



First Ink: the development of a magazine of exemplary academic writing ‘by students, for students’

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Presentation abstract

Exemplars of student work can help demystify the critical, rhetorical, and linguistic expectations that underpin academic writing. Marking criteria, no matter how plainly expressed, are necessarily abstract and so may seem remote—even opaque—to our students. Seeing ‘critical thinking’, ‘breadth of research’, or ‘clear expression’ exemplified in a piece of student writing can make the conceptual concrete. Certainly, research attests to the power of student exemplars in making tacit knowledge about academic writing visible and making disciplinary notions of quality clear (see, for instance, Handley and Williams, 2011; Hendry, Bromberger and Armstrong, 2012; Wingate, 2015; To and Carless, 2016).

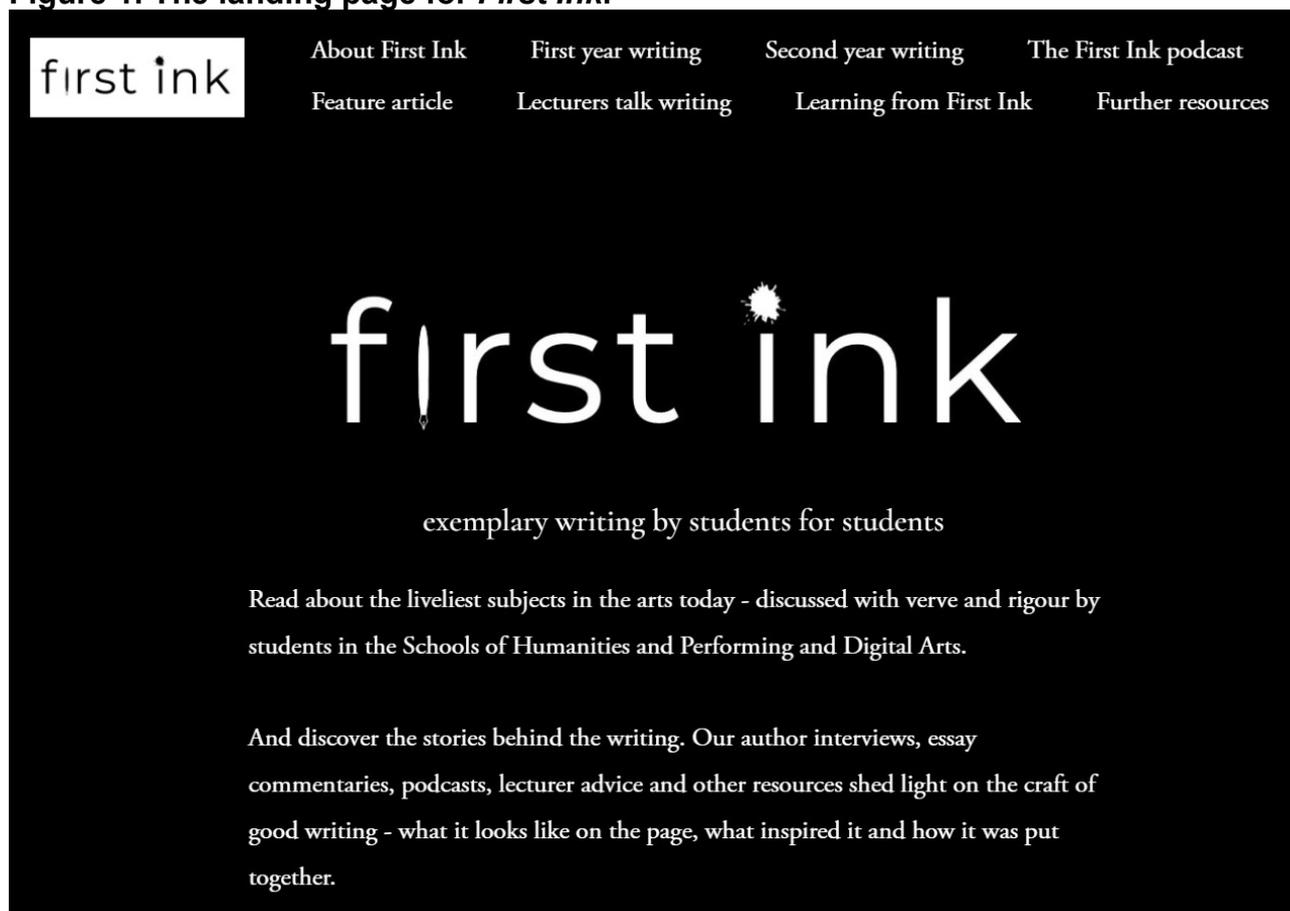
This paper began by tracing the conceptual evolution of *First Ink* from its origins in an internal proposal paper in 2014 to the idea of a website that combines the engaging properties of a student magazine with the educational benefits of a learning resource. *First Ink 2024* offers a range of first-class undergraduate writing across different genres in the Arts and Humanities. The magazine invites readers to discover the stories behind the writing through author interviews, essay commentaries, podcasts, lecturer advice, and other resources that shed light on the craft of good writing—what it looks like on the page, what inspired it, and how it was put together. Following an account of how the magazine was developed by a staff-student team in the summers of 2022 and 2023, the presentation reflected on several issues related to co-creation, exemplar selection, student engagement, the representation of diverse voices, funding, and sustainability.

