

STUDENT MINDSET CONFERENCE

30
APRIL
2026

SPRING EVENT



UCAS₁

TRAINING YOUR ACADEMICS TO CREATE KICK-ASS COURSE DESCRIPTIONS



YOUR SPEAKER



TRACY PLAYLE



**FOUNDER AND CHIEF CONTENT
STRATEGIST**

PICKLE JAR AND CONTENTED

**WHY DOES
IT GO SO
WRONG?**

**CREATING
SHARED
STANDARDS**

**SUPPORTING
THEM TO DO
IT WELL**

BUT FIRST...

DISCUSS

- ▶ What is the best model for creating course content?
- ▶ Who should do what?

WE NEED SOMEONE WHO ...

...knows the course
and its features
and benefits well

...knows the target
audience and their wants
and needs

...knows how to write
compelling SEO
marketing copy

...knows how to meet
audience needs
through copy



**WE DON'T LIKE IT WHEN
THEY THINK THAT THEY
CAN DO OUR JOB...**



**...BUT THEN WE ASK
THEM TO DO OUR JOB**

WHY DOES IT GO SO WRONG?



~~BLAME~~

RECRUITMENT TEAM

COURSE LEADS

What our priorities are

What we know

What we fear

COURSE LEAD
STUDENT
MINDSET
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COURSE LEAD MINDSET

Work in pairs on your table to write some user stories about academics.

**"As a ...
I need ...
so I can ..."**

COURSE LEAD MINDSET

Work in pairs on your table to write some user stories about academics.

Example:

As an early career researcher I need to secure funding so I can continue my career.

COURSE LEAD MINDSET

Work in pairs on your table to write some user stories about academics.

**"As a ...
I need ...
so I can ..."**

RECRUITMENT TEAM

COURSE LEADS

What our priorities are

What we know

What we fear

RECRUITMENT TEAM

COURSE LEADS

Hitting admission targets
Moving prospects through pipeline
Proving ROI and efficiencies

What our priorities are

Teaching workload
Research priorities
Securing future funding

Marketing strategy
Customer engagement
Persuasive copywriting

What we know

Their subject area
Teaching
Writing academic papers

Not hitting targets
Letting students down
Academics (!)

What we fear

Peer perspectives of them
Losing their job
Not doing enough

THE ROOT CAUSE

2

LACK OF AUDIENCE INSIGHT

14 | Student Mindset Conference 2026

UCAS

DO STUDENTS UNDERSTAND THESE TERMS?

Understanding isn't a given.

TERM	I KNOW WHAT THIS MEANS	I DON'T KNOW WHAT THIS MEANS
Work experience opportunities	97%	2%
Curriculum	96%	2%
Real-world experience	95%	2%
Employability skills	95%	2%
Placement year	95%	2%
Real-world skills	95%	3%
Critical thinking	93%	3%
Modules	93%	4%
Full-time hours	89%	5%
Practice-based learning	85%	9%
State-of-the-art facilities	84%	9%
Problem-based learning	83%	9%
Portfolio	81%	9%
Research-led teaching	80%	10%
Applied learning	76%	13%
Industry-standard facilities	76%	14%
Professionally accredited	74%	15%
Industry-trusted tools	68%	17%
Cohort	66%	21%
Credits	62%	20%
Multi-disciplinary	55%	31%
Competency-based	46%	35%
Interdisciplinary	41%	41%
Thorough grounding	28%	53%

Q. Below are words and phrases that describe how courses and degrees are structured. Thinking about these phrases, please tell us how well you understand each one. | Respondent Numbers: 1,129

THE ROOT CAUSE

3

ABSENCE OF CLEAR FRAMEWORKS

Are our frameworks written for them or for us?

