

Who reads a PhD thesis? –Raising students' awareness of readers and their needs through a reader response protocol.

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“It’s about your audience.”

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Who reads a PhD thesis?

- Report the results of a small survey on the purpose and nature of PhD support among members and their institutions
- Look at the forms of feedback given by respondents
- Suggest some models of feedback which can raise students' reader awareness
- Invite contributions by the audience to add to these

The survey questions

The survey aimed to discover

- the extent to which EAP tutors are engaged in actually giving feedback in some form on PhD drafts or parts of them.
- the institutional contexts
- the purposes for which the tutors believed they were doing this
- what types of drafts and documents were commonly presented to tutors and the mode in which the feedback was given
- The nature and focus of the feedback
- The involvement of the subject supervisors in this relationship

The survey questions

Prompted by

- My own current work
- The 2011 BALEAP Conference and proceedings:
“Cross-pollination Between Disciplines, Departments and Research.”

The survey questions: purpose of feedback

The views of departmental staff

- “They were concerned with... being able to read student work without hindrance” or “distracting” errors
- “the importance to the reader of smooth flowing text” (Turner, 2013).
- “So the way I look at it is, there are no surprises. So I’m reading an article and the article will say, ‘These are the following sections,’ then you give the sections...” (Finn, 2013).
- (Guidelines for Master’s thesis examination report)
“c) *Accepted with major modifications*:...The examiner may recommend the candidate seek the assistance of an editorial service if errors in grammar and syntax are extensive.” (Kumar and Stracke, 2011)
- Lecturers favoured reuse of generic phrases (up to about 9 words). (Davis and Morley, 2013)

.....readability and predictability

also publishability and reputation of university

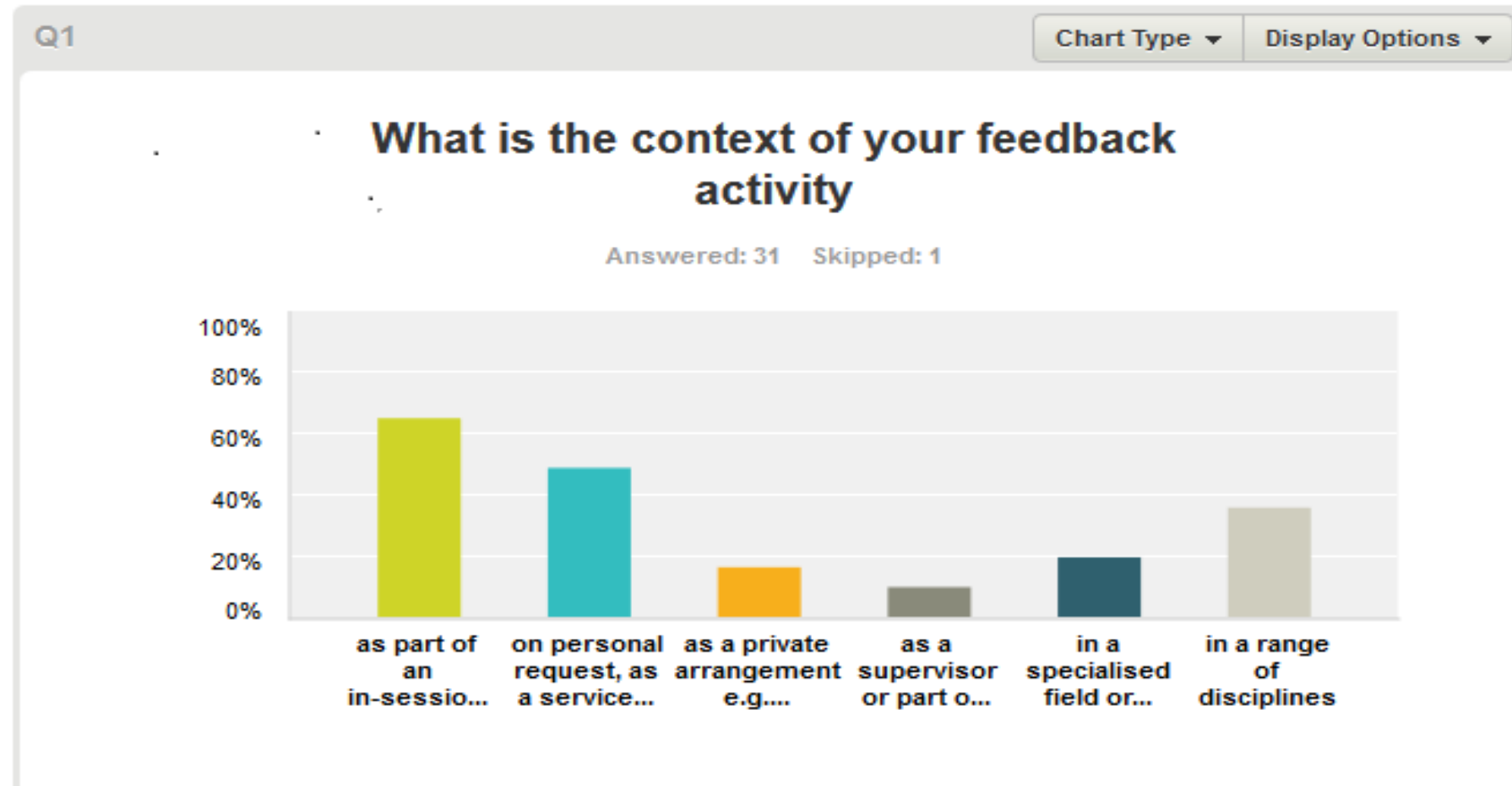
The survey questions: expected types of feedback from EAP tutors

