work.

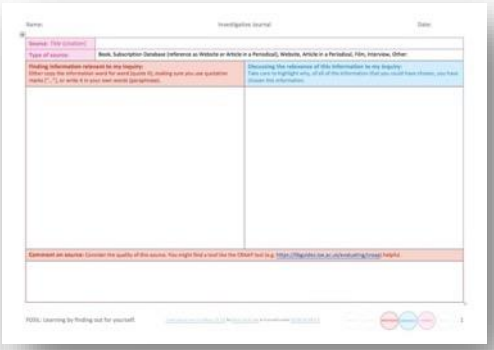
E.g. 2: Teenagers live on the internet. They all understand how to do research.

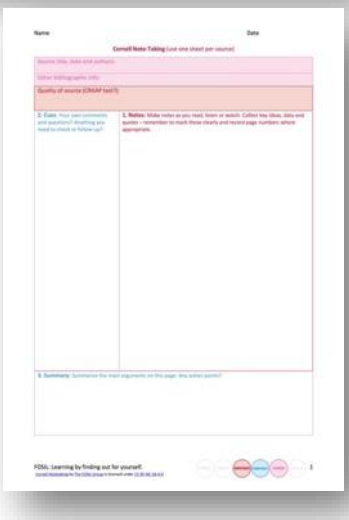
Really? Do they know how to find the *kinds* of sources they will need for *this*? Do they know how to skim and scan? Do they know how to make notes? Do they understand how to plan their final product? **How do you know?** Where do you think these skills have been taught – have you done it or do you think someone else has?

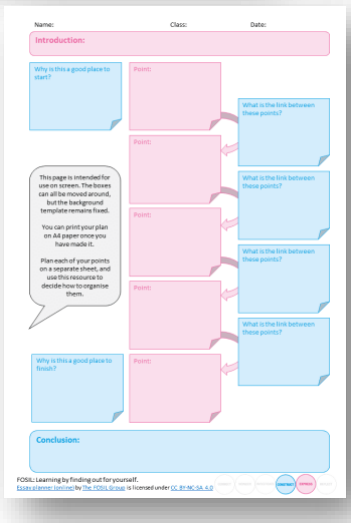
- Think about the skills required for your particular coursework and plan intervention and scaffolding. You teach examined skills. You should also be teaching coursework skills. This might include:
    - sessions (with you or a librarian): introducing them to sources or search strategies; on effective notetaking; on citing and referencing; on analysing data; on working with information.
    - Scaffolding graphic organisers e.g. Annotated Bibliography, Keyword Record, Investigative Journal, Cornell Notetaking sheet, Research Organiser, Essay planner, or something more specific to your subject e.g. this one on Tourism
- Plan for them to do some of the coursework in lesson time and **watch** them searching for sources or note-taking so you can be sure they understand what they are doing.
- Talk to them about what they understand by 'doing research' and make sure it matches your expectations.
- Ask them to show you some of their notes along the way so that you can see what they are doing.











E.g. 3: The rules surrounding coursework are clear and the consequences for cheating are severe. They all know this, so if they cheat it must be deliberate, and they deserve to be caught.

How do they know? Have you told them? The school only tends to provide central advice about cheating in exams close to exam time. If you want to be sure that they understand the rules regarding coursework, you need to explain them clearly.

- You can find all the JCQ Information for Candidates here. You should also make yourself familiar with the Instructions for Conducting Coursework or Non-Examined Assessment. You may also want to look at the JCQ Malpractice page, which includes guidance about the use of AI in coursework/NEAs, which is updated regularly.
- Make sure students (and parents) are aware of the specific rules for this assessment right at the start. What are parents allowed to do – e.g. can they proof read? What are the rules on student use of AI? What help are you allowed (and not allowed) to offer? What are the potential consequences?
- Cheating usually happens when students are under pressure or behind. Helping them to stick to your timetable makes this less likely. Having them do some of the work in class or submit regular drafts (even if you aren't allowed to comment on them) helps you to see the work evolving.
- Plagiarism also happens when students have poor note-making skills and lose track of their sources. If they don't know where information comes from, they can't cite it. Help them by scaffolding their note-making right from the start.

The better we get at getting better the faster we will get better

I used to teach in a department with a very wise Science technician, who said to me "I can't believe all you teachers moan every year that the students are so bad at certain skills in their practical assessments. If they **all** can't do the same things every year, doesn't that mean **you** aren't teaching them these skills properly?" And he was right.

At the end of every coursework season, get your department together to talk about what went well and badly. What do **you** need to support better next time?

E.g.

- If they are always missing the final deadline, why is this? Do they know it isn't a 'real' deadline? Are there not enough interim deadlines along the way to keep them on track? Do you need to start earlier next year?
- If it takes them too long to choose a question, do you need to scaffold this better (if allowed)? Get them thinking about it earlier?
- If there are certain skills they always lose marks on, how can you explicitly teach or scaffold these skills? Do you need to make the mark scheme clearer?

Every year I improve my EPQ process based on lessons from the previous year. What needs to be improved about your coursework process?

Detailed EPQ timetable with interim deadlines

Next Event: 15/01/2025 RII: First two sections. Arrange meeting with supervisor.

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Date	Title	Content	Link	Colour		
15/01/25	RII: First two sections. Arrange meeting with supervisor.	Must meet supervisor during next week		#F07D00	DELETE	EDIT
24/01/25	Complete RII (after meeting with supervisor)			#F07D00	DELETE	EDIT
29/01/25	Complete Candidate Proposal Part A			#F07D00	DELETE	EDIT
07/02/25	Upload plan to PR page. Complete 1st section of PR. Arrange meeting with supervisor.	Must meet supervisor during next week		#3AAA35	DELETE	EDIT
19/02/25	Complete PR having met supervisor.			#3AAA35	DELETE	EDIT
06/06/25	First section of MPR. Upload supporting docs. Arrange to meet supervisor.	Must meet supervisor during next week. Upload supporting documents to MPR chat section on ProjectQ (e.g. source evaluation chart, planning documents showing how you have monitored progress, idea planner for report)		#009FE3	DELETE	EDIT
02/07/25	FINAL deadline for MPR (aim to get done before Activities Week if poss.)			#009FE3	DELETE	EDIT
10/09/25	DRAFT report due. Arrange meeting with supervisor within next two weeks.	Upload report to PPR chat section on ProjectQ. Must meet supervisor in next two weeks.		#EC619F	DELETE	EDIT
01/10/25	Complete PPR, having met with supervisor. Arrange presentation meeting with supervisor.	Must meet supervisor next week to get feedback on yoiur presentation.		#EC619F	DELETE	EDIT
15/10/25	Complete Presentation Record A, having met with supervisor			#EC619F	DELETE	EDIT
03/11/25	PRESENTATION WEEK			#EC619F	DELETE	EDIT
12/11/25	Summary and Reflection and Candidate Declaration. AIM TO HAND IN FINAL PROJECT.			#662483	DELETE	EDIT
12/12/25	(FINAL DEADLINE - if you were not able to hand in on 12th Nov)			#662483	DELETE	EDIT