EDITORIAL GUIDES

e.g. Style and tone guidelines

Tells us how we should stand
A step on from brand guidelines
Written for content creators

VS

CONTEXT GUIDES

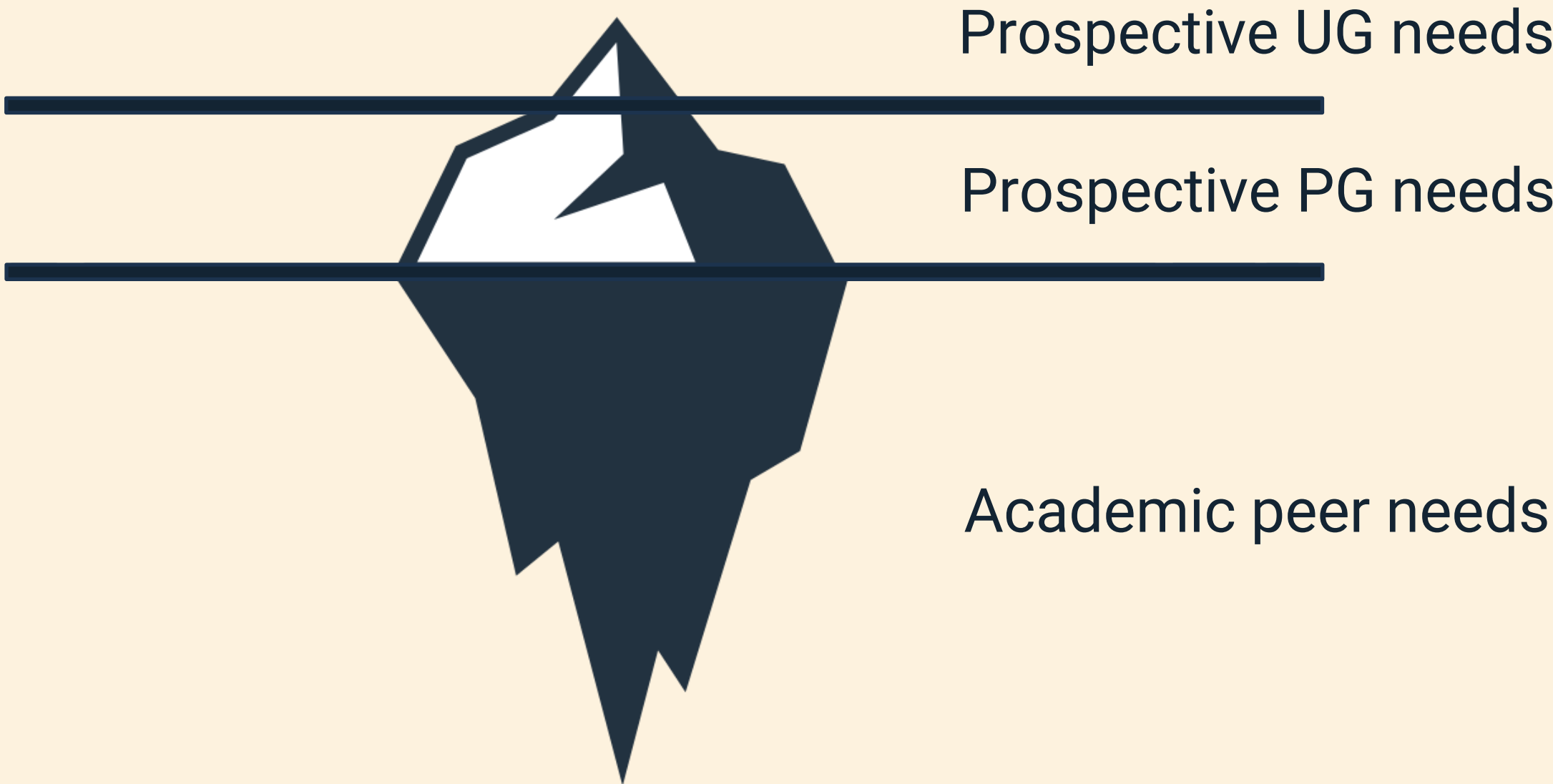
e.g Writing a great course page

Tell how to write specific items
Practical – why, how and what
Written for content contributors

THE ROOT CAUSE

4

FEAR OF OVERSIMPLIFICATION



THE ROOT CAUSE

5

CAPACITY AND CONFIDENCE GAPS

I don't have
enough time

I don't know
how to do it

I don't have time to
be perfect at this

THE ROOT CAUSE

6

CONFIDENCE SURPLUS

I use the internet therefore I'm an expert on web content. I know exactly how this should be done and the university marketing team doesn't know what they're doing

THE ROOT CAUSE

7

LACK OF INVESTMENT IN COPYWRITING

*Imagine if Procter and Gamble
made the R&D team create
the Head & Shoulders ads*



THE ROOT CAUSE

8

COURSES APPROVED WITH NO PROOF OF DEMAND

"We're including courses on our website that haven't recruited a single student in over 8 years"

(A real quote from a person that will remain unnamed)



**IF WE REALLY WANT BETTER
COURSE CONTENT, WE
DON'T START BY REWRITING
IT**

**WE START BY REDESIGNING
THE CONDITIONS IN WHICH
IT'S WRITTEN**

TOWARDS SHARED STANDARDS



TOWARDS SHARED STANDARDS



RECRUITMENT TEAM

COURSE LEADS

Rules



LET'S PAUSE... DISCUSS

| What can we agree on?