- Language
- Conformity with conventions and expectations
- Structure
- Genre effectiveness

Q1

The survey results

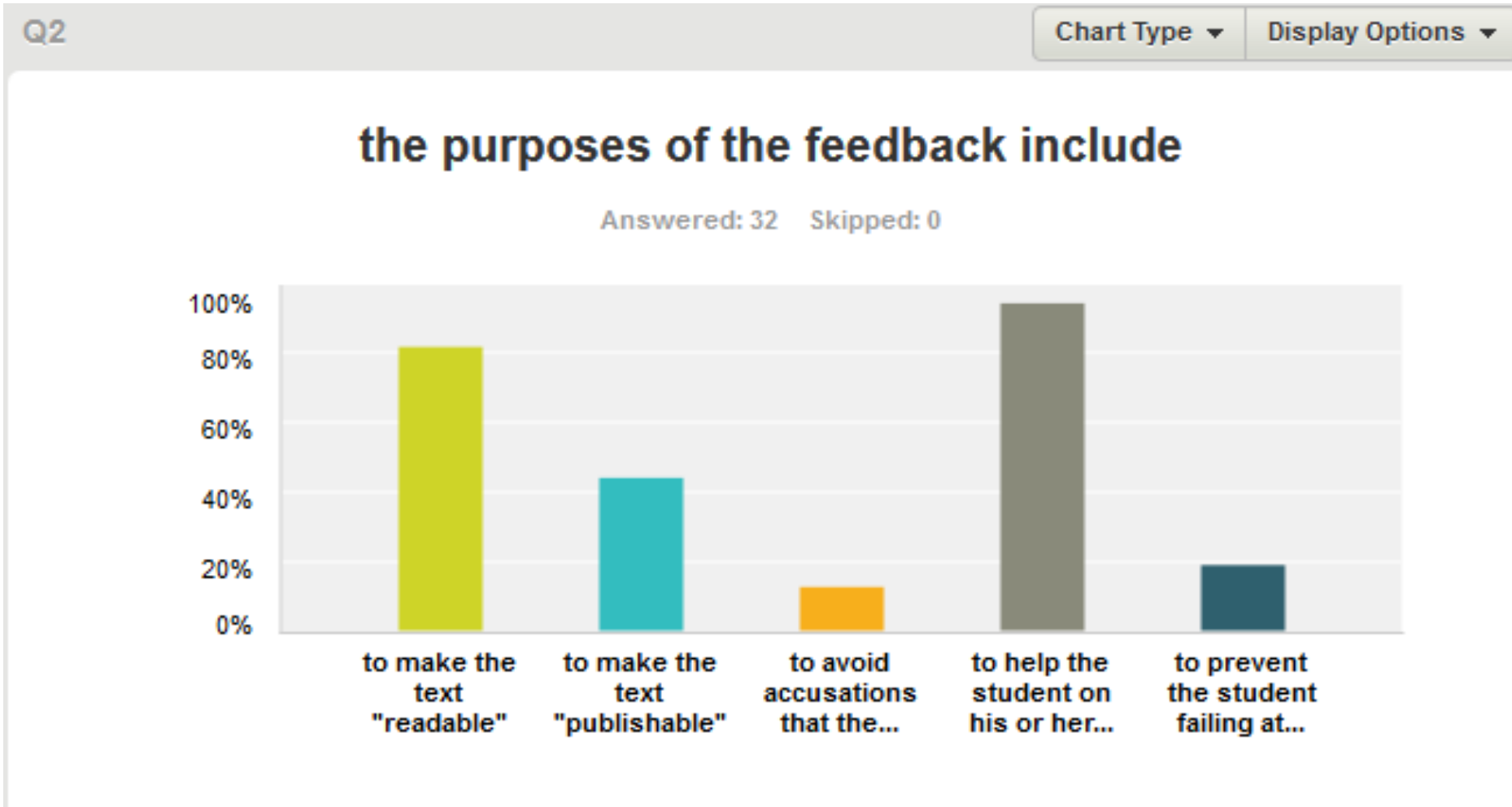
PAGE 1: Giving feedback on PhD Writing



Q1 Comments

- formal 1:1 language tutorials (5x1 hour) for final year PhD students
- Insessional in departments and bookable 1:1 for all-comers
- As part of the Unit's consultation offer to all NNS students, and as an important element of Early Research Writing In-sessional programme
- On a writing course that is more "foundation" than "in-sessional"

