



Teach Basic Writing Skills: Summary, Analysis, Synthesis

Students must learn to Critically Read scholarly sources before learning to write about them

We are often frustrated when students seem to lack basic writing skills. However, students may first need to gain critical reading skills before they write about a topic. (See the attached copy of Bloom's Taxonomy.) After we teach how to critically read scholarly sources in our discipline, we can help students analyze and reflect what sources "say" and how they relate to the purpose of students' writing assignments.

Students can then Analyze and Evaluate sources in preparation for creating new knowledge

Once students can more easily navigate scholarly material, they may still not understand the role of summarizing & synthesizing in scholarly writing. Many students have successfully used summaries of good sources rather than thinking about the sources and synthesizing them to support a new insight the student may have. Since students may lack the skills to integrate material, "we may need to explicitly teach integration and synthesis skills" (Zin, Reis-Bergan, & Baker, [as found in *The St. Martin's Guide to Teaching Writing*], 2003, p. 239).

We can teach Synthesis skills in class or use other methods

If we do not want to use class time to teach synthesis skills, we can post instructions with good and poor examples of synthesis; annotate the documents with explanations. For example, a poor model might be a paragraph that cites three different sources, but lacks any explanations from the student author, or a poor paragraph may lack any sources, etc. Or we could assign students to evaluate information from one source in light of knowledge gained from another source (Stenberg, 1998, as cited in Reif, 2008, p. 130).

Help students move from Summarizing to Synthesis

The goal is to help students move from summarizing, which is what they probably used in high school, to "bring together information not usually conjoined and to arrive at an original slant on an important problem" (Booth, Colomb, & Williams, 1995. p. 73, as cited in Hauptman et al., p. 124), and to "focus on the thesis, with the sources used in a support role of that thesis" (p. 131). (See Bloom's taxonomy below).

How will I know if students are not ready to create their own claims?

Avoid simply asking students if they are already able to read critically, evaluate and synthesize sources. Approximately 86% of students over-estimate their ability to perform a skill. So simply asking if they understand is not enough!

Students' failure to understand how to move from summarizing to analyzing and synthesizing often appears in the following results:

- Insufficient knowledge about the topic
- Lack of scholarly sources [may have long explanations with no citations]
- Weak or unclear transitions [may have simply used "cut-and-paste"]
- Missing original claims by the student [may have superficial comments]
- Paragraphs not related to the thesis
- Focus is on sources rather than the claim

Be Patient!!

Although some students move from “knowledge-telling” to “knowledge-contributing” fairly quickly, many studies indicate that the transformation takes about 10 years.

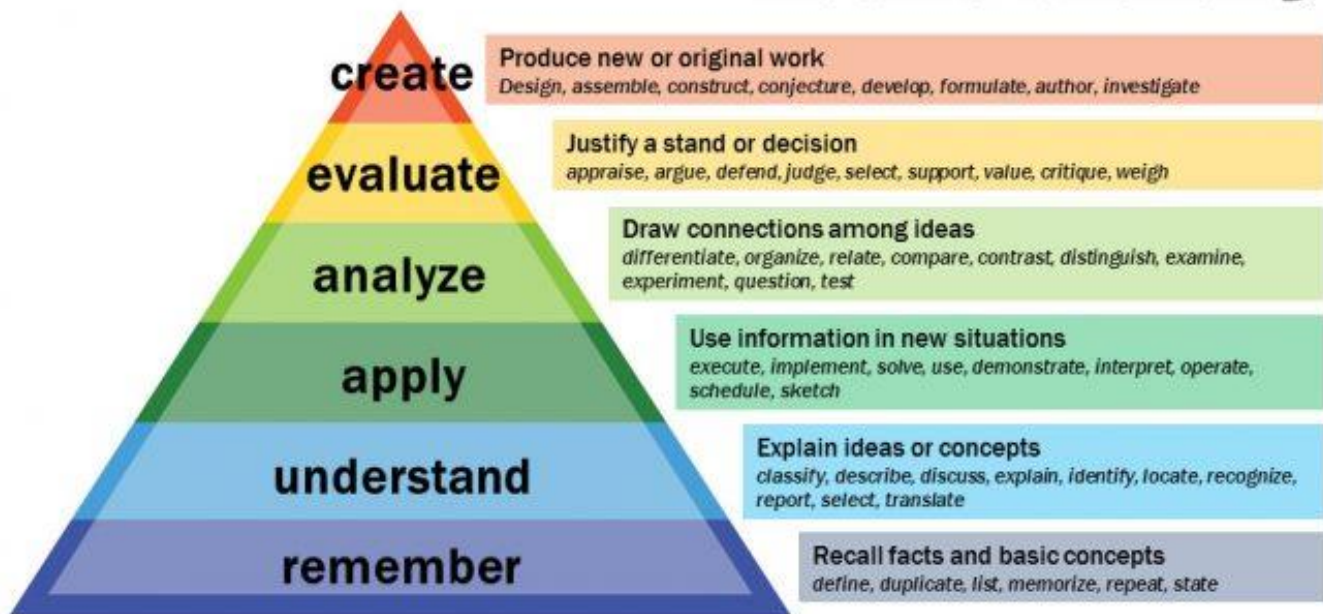
References

Glenn, C., Goldthwaite, M. A., & Connors, R. (2003). *The St. Martin's guide to teaching writing*. Boston: Bedford/ St. Martin's.

Hauptman, S., Rosenfeld, M., & Tamir, R. (2003). Assessing academic discourse levels of competence in handling knowledge from sources. *Journal of Writing Assessment*, 1(2), pp. 123-145.

Reif, F. (2008). *Applying cognitive science to education: Thinking and learning in scientific and other complex domains*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.

Bloom's Taxonomy



Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching

Patricia Armstrong, former Assistant Director,
Center for Teaching at Vanderbilt University

FHSS Writing Lab

1175 JFSB

801-422-4454

<https://fhsswriting.byu.edu/Pages/Home.aspx>

fhss-writinglab@byu.edu

Faculty Supervisor: Joyce Adams (422-8168)

Student Lab Manager: Rebecca (422-4454)