

CRITICAL THINKING & COMMUNICATION: WRITING-TO-LEARN TIPS

John Dewey, in 1916, rooted the notion of critical thinking in the ability for someone to engage a problem. Problems evoke one's natural curiosity, thus stimulating learning and critical thought. In essence, to be in the midst of some problem and to have to find your way out facilitates thinking.

So, we must present our material—whatever we choose to cover—as problematic. The problem we face, however, is getting students to realize there are problems at all! Most students come to college with the assumption that the next four-plus years will be acquiring information—a set of facts to which they must consult in the careers they will have. This type of attitude cannot be the ground for critical thinking. Aristotle noted that philosophy begins in wonder; as it turns out, thinking begins exactly the same way.

In our courses, especially in light of the university's QEP, The Write Attitude, we will be explicitly connecting such thinking to writing. John C. Bean cites Kurfiss (1988) who derives eight principles for designing a course that supports critical thinking:

1. Critical thinking is a learnable skill; the instructor and peers are resources in developing critical thinking skills.
2. Problems, questions, or issues are the point of entry into the subject and a source of motivation for sustained inquiry.
3. Successful courses balance challenges to think critically with support tailored to students' developmental needs.
4. Courses are assignment-centered rather than text and lecture-centered. Goals, methods, and evaluation emphasize using content rather than simply acquiring it.
5. Students are required to formulate and justify their ideas in writing or simply acquiring it.
6. Students collaborate to learn and to stretch their thinking, for example, in pair problem solving and small group work.
7. Several courses, particularly those that teach problem-solving skills, nurture students' metacognitive abilities.
8. The developmental needs of students are acknowledged and used as information in the design of the course. Teachers in these courses make standards explicit and then students learn how to achieve them.

A crucial step in teaching critical thinking is to develop good problems for students to think about.

Most students reach closure about a problem too quickly. This occurs because students are not accustomed to suspending judgments, questioning assumptions, evaluating evidence, or imagining alternative answers. Thus, as critical thinking instructors, we must facilitate exploratory thinking. This type of thinking can occur in talking—such as class discussion—yet it can also happen in writing. To do this, though, writing must be treated as a process.

We must get our students to realize that writing is not the package in which we deliver our ideas but, in fact, the process whereby thinking itself occurs. Our students should understand, as Peter Elbow (1973) rightly points out, that “meaning is not what you start out with but what you end up with...Think of writing not as a way to transmit a message but as a way to grow and cook a message” (p. 15). Consequently, a major part of our classes should be the development of thesis-driven writing.

Moreover, revision in the writing process should be understood *as* thinking-through-the-problem-at-hand. So, when the student revises her work, she is not editing it or proofreading it, she is instead engaged in the reflective process of thinking through the problem. Consequently, a thesis statement might be a middle stage in the process—a moment of discovery in the thinking—instead of the “idea that begins” the process. If this is the case, then our assignments need to be encouraging “revision-as-writing-as-thinking.” Bean offers fifteen suggestions for encouraging revisions through interactive elements, which constitute moments in the writing process:

1. Encourage students to pose a problem within a subject; that is, develop an issue that they want to explore.
2. Give problem-focused writing assignments.
3. Initiate classroom discussions that encourage students to comment on something or to argue a point. This allows them to rehearse the thinking strategies that underlie revision.
4. Incorporate “low-stakes” exploratory writing in the classroom.
5. Build writing-center conferences into the writing process.
6. Have students submit problem proposals, abstracts, and theses statements early in order for you to comment on them.
7. Build in due-dates for certain steps in the revision process; have them stay up all night the night before to write a rough draft, not the finished paper.
8. Incorporate peer review.
9. Hold writing conferences for those having problems with the assignment.
10. Have students submit ALL WORK that led up to the final paper. This encourages the process at the same time in defends against plagiarism.
11. Allow re-writes on next-to-final drafts.
12. Show students your own work in progress to illustrate that everyone goes through the writing process.
13. Give advice on the mechanics of revising. Most students revise online, at the computer, not on a hard copy of the work. Encourage the latter. It allows for a more illustrative demonstration of the thought process. These visual elements foster the thinking.
14. Don’t overemphasize essay exams. Though these have their place, if we concede that writing is a process because thinking is a process, then assignments that do not allow for multiple drafts is problematic.
15. Have high-standards for the finished product. “A” grades denote exemplary work. As such, “A’s” are not typical grades. If they tend to be

awarded in our course often, then it is most likely the case that you have diminished standards.