Q1



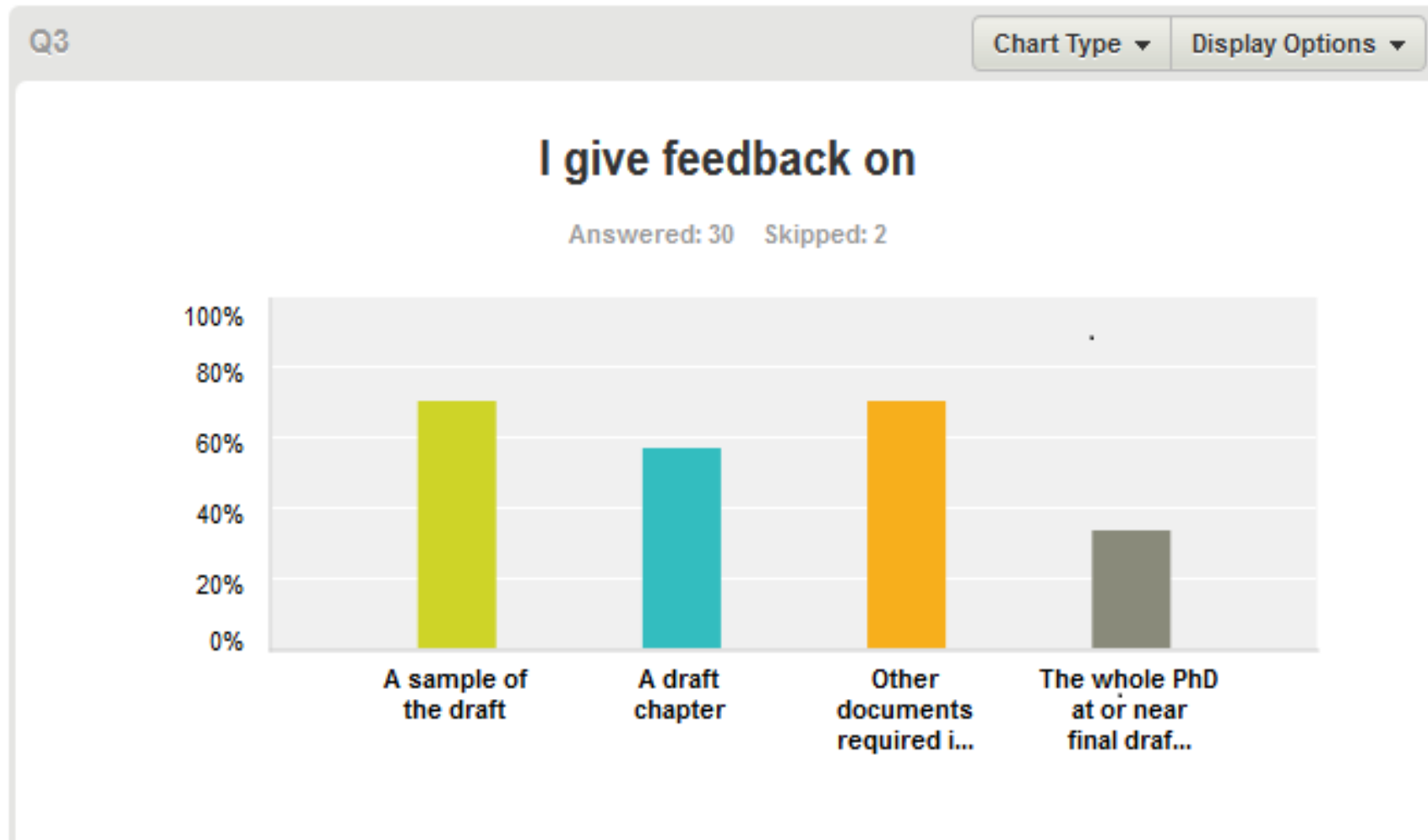
Q2 Comments

- Mostly readability and encouraging students to develop awareness of how others write- the idea that they might read their supervisors' publications with an eye to noticing features of their writing often comes as a shock to students
- My current work is mainly with first and second year PhD students so it is not polishing an end product so much as getting students into good 'writing down' practices; I focus on top down issues for organising and structuring Lit Reviews, for example, with lots of bottom up stuff on synthesising from sources/ integral and non integral referencing, creating coherence etc.
- to make the student:
 - express their ideas more clearly /aware of academic conventions re: structure / idea development /advise on how to improve structure and style (as part of the journey to becoming an academic writer)

Q 3 Comments

- Varies according to students; sometimes as a learning process, sometimes fine-tuning for publication in peer-reviewed journals.
- To help the student on his or her journey to becoming a writer in other, non-academic contexts (e.g. it is hoped that much of the feedback will not only benefit the student's ability to write at university, but also his/her ability to write in a business context after graduation).
- To support students in meeting academic requirements of British PhDs.
- In rare cases, to justify to both the student and other stakeholders why a piece of writing has been judged as evidence of an academic offence (usually plagiarism).

