Fifty Common Mistakes in the NEA

Getting Organised

1. Not keeping a research diary.

If your students find the justification and evaluation of the different stages of the investigation difficult, encourage them to keep a research diary. Just a few notes on what went well and what was challenging at each stage can help them organise their thoughts.

2. Not allowing students to take true ownership over the study.

Are students taking true ownership of their study or just completing each section as and when you ask them to? Think about how to build deeper independence in your students long before they begin their NEA.

3. Not using the key geographical words they understand.

Even A Level students forget to use the key geographical vocabulary associated with their chosen study. Ask them to formulate a list of key words and terms before they start their write up to focus them on writing like a geographer in every section.

4. Expecting students to just get on with the write it up.

Though working grades cannot be provided for each NEA section, it is motivating for students to submit in stages rather than complying to one single final submission date. This also helps teachers plan intervention sessions if some students fall behind.

5. Not starting enquiry based learning in year seven.

How well do students understand the requirements of each stage of an enquiry? Starting enquiry projects in year 7 means students transition to the A Level NEA more easily - they can focus their energy on writing great content and less on learning the structure of a successful investigation.

Titles

6. Choosing a title that is too broad.

Big ideas are great in the classroom, but students should avoid having too broad a title for their NEA investigation. It is unlikely they will be able to find clear, empirical and meaningful evidence that directly relates to their research questions.

7. Testing the untestable such as change over time.

Unless they are really sure they can find the data, students should avoid titles that look at how an impact has changed over time. This type of research is usually beyond the time frame of an NEA and pursuing these can result in meaningless and weak conclusions.

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8. Using questions could be answered with a simple yes or no.

Students should avoid titles that are answered with a simple 'yes' or 'no'. These give little scope for a range of discussion points in the conclusion and create a closed narrative throughout the study. Instead students might like to use phrases such as 'to what extent...'.

9. Focussing on something that impassions them but does not fit the fieldwork location.

We frequently tell students to focus their study on an aspect of the course they enjoyed. But what if that topic does not 'fit' the available fieldwork locations? Students may create a meaningless study just because they can't see beyond that topic.

10. Comparing two totally different places.

Be wary of trying to compare two unrelated places in a study. With so many multi-layered variables differing between locations, it will be difficult to find meaningful points, unaffected by other factors, on which to truly draw comparisons in analysis.

11. Studying something ongoing (like COVID).

Studying something that is an ongoing phenomenon (such as 'the geographical impact' of a conflict) is notoriously difficult. The picture is one of constant change, so trying to find meaningful geography out of partial knowledge can only breed poor conclusions.

12. Trying to do a comparison study with a holiday destination.

Some students try to base their study around comparing their fieldwork location with their holiday destination. It is very rare that this works practically - equipment, time and effort are frequently compromised, making any comparison more difficult.

13. Writing a sociology study.

Students who are excellent human geographers may end up producing sociological studies (into human behaviour) rather than geographical ones. Remind these students of key geographical concepts (such as place or interdependence) to keep them on track.

14. Letting the title dictate the whole study (rather than the data).

Many students find it difficult to strike a balance between a study that is led by the title and one led by data. A confident geographer will recognise how important it is to let the data itself become the justification for proceeding in certain ways.

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Introduction

15. Discussing the location as if everyone knows it.

Students who study an area they know well may take it as given that the reader of the study knows the place as well as they do. Describing and locating a place in detail, contextually as well as spatially sets the right tone for the remaining write-up.

16. Not really understanding the intricacies of their study location.

Students doing fieldwork in unfamiliar locations usually need to spend a lot of time really getting to know what makes that place tick. Human geography studies will often benefit from students understanding the physical geography of the area and vice versa.

17. Not reading around the subject enough (outside the textbook!)

When students complete a literature review, too many see their course textbook as a suitable reference. While this may summarise the main ideas, greater depth will come from peer-reviewed articles, other books or academic podcasts.

18. Framing a research question too broadly and answering it in the literature review.

Students sometimes choose to focus their study on something so broad that their research questions are answerable in their literature review, making their data hold little value. Encourage a narrower focus so that place specific data becomes important.

19. Not knowing how to reference and/or create a bibliography

Students frequently record citations and references inconsistently. Correcting them can take valuable time away from creating sound geographical discussions. Show them good examples of academic referencing and how a research diary can help format this.

Data Collection

20. Not thinking about the type of data that needs to be collected.

Lots of students tend to let their data collection be 'technique-led' rather than 'data-led'. Encourage students to carefully examine the actual data they would need to satisfy answering their research questions before they design their methodology.

21. Writing limp ethical and moral considerations.

Encourage students to develop their gravitas as a researcher through their consideration of ethical and moral issues. These statements can be quite limp and impersonal to the places and people involved if students settle for off-the-shelf reflections.

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22. Not doing enough interviews.

Students using questionnaire interviews as part of their data collection commonly underestimate just how many they need to make sensible judgements from their data. Encourage them to be more creative in how they recruit people and to prioritise this task.

23. Being too busy to just take it all in.

During the data collection stage encourage students to take some time away from the clipboard or digital device to simply observe their surroundings in silence for a few minutes. Students can gain an incredible insight to a place just by slowing down.

24. Having an over emphasis on quantitative data.

Students can become focussed on recording huge amounts of mediocre quantitative data while ignoring amazing qualitative data simply because they perceive it to be illogical or subjective, or difficult to work with in later stages. Practice doing qualitative data analysis to improve their confidence.

25. Not running a pilot survey (or not saying they have done one).

Students frequently see pilot studies as a waste of time. However piloting certain aspects of a study, such as a questionnaire is a valuable experience and provides students with opportunities to discuss self-reflection in their evaluation section.