Our critical thinking classes tend to promote closed-form, thesis-governed writing—the prototypical structure for most academic prose.

Bean also cites three ways that students tend to avoid a thesis or write in spite of the ones they have developed: 1) “And Then” Writing; 2) “All About” Writing; and 3) Data Dump Writing.

1. “And Then” writing is essentially chronological, narrating a person’s life or series of events. You would see this in an assignment in which you gave them the task of analyzing a film or text. They, instead, just tell you what happened, event by event. Or, you might see this in a literature review in which a student just summarizes the articles in the order in which she reads them.
2. “All About” writing strives to say EVERYTHING about a topic or issue. The paper may be somewhat organized because the student has addressed things topically but she has also failed to produce a thesis or position that guides the paper. The topics are, then, not reasons for the thesis. The structure is inappropriate and ineffective in a thesis-governed paper.
3. Data dumps on the other hand have no apparent structure. There is little transition or cohesion between the things that are stated and discussed. The student has no guiding thesis, no guiding idea, and so she goes to Google and grabs it all. These are often the most likely to be plagiarized because the student is just cutting and pasting from websites (and occasionally books or journals). It is incomprehensible and plagiarized—a teacher’s worst nightmare.

Here are a number of ways to encourage writing-as-thinking, which will avoid the problems listed above:

1. Present a proposition (thesis) for student to defend or refute.
 - a. “In recent years, advertising has/has not made enormous gains in its portraying of women as strong, independent, and intelligent.
 - b. The overriding religious view portrayed in *Hamlet* is/is not an existential atheism similar what Sartre discusses in “Existentialism as a Humanism.”
2. Give students a problem or question that demands the student’s “best solution” answer.
 - a. Security vs. privacy is the overarching public policy dilemma that administrators face with airport security. You are a member of a team of consultants tasked with trying to balance these value demands. What would your team’s solution and strategy be to meet the demands of both?
 - b. What do you think are the best strategies for dealing with the increasing instances of criminal acts and violence perpetrated here on Savannah State’s campus?

3. Create “strong response” assignments based on one or more scholarly articles or other readings.
 - a. Peter Singer puts forth a fairly contentious thesis in “Famine, Affluence, and Morality.” In a short essay that sets up the question of whether affluent people have such a duty, summarize Singer’s argument and then set forth the strongest objection that a naysayer might have to Singer. For this paper, do not reveal your own view.
 - b. Read the speech Barack Obama delivered at Cairo University in Egypt on June 4, 2009. Summarize the main argument of his speech and then analyze the rhetorical strategies he used to appeal to Muslim listeners and readers.
4. Create what Bean terms “Microtheme Assignments” geared at writing-to-learn.
 - a. The “Trolley Problem” has been a classic example in ethics to show the differences between the moral reasoning of a consequentialist and deontologist. Imagine you are sitting a table at lunch with friends and your friends ask you about your ethics class. In less than 250 words, first explain the trolley problem example, and then show how the fundamental moral principles of the consequentialist and the deontologist force these two to see the problem in fundamentally different ways.
 - b. A classmate does not understand the difference between deductive and inductive reasoning. In one page, use an example of each to illustrate the difference. Be sure to focus on the intent of an inductive argument’s conclusion to follow with a high degree of probability from the premises, assuming they are true while a deductive argument’s conclusion is intended to follow with strict necessity assuming the premises are true.

If you are interested in reading about more pedagogical techniques for your CTC classroom or borrowing a copy of Bean’s *Engaging Ideas* text, please contact Dr. Lisa Yount at yountl@savannahstate.edu.