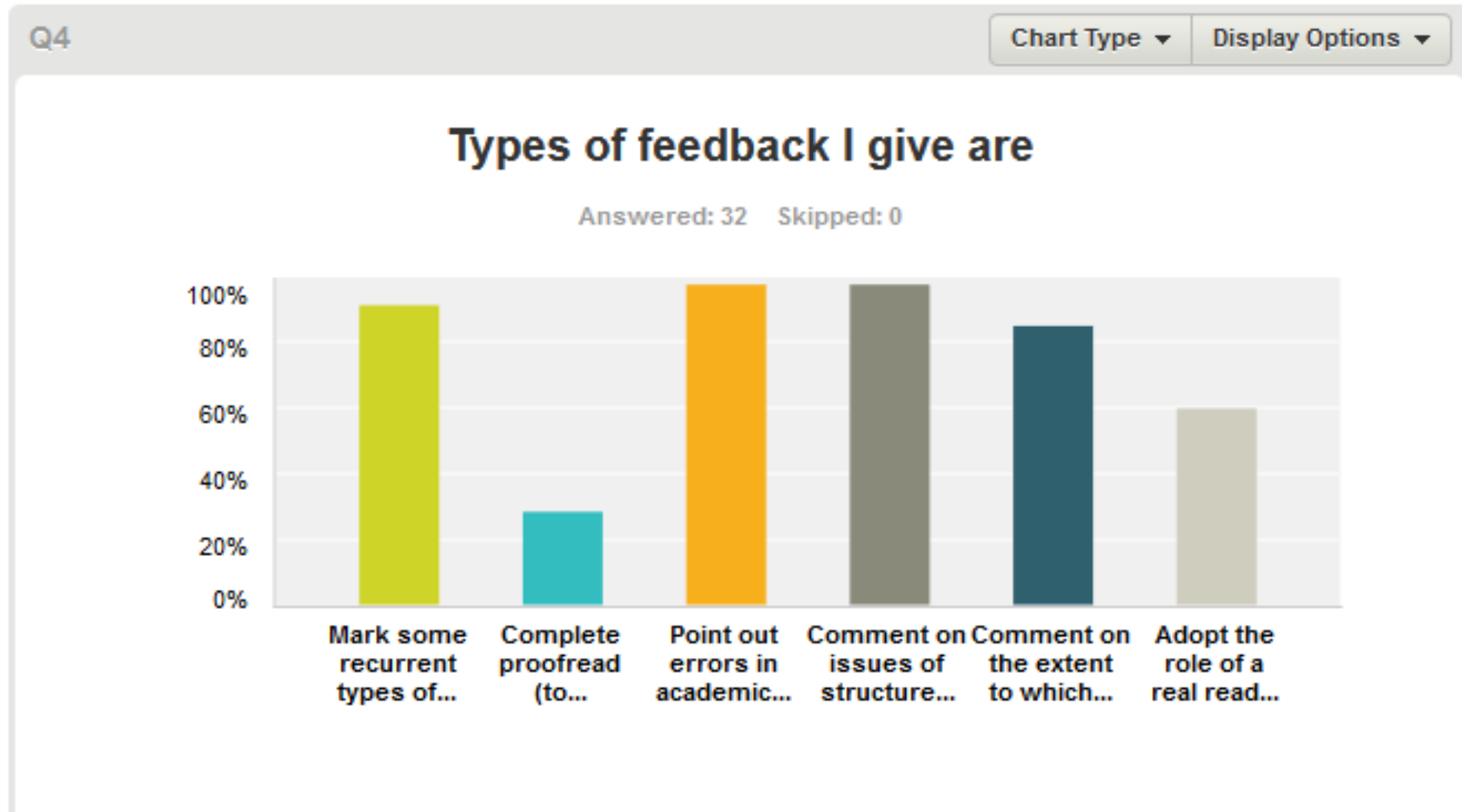
Q3



Q 3 Comments

- Sections of drafts some students bring a lot of their work, others just a sample. we don't have guidelines (as yet, but this question has made me question this approach!)
- Five tutorials, so potentially 5 samples from different chapters
- Mainly on proposals, research articles for publication, and texts in between. Rarely on a whole thesis at one go.
- First year report

Q4



Q4 Comments

Supervisor level:
I AM a 'real reader"