Keywords: academic writing; exemplars; co-creation; student-led projects.

Community response

Clough began his presentation by introducing the initial concept for the online magazine *First Ink*. He emphasised the value of student exemplars in demystifying academic writing, particularly for complex concepts like voice, cohesion, and criticality. Exemplars allow students to observe academic writing skills and tools in real student work, fostering deeper engagement and supporting their development as writers. Clough, however, noted the challenges students face in finding suitable examples. The main sources—undergraduate research journals and online repositories—often fall short, either being overly polished by the publication process or lacking the engaging elements of websites or online magazines. *First Ink* was created to bridge this gap, serving as both an engaging writing resource and a repository for students.

Figure 1. The landing page for *First Ink*.



Clough outlined the development process of the magazine, which was created for students of Performing and Digital Arts and Humanities at Royal Holloway, University of London. The community was enthusiastic about the collaborative publication process led by Clough and his team of student editors during the summers of 2022 and 2023 to create *First Ink*.

They praised the 'inspiring' collaboration between students and academics in shortlisting submissions, with a student panel ultimately selecting the pieces for publication.

Participants were also enthusiastic about the complementary resources, including writing tips, annotations, and interviews with both authors and academics that were developed alongside the submitted writing. This elevated *First Ink* from a simple repository to an engaging writing resource, providing users with a holistic understanding of the writing process and how they can apply learning to their own writing. Participants agreed that this approach was significantly more engaging than traditional repositories, praising the 'scope and vision of [the] project—and the way that the students have really owned it'.

Participants felt that the opportunity to 'create a collaborative project to showcase their work where students had ownership of the project' was inspiring. They commented on the skills students would develop through engaging in the process, including collaboration, reflection, and writing for specific audiences.

Clough continued his presentation by reflecting on the process of creating *First Ink* over the previous two academic years. He noted the difficulties in measuring the initiative against institutional metrics, including student attainment and progress, but he demonstrated that readers' responses were largely positive. The website usage data reflected increased views in line with assessment deadlines and among students from modules that had example assignments on the website. Participants confirmed this trend with their own repositories and online resources and saw it as an encouraging sign that *First Ink* was being used actively for writing development. Clough further outlined the feedback he had received for *First Ink* from users of the site. He noted that they enjoyed the idea behind it and appreciated the variety of content as well as the ease of navigation, but they wanted some of the content to be broken down a little more, perhaps with bullet points, to increase engagement. Unsurprisingly, they also wanted to see more examples—specifically those related to their modules. Participants sympathised with requests for more examples and shared their experiences of building up larger numbers of exemplars over time.

Clough ended with a reflection on the difficulties of ongoing funding for this type of annual project. Participants sympathised with this challenge and the difficulties in funding student-led and co-created projects across the sector. They encouraged Clough to reach out to external funding bodies and educational organisations to keep the project going for future students. This session was positively received by participants, who 'loved everything'

about it. Participants thanked Clough for sharing this 'inspiring project' and giving the community hope for larger scale, collaborative student endeavours.

Next steps and additional questions

Participants were keen to see the project continue, despite difficulties of funding. One contributor, who is involved with the RAISE (Researching, Advancing, and Inspiring Student Engagement) Network, has offered to collaborate on the project in the future. Such an endeavour could potentially extend the reach and engagement of *First Ink* to more students across the United Kingdom. Alternatively, *First Ink* might act as a template for others to create their own institutional versions.

It would be interesting to hear Clough's reflections on developing the approach further, particularly:

1. What are the opportunities to expand beyond two faculties to cross-disciplinary or interdisciplinary work?
2. How might you collaborate with colleagues from other institutions and organisations (for example RAISE) in the future development of the project?

Author's reflection

I was heartened by the encouraging response to this project—particularly at a time when the future of *First Ink* is in question because of funding constraints. In response to the two questions posed, here are my thoughts:

1. What are the opportunities to expand beyond the two faculties to cross-disciplinary or interdisciplinary work?

First Ink celebrates discipline-specific writing from Arts and Humanities subject areas at Royal Holloway—but there is no reason why it should not expand its reach to other schools at the university, helping students from across a wider range of disciplines. That might also offer economies of scale when it comes to project finances.

2. How might you collaborate with colleagues from other institutions and organisations (for example RAISE) in the future development of the project?

This is an excellent idea and one I will pass on to the relevant Directors of Education at Royal Holloway responsible for taking this project forward.

I have now retired, but if anyone wishes to discuss this project further, please do get in touch at gerardclough@gmail.com. I can provide you with time-limited access to the resource and would be delighted to get your feedback.

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Gerard Clough was Senior Teaching Fellow at the Centre for the Development of Academic Skills at Royal Holloway, University of London until his retirement in July 2024. He is now a freelance educator supporting refugees, and he is about to launch his own bespoke service—Richmond English—offering one-to-one and small-group tuition to international clients seeking to develop their language and communication skills.

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