26. Having a misbalance between primary and secondary data.

Few studies strike a good balance between primary and secondary data. The two forms of data should complement each other throughout the study - in the method, data presentation and in the analysis. Too often secondary data is bolted onto primary data as an afterthought.

27. Not clearly referring to independent and dependent variables.

Students often do not give enough thought to the different independent and dependent variables in their study. Highlighting each of these early on, ideally in the data collection planning stage, focuses their minds on geographical cause and effect.

28. Having a closed mindset to unexpected geography.

Students can become so well-versed in geographical theory that when the real world doesn't comply, they reject good data and continue to search for the 'neat' results during the data collection phase. A more open mind set will allow them to see context.

29. Choosing a method that narrows the scope of the study.

Students may struggle to strike a balance between a data collection method which is small enough in scale to be manageable and large enough for interesting and sound analysis. Writing 'dummy' data in advance may help them see what analyses are possible at that scale.

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30. Students not collecting enough data for stats tests.

Students frequently ask teachers how many questionnaire responses are needed in their data collection. Students should think ahead to their analysis and estimate the minimum number of responses that would inform meaningful conclusions… then double it!

Data Presentation

31. Thinking they are annotating when they are in fact just labelling in detail.

Make sure students really know the difference between a label and an annotation in their data presentation. Often students will simply write a detailed description to accompany an image instead of linking what they see to their research questions.

32. Not understanding the ways data are classified.

It is common for students to make ill-informed choices in their data presentation because they do not have a grasp of the different data types. As well as discrete and continuous data, students might also consider others such as ordinal and ratio data.

33. Choosing data presentation from a 'menu'.

Though it is common to highlight a range of different data presentation techniques to students, be wary of making these appear like a 'menu' from which they can simply choose at will. The emphasis is on techniques that are appropriate for the data.

34. Not thinking about 'social shading' in data presentation.

The colours students use in their data presentation can be employed to create meaning rather than just be there to make it more visually attractive. For example, red is often associated with negativity, blue with water and green with sustainability.

35. Overusing Excel's drop down menus (for colours, styles etc).

Excel is a great tool for data presentation. However, its structure makes it too easy for students to use the package like a series of menus from which they passively choose, This can hinder them making their presentation appropriate to their data.

36. Not getting the basics right.

Well chosen, appropriate data presentation techniques are too often let down by a lack of care and poor attention to detail in their execution. Common trip hazards include axes labels, axes scales, use of a key, titles and displaying the units of measurement.

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37. Including pages of stats calculations and raw data in the study.

Students often unnecessarily bulk out their study by including raw data or their workings for statistical calculations. This may mean students are misfocussing their efforts and are not grasping the importance of analysing results and finding patterns.

Data Analysis

38. Discounting 'anomalies' too readily.

Be cautious about advising students to not count or consider data that appears to be anomalous just because it sits outside the norm. They may automatically be discounting data that actually has a really interesting geographical story behind it.

39. Not analysing (or presenting) secondary data.

Students frequently make passing references to secondary data but not all present the data graphically alongside their primary data. Doing so can be a useful way of showing the contextual juxtaposition of the two forms of data and make analysis easier.

40. Doggedly sticking with a ropey title.

Students commonly realise in the analysis stage that the title they have chosen just doesn't work. Doggedly clinging onto a ropey title undermines the whole study. Instead they should state the title's limitations and focus on credible geography that works.

Conclusions

41. Misunderstanding correlation and causation.

Make sure students know the difference between correlation and causation. Often students will try to formulate reasoning for something that actually has little geographical grounding. Encourage cautious language such as 'This appears to suggest...'.

42. Not being tentative enough.

Students often make bold statements in their analysis and conclusion sections that represent large leaps of faith. Try to encourage them to move away from the idea that their results 'prove' something and to move towards their results 'indicating' it.

43. Repeating rather than referencing geographical theory in the conclusion.

In their conclusions, students sometimes repeat the geographical theory they have already discussed in detail in their literature review. Ensure students recognise the difference between doing this and referencing something they have already mentioned.

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44. Not referencing research questions in conclusion (or making vague links).

Students commonly get so involved with their data collection and analysis that by their conclusion they appear, in writing, to have steered away from their research questions. It is a good idea to use these as sub-headings in the write up to retain the research structure.

Evaluation

45. Only evaluating the method.

Students frequently rush their evaluation and limit their discussions to the data collection phase. Instead, students should look to evaluate how each study section informs other sections and how the whole study hinges together as a piece of research.

46. Not understanding the difference between reliable and valid.

Students often confuse 'validity' and 'reliability' when discussing their data. Data sets are valid if they are good measures of geographical phenomena. Data sets are reliable if they are consistent (e.g. similar results when methods are repeated).

47. Ropey and meaningless justifications.

Sometimes students come up with bland and rather weak justifications for choosing certain data presentation techniques. One form of a graph might be 'easier to read' but students need to go into more depth and explain which of its features make it so.

48. Not being critical of secondary data.

Students often forget that secondary data should be subjected to the same type and level of critique as primary data. They should examine the data sources and prepare similar discussions about the reliability, validity, subjectivity and bias one finds.

49. Failing to see themselves as active researchers.

Students often see themselves as passive observers of their NEA data, whereas they actually might be active researchers, with a valid influence over the data they record. Confident students recognise this and writing about it may strengthen their study.

50. Making grand claims about the impact their research will have.

We can't blame students for being excited about their research but overestimations of the 'impact' their research may have can mean they have not thought about the wider geographical context of place and where their localised research sits within it.

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