EAP focus

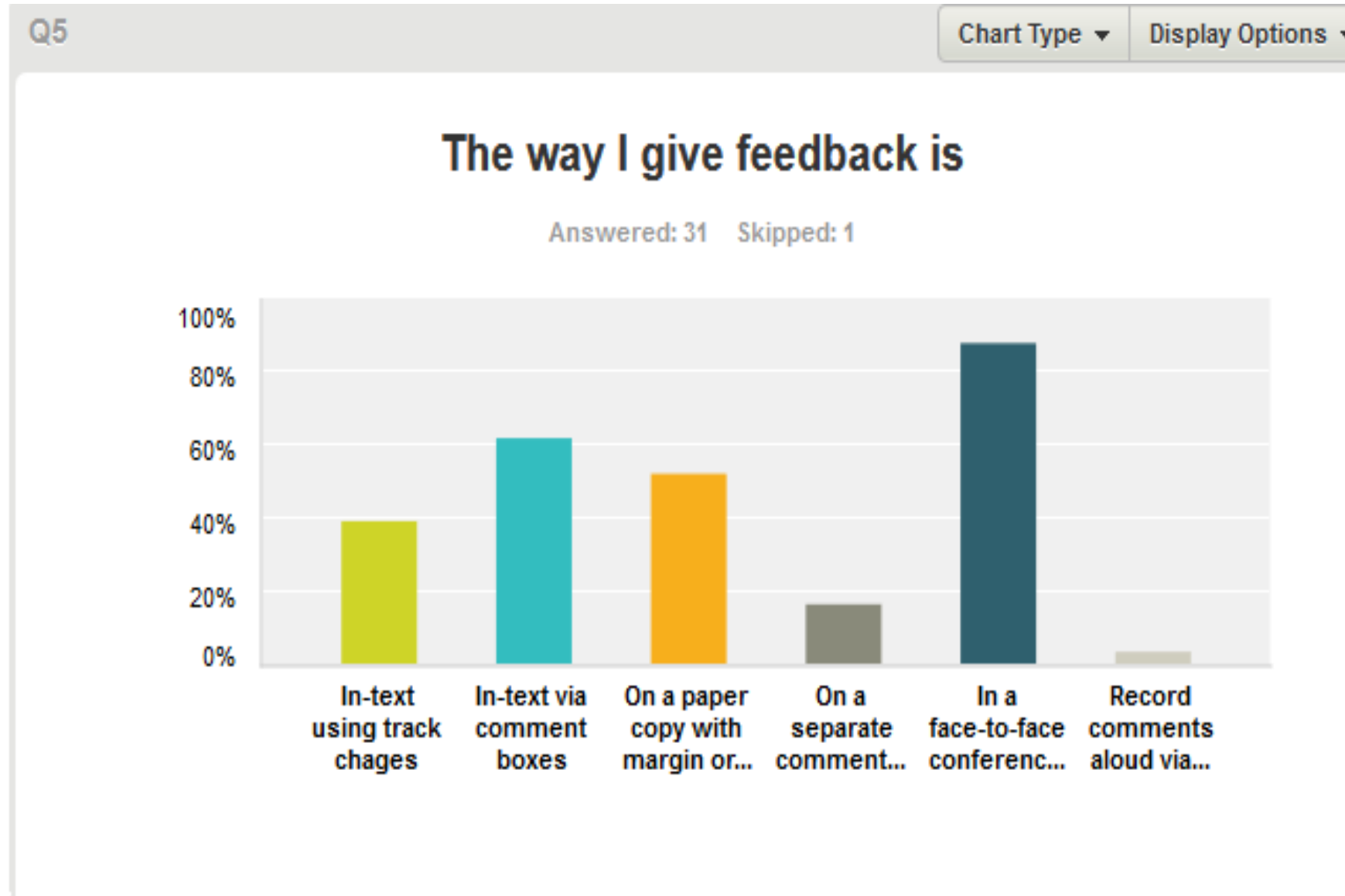
- to make the student express their ideas more clearly /aware of academic conventions re: structure / idea development and show them where they are not following them.
- Depends what the student wants - sometimes just proofreading, sometimes language help /
- Structure, content / purpose /flow etc.
- Practical advice on where to seek further academic support/study skills strategies/etc.
- Motivational feedback, e.g. "Well done - this is a well-written assignment"; or "Significant improvements are needed in order to succeed on your main degree course"

Q4 Comments

Reader response

- Due to varying expectations of supervisors across a wide range of disciplines, "pointing out errors" often translates better as raising awareness of aspects where the (non-specialist) reader's expectations are not met (occasionally advise student to refer to supervisor or ultimate guidance)
- I should qualify the last tick, as this may be my intention but if the discipline and topic are far removed from my knowledge, it becomes difficult to do this... On the other hand, students should write for the educated reader and not necessarily for the expert...