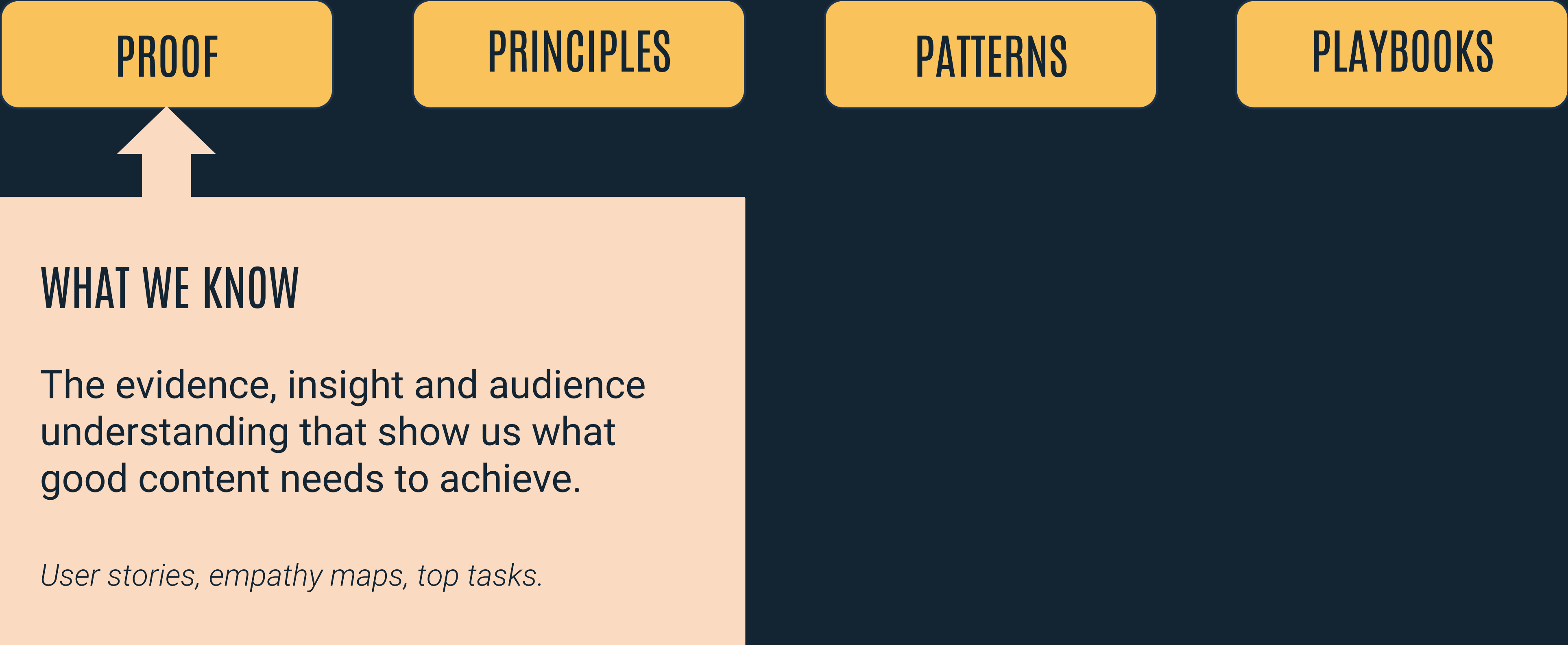
RECRUITMENT TEAM

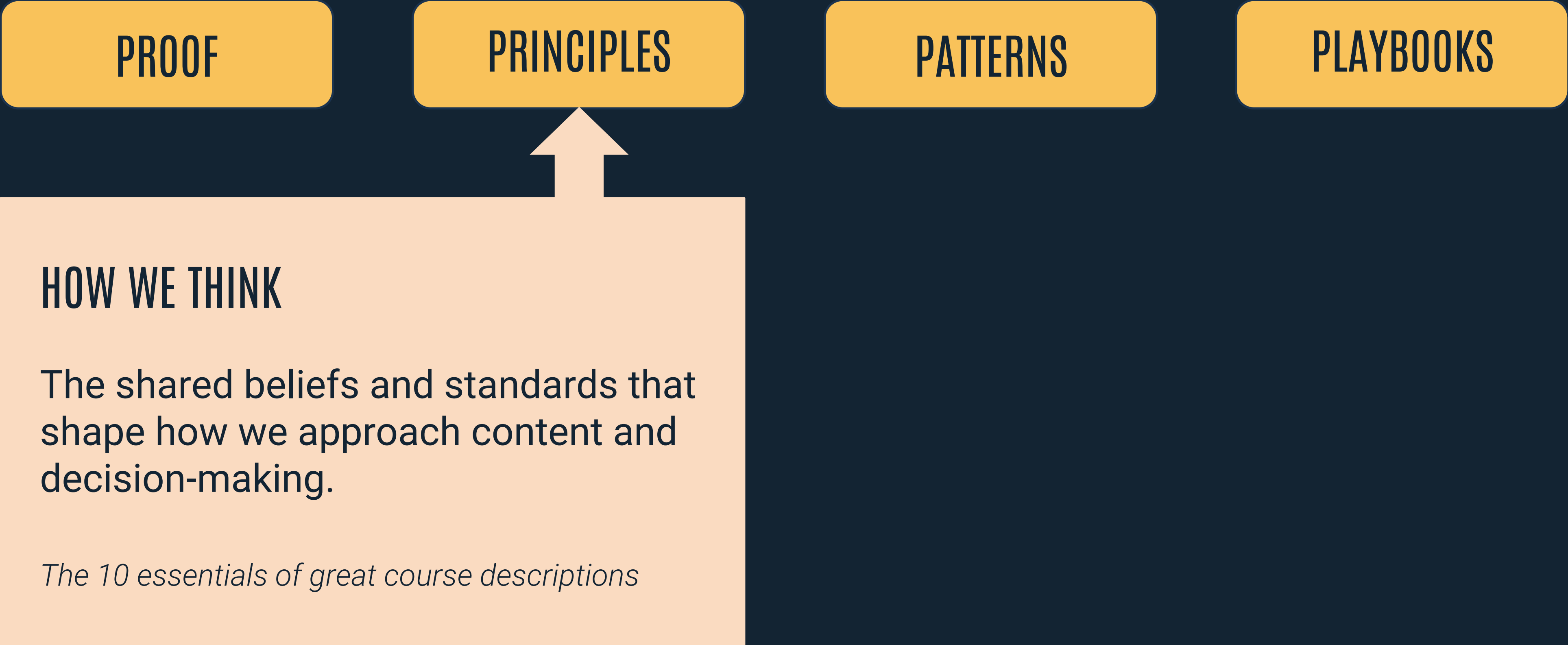
COURSE LEADS

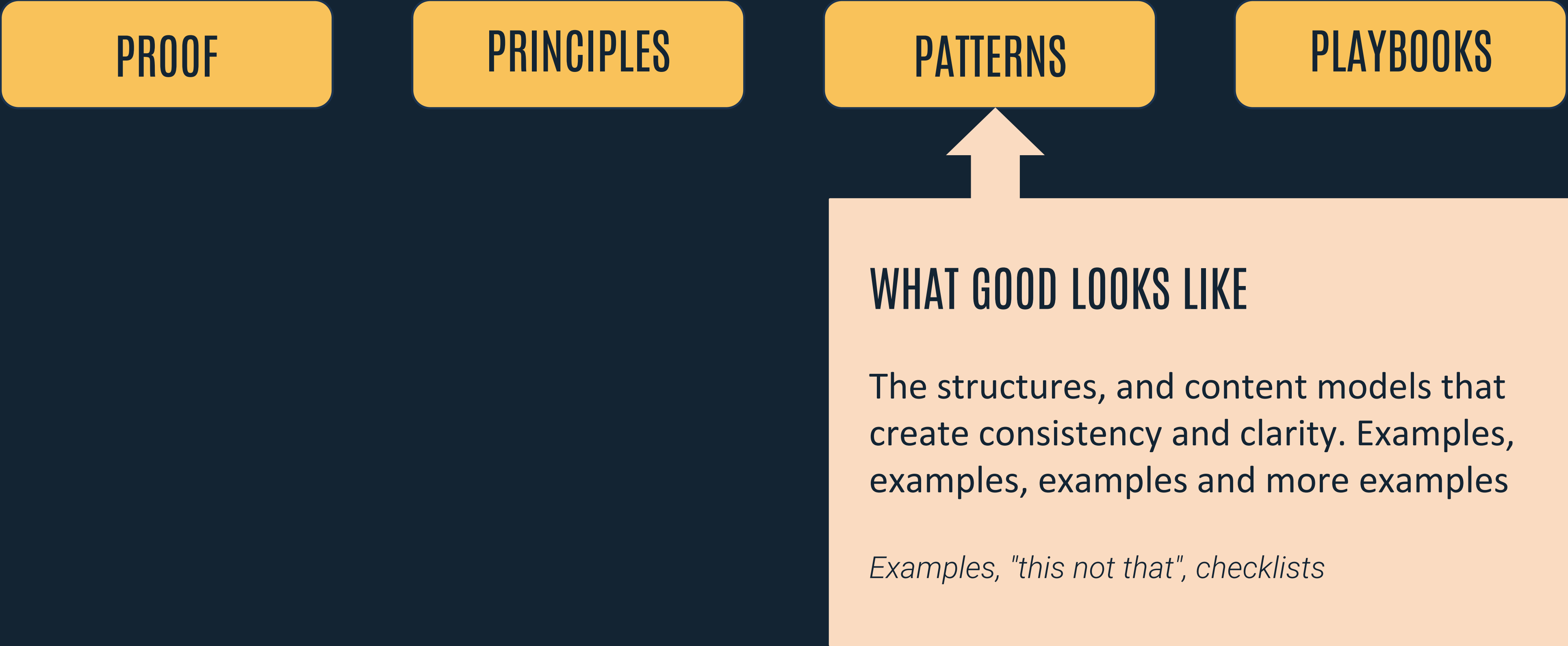
Shared understanding of, and
care for, the students



WHAT IF WE CREATED DECISIONS, NOT RULES?







PROOF

PRINCIPLES

PATTERNS

PLAYBOOKS

HOW WE DO IT: PRODUCTION TOOLS

The practical guides, templates and step-by-step support that help people create better content with confidence.

Workbooks, madlibs activities, AI tools

A TOOL TO HELP...



COURSE COMPANION GPT

go.wearepicklejar.com/course-copy



SUPPORTING THEM TO DO IT WELL



LET'S IMAGINE...

DISCUSS + CREATE

What support do they need from us?
Create 3 ideas ways to support them.

