

CRITICAL THINKING & COMMUNICATION (CTC) INSTRUCTION FOR THE COMMON WRITING ASSIGNMENT REQUIREMENT

Background

For purposes of assessment across multiple sections of HUMN 1201, it is expected that faculty provide students with a common assignment so that demonstrations of learning outcomes can be uniformly evaluated. Given the nature of the skills developed in Critical Thinking and Communications, the best type of assignment will be one that requires students to grapple with a problem and write a persuasive response to that problem. This approach will allow us to measure student proficiency with Institutional Student Learning Outcomes #1-3 (Writing, Critical Thinking, and Informational Literacy), as well as CTC Student Learning Outcomes #1, #4, and #6.

Approach

Student should be presented with what is understood to be an “ill-structured problem” with which they will have to grapple. An ill-structured problem is one in which “reasonable people may reasonably disagree” regarding the solution whereas a well-structured problem is one in which the problem is well-defined and there exists a “right answer” as well as numerous “wrong” ones. An example of a well-structured problem is a typical mathematical problem (e.g., “ $2+x=4$: SOLVE FOR X”).

A critical thinker should approach an ill-structured problem by initiating the following information-gathering steps:

1. Identify the issue.
2. Grasp the issue as a problem.
3. Illustrate why the problem is, in fact, a problem.
4. Explain ways to effectively confront and possibly solve the problem.

Next, students need to understand how to wrestle with and ultimately attempt to solve the problem:

1. Determine the real or actual problem and state it in a way that is unambiguous.
2. Identify alternative perspectives on the problem. Is there more than one-way to see the problem that—if not identified—causes significant and insurmountable confusion?
3. Gather information on the problem and ways that the problem has or has not been addressed in the past.
4. Generate possible solutions or positions regarding the problem and then choose the best one.¹

So, in the context of our courses, we will be generating ill-structured problems that students will need to confront through writing. It is, then, our task to construct a

¹ “Problem Solving”, iStudy For Success. Penn State Online Tutorials for Essential College Skills, accessed August 6, 2014, <http://istudy.psu.edu/tutorials/>

writing assignment that will articulate an ill-structured problem that requires students to cultivate and exercise the following skills: written communication; critical thinking; and information literacy.

The Common Assignment Features

Our common writing assignment will be: a) to assign students the task of developing a defensible thesis responding to a specific problem or issue that you explain and give adequate background information regarding or b) to have students engage a problem that demands the student's "best solution" answer. The assignment will also be at least 1000 words in length.

Whichever tactic you choose, the assignment should have the following features:

1. A clearly articulated task for the student to complete—that is, a role or purpose that the student is assigned within the context of confronting the issue.
2. A specific audience to which the student will be addressing (which will also help to define the student's role as the writer)
3. A specific genre that is identified and explained (e.g., academic paper, op-ed, memo, etc.).
4. It must be explained as a writing-to-learn assignment (i.e., the assignment will have stages or milestones in which you as the instructor will engage with the student during her writing process)
5. The students at the outset will have the common evaluation criteria that you will be used.²

The QEP Writing Rubric and the AACU Rubrics for Critical Thinking and Information Literacy are the foundations for evaluating the student learning outcomes.

We encourage you to develop a grading guide that reflects these criteria as well as the VALUE rubrics from the AACU. You are free to determine the relative weights of your grading categories, but the overall value for the assignment must at least 15% of the student's overall grade.

² Bean, John C., *Engaging Ideas*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011), p. 96-100.