Q5



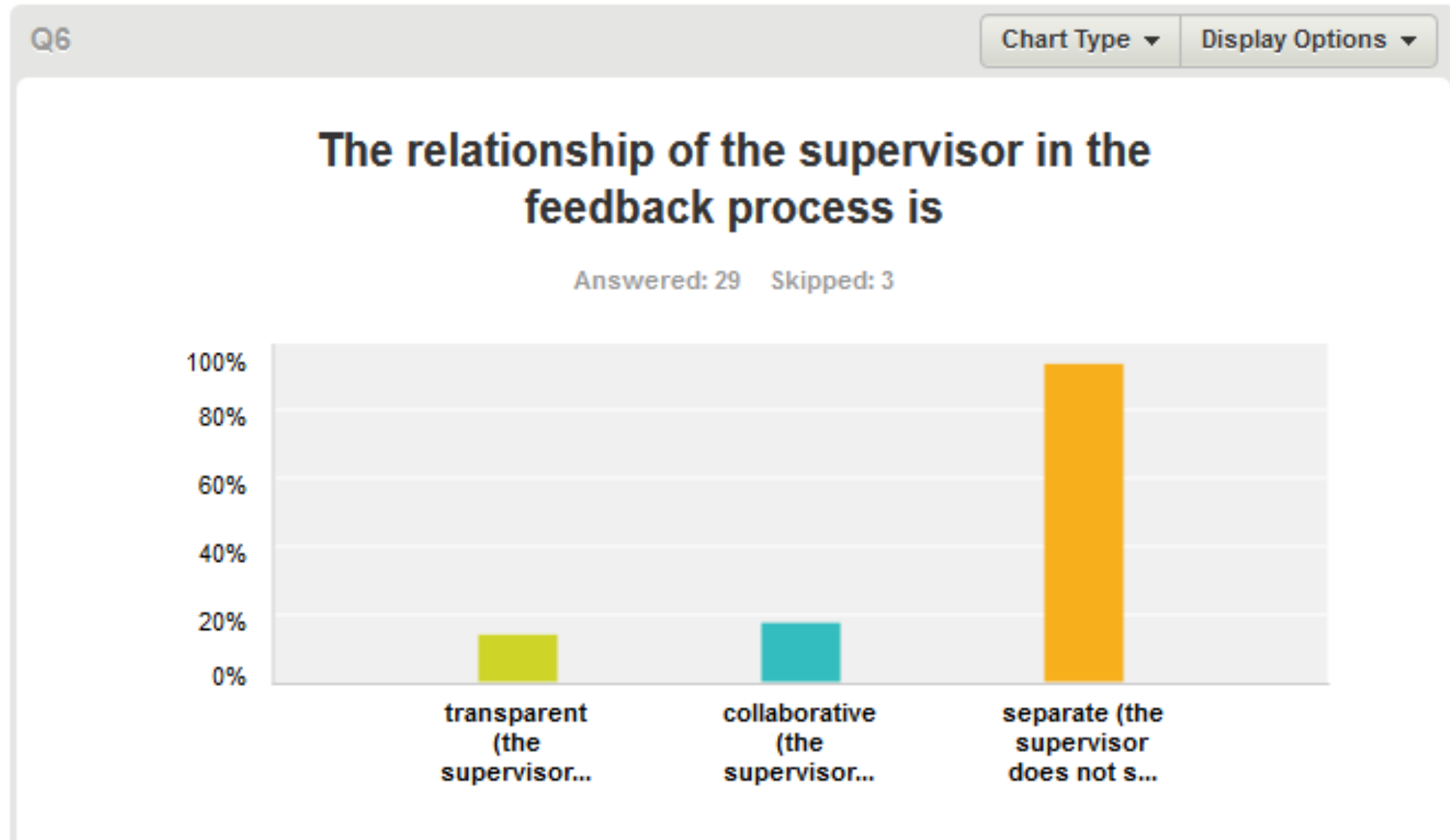
Q4 Comments

- We run both an on-line (via e-mail) and face-to-face version of the course.
-according to whether by distance or not, and the 'neediness' of the student
- Grademark quick mark comments. Bluebeam, Blackboard (gradecentre)

Pedagogic focus:

- In text using highlight colours followed by whole class discussion
- for common grammar/vocab errors I highlight the error and elicit correction from the student; if it's a collocation/idiomatic error, then I will correct it and explain it to the student and make them make a note of it so that they can try to avoid repeating that error.

Q1



Cline of involvement

- I only give feedback to students I am supervising or am on the supervision team and at pre-viva time.
- The supervisor MAY see my comments, -often get v. positive feedback about the student's progress / improvement in writing, but any contact is on the initiative of the supervisor. We send reports to supervisors when student has been referred to us by them...
- where student IELTS writing score is in our 'Tuition Essential' category, or is referred by supervisor for insess. help, tutors send supervisor a report at the end of the course. Where students' attendance is voluntary we do not routinely contact supervisor.
- Sometimes the PhD supervisor refers the student to me and so it's collaborative, sometimes separate.

