



Use Formal Writing Assignments to Move Students from Reading Critically to Critical Analysis to the Creation of New Insights

Reading and writing in the disciplines can help students more fully understand the conversation of the discipline and the different types of information that are relevant to them. Disciplinary writings are not just “frames or shells into which content can be cast, but habits of thought and communication grounded in the objectives, values, and ‘world view’ of each discipline” (Linton, et al., p. 65). We can guide students through the processes of critical reading and writing in our disciplines.

Critical Reading

Help students see the value of reading critically: “Students are often conditioned to read assigned texts for the purpose of passing quizzes or exams”; however, “different purposes often require different reading strategies” (Bean & Melzer, 2021, p. 140).

“Inexperienced students tend to read linearly from first to last page looking for facts, definitions, and data that can be highlighted and remembered for a test” (Bean & Melzer, 2021, p. 138). “Students come to college tending to think of assigned readings as containers of information to be memorized for a test. Our challenge is to [help students] see readings as voices in a conversation that they read and respond to mindfully” (p. 190).

Engage students’ interest in a text before they read it so that they are already participating in the conversation. Help students recognize that “texts aren’t simply containers of inert information; rather, they are rhetorically purposeful messages aimed at effecting some change in the reader’s view of the subject” (Bean & Melzer, 2021, p. 151).

We may need to help students “overcome their natural resistance to ideas and views different from their own” (Bean & Melzer, 2021, p. 153).

Avoid using lectures to “review the course readings.” “Help students with difficult portions of a reading, clarify confusions, . . . but teachers should send the signal that becoming an engaged reader is part of a student’s homework” (Bean & Melzer, 2021, p. 144).

Hold students accountable for the readings. Consider alternatives to using quizzes to assess whether or not students have done the reading assignments since “quizzes tend to promote surface rather than deep reading. Quizzes encourage students to extract ‘right answers’ from a text rather than to engage with the text’s ideas, and they don’t invite students to bring their own critical thinking to bear on a text’s argument or to enter into conversation with a text’s author” (Bean & Melzer, 2021, p. 144). If you choose to use quizzes, “focus on meaning rather than information” (p. 145). Use questions that require students to think critically about the readings and to prepare students to engage in class discussions.

For example, quizzes might include asking students any of the following:

- describe the central idea in the reading
- identify 2 concepts from the reading and show how these concepts are connected to what we talked about in class last time
- provide evidence from the reading to indicate whether you agree or disagree with the author
- identify the question that the authors tried to answer
- determine how the authors interpreted their findings

(adapted from Bean & Melzer, 2021, pp. 145-146).

Critical Analysis

Immature writers often focus on their own thoughts and fail to understand what texts actually say. The resulting writing may be “essentially a restatement of their thoughts” (Kellogg, 2008, p. 6).

Beginning students may see knowledge as “the acquisition of correct information and right answers. They see themselves as empty buckets being filled with data by their professors” (Bean, 2001, p. 18). In turn, they may view writing tasks as a demonstration of “one’s knowledge of the correct facts—a concept of writing as information rather than as argument or analysis.” Students may consider opposing views to be simply “opinions.” This belief that “everyone has a right to his or her own opinion” may lure students into believing that there is little purpose in defending any particular view (p. 18).

Help students enter scholarly conversations. Although we want our students to “engage in written argumentation,” many students “lack sufficient understanding of what constitutes robust argumentation and how different argumentation elements are organized to present a reasoned argument in their writing” (Hyland, 1997, as cited in Crossley et al., 2022, p. 2). In particular, argumentative/persuasive writing is “one of the most difficult types of writing to produce,” because it requires an “analytic structure that requires critical arguments to be systematically supported” (Applebee, 1984, as cited in Crossley et al., 2022, p. 2).

Creation of New Insights

“It takes at least two decades of maturation, instruction, and training” to move from “knowledge-telling” to “knowledge-transforming” and on to “knowledge-crafting” (Kellogg, 2008, p. 3).

Asking questions and creating thesis statements to answer the questions “does not come naturally to beginning college students” (Bean, 2001, p. 20). Students may write “reports” on what they found in the research (a summary) instead of a persuasive claim. Professional writers often do the same in their first draft – a type of list of what they found and what they think ties it together. The difference between student writers and professional writers often lies in the fact that professional writers recognize the significance of the “report” as a first draft, and students submit the “report” as their finished version (p. 20).

As students come to understand knowledge in the discipline, they can learn academic writing that “asks writers to join a conversation rather than to report information.” They can learn to “try to change their readers’ view about something through analysis or argument” and that their “own contribution should bring something new to the conversation. It springs from the writer’s own critical thinking brought to bear on evidence relevant to the problem with awareness of counter-evidence and alternative claims occasioned by different theoretical or methodological approaches” (Bean & Melzer, 2021, p. 21).

We Can Help Students by Teaching Critical Reading, Analysis, and Creation of Ideas

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References

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