(Please don't suggest a "guidelines" document)

TRAINING

TOOLS

DEMONSTRATION

1	Writing workshops	6	Worksheets	11	"This not that" examples
2	Short webinars	7	"Madlibs" structures	12	Annotated reviews
3	Recorded micro-learning	8	Checklists	13	Live copy editing
4	Audience insights briefings	9	AI prompt libraries	14	Before and after examples
5	Peer review training	10	AI review tools	15	Subject-specific examples

COLLABORATION

16

Peer review sessions

17

Content office hours

18

Content crits (team sessions)

19

Drop-in clinics

20

Pair writing sessions

REINFORCEMENT

21

Template writing prompts

22

Tooltip guidance

23

Content refresh sessions

24

Post-training coaching

25

Content reviews/feedback

ENABLEMENT

26

Protected writing time

27

Clear approval routes

28

Access to content support

29

Faculty content champions

30

Guidance broken down



**LET'S PUT
WHAT WE'VE
LEARNED THIS
MORNING INTO
PRACTICE...**

REVIEW THE COPY...

Working in small groups apply the research insights to a typical course description and reshape it using three key questions:

a

1. What is real here?
2. Who is this really for?
3. What might need explaining?

Once you have considered the questions, say how you would improve the copy

THANK YOU

Tracy Playle

CEO and Chief Content Strategist
Pickle Jar Communications

Founder, ContentEd

tracy@wearepicklejar.com