Q6 Comments

- The supervisor usually refers the student when there are problems with grammar, language or organization. I never meet the supervisor
- My interactions with the students are confidential unless referred to me by their supervisors or the student gives me permission to discuss with supervisors.

Q6 Comments

The student calls the shots!

- I find students sometimes seek feedback from their supervisor and then ask me for feedback on the same piece of work (without me knowing) and then compare the feedback and show me the differences/similarities - they seem to trust me more than their supervisor for advice on academic language - I'd be interested if this is common/appropriate - I always tell students to listen to their supervisor as they are discipline specialists. I've just completed the I've enjoyed providing PHD support, it's been challenging, and these questions have raised more issues/areas I've not considered.
- This is an excellent question!

Reader response strategies

- Quite a significant number of tutors are using reader response principles?
- Do they use reader response protocols?

The use of some pre-planned set of reader responses based on a particular pre-decided reader role (Alexander, 1999)

Reader response protocol

- Why is it important?
- It enables students to see the *effects* of their errors and departures from norms and reader expectations, rather than being prescriptive
- It enables students to identify successful aspects of their writing and use these as future models.

In working on PhD theses, it may not be practical (and maybe not ethical) for most EAP tutors to take on the role of the supervisor or examiner.

However, they could be the readers for whom the text might be published. Their responses can mirror the effect of the writing on a reader who is slightly less closely involved in this particular research, or just the educated reader.

Areas of comment:

- Clarity and ambiguity
- Ease of reading and understanding
- Possible departures from convention or cultural issues
- Demands being made on the reader
- Reader emotions and sensitivities

Examples of stock comment stems

Clarity and ambiguity

- *The reader is not sure-do you mean X or Y? (reformulations)*
- *The reader is confused.....*
- *The reader wonders whether/ why/how/ in terms of what?*
- *We expected a contrast....but...)* (e.g. after wrong use of However/ On the other hand...)
- *The reader cannot work out what 'It' refers to here.*

Ease of reading and understanding

- *This sentence has gone on for four lines now, the reader is becoming confused. Consider dividing it here.*

Examples of stock comment stems

- Possible disciplinary/ interdisciplinary issues
- *Would readers in your field know this/ need a gloss here/ need the full form of these initials* (when students seem to overuse acronyms with no explanation)
- *Would UK readers be aware...?*
- Sometimes step back and admit our imitations as readers:
- *Is this usual in your field? Ask your supervisor/ Check with your supervisor's writing or with journal articles in this field)*

Examples of stock comment stems

Demands being made on the reader

Do you expect the reader to stop reading and go back and find Chapter 2 and locate this diagram?

The reader does not remember what Tracy claimed regarding identity work (e.g. '...as shown in Ch 2' -but without any explanation or gloss or memory jogger).

Reader emotions and sensitivities- including positives

The reader is bored/ may die before this sentence is complete/ is not a goldfish) (lengthy sentences or constant over-summarising).

Don't tell us you are going to tell us: just tell us

How good to see a real observation prefacing a section. This engages the reader and makes us feel fresh to take on another angle on this phenomenon

Metaphors as feedback

Create running metaphors for reader/ writer relationships: e.g.

e.g. For textual organisation signalling:

The reader is a guest in your house

(e.g. show him where to hang his coat/ tell him when dinner is served, don't serve a plateful of raw ingredients)

e.g. For showcasing your results:

You are a guide showing the reader round a cave. Show us round and shine a torch on the interesting features.

Metaphors and parables

- Metaphors can relate to the topic of the thesis
E.g. *identity creation strategies* in academic interactions

This paragraph seems to have been written by Salvador Dali
(Thesis on cultural tourism- Spanish student)

- Or can be parables (alternative narratives, illustrating significance)
- E.g. for literature reviews

These people (writers of the sources), are your friends, who helped you get where you are.

What are your metaphors for the reader writer relationship?

- Audience suggestions:

Your sources: are a string of pearls- the argument is the thread that holds them together

...are the Orchestra you are their conductor/ are your servants not your masters

- Interlinked silver pearls

- Negative:

A poor literature review is like a laundry list/ shopping list

... has the 'Everest' quality- sources included 'because they are there!'

Apply the 'So what?' test.

End

“It’s about your audience.”

Departmental lecturer

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