



Writing Forum

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Escaping the Doldrums: Assignments for Critical Thinking by Claire Moisan

It's February. The snow's piled up outside. You can't remember the last time the thermometer got above 30. And now you've got a stack of papers to grade. Hoping (it springs eternal) for thought-provoking, argumentative, analytical essays, you instead find yourself running into the doldrums of undergraduate writing: plot summary, data dumping, superficial surveys that try to cover *everything* ("since the dawn of time..."). "Why? Why? *Why?*" you despair. "What can I do?!"

The answer to the first question is probably pretty evident: Novice writers lack the cognitive maturity, as John C. Bean writes in his book *Engaging Ideas*, to develop reasoned arguments and complex analyses. But, he shows, there *is* something we can do: By tweaking our assignments and pedagogical approaches to writing, we can steer students away from those writing doldrums and help them to develop the critical thinking skills necessary for producing good writing.

Encouraging critical thinking through writing was the topic of the Writing Lab's most recent Teaching Writing at Grinnell lunch, *Give Them Something to Work With*, led by Professor of History Victoria Brown. Victoria shared assign-

ments she uses in her History 112 and 228 courses that encourage students to think outside of themselves and creatively synthesize course materials.

In both her 200 and 100 level courses, she asks students to take on a persona and to write to a specific audience in genres that are not strictly academic. For her History 228 take-home exam, for example, students must write a memo to Victoria in which they take and support a position on whether the colonial era or slavery should be included as topics in a course on Immigration History. Victoria wants to get students to hear what other scholars are saying and to reproduce their arguments cogently and respectfully. "Don't tell the story," she warns her students, "I want to know what the intellectual activity was!" In History 112, she also calls upon students to inhabit a persona—in this case they must channel either P.J. O'Rourke or William Greider—and write in an atypical genre—a column in *Rolling Stone*—and take a position on a historical debate—an assessment of Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson—using speeches and other primary source documents as evidence.

These assignments force students to think critically about course materials in the following ways:

- they **de-center** students, forcing them to think outside of themselves;
- they direct students' focus by giving them a specific **purpose** (to persuade) and **audience**

(e.g., Victoria, *Rolling Stone* readers) for their writing;

- they are **problem-based**—they pique students' curiosity to figure something out and to seek new questions;
- they introduce new genres that are **meaningful** in both academic and real-world contexts ("Who doesn't write memos?" queried Victoria);
- they are **complex**—students cannot avoid synthesizing course materials;
- they are **dialogic** in the way that they ask students to enter into an intellectual conversation—in the first case, with Victoria, in the second with contemporary political commentators;
- they complement more formal academic essay assignments, which Victoria also uses;
- they compel students to write to learn rather than learn to write.

According to Bean, these are the essential elements of integrating critical thinking, writing, and active learning in the classroom. Bean notes that, in order to think critically, one must have a problem to think about. He quotes John Dewey: "Only by wrestling with the conditions of the problem at first hand, seeking and finding his own way out, does [the student] think" (cited in Bean, 2). Crafting problems that engage students' curiosity and encourage sustained inquiry is the

"What is written without effort is read without pleasure."

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challenge.

Problems, Bean says, need to be “ill-structured,” meaning that they should point students in a direction but be open-ended enough so that students can choose their own path; they should push students to question assumptions—their own, the professor’s, the course material’s—to seek conflicting views, to test hypotheses, and to come up with more questions. To further enhance critical thinking, courses should emphasize collaboration, not only among students, but also between students and the professor, who then acts as coach and mentor, modeling, through her or his own practices, what academic discourse looks like.

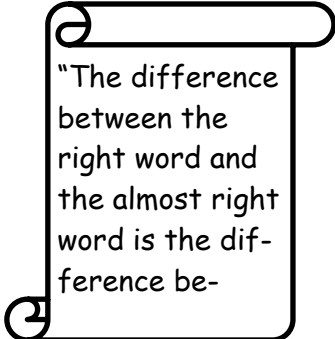
Here are Bean’s suggestions for designing critical thinking tasks:

- Think of tasks that would let students link concepts in your course to their prior knowledge;
- Ask students to teach difficult concepts in your course to a new learner;
- Think of controversial theses in your field for students to defend or attack;
- Think of problems, puzzles, or questions you could ask students to address;

- Ask students to write an analysis based on data;
- Offer opening frame sentences of a paragraph that students have to finish;
- Have students role-play unfamiliar points of view;
- Select important articles in your field and ask students to write summaries or abstracts of them;
- Ask students to write a dialogue on a controversy in your field;

Alongside these suggestions, we could also think about asking them to write in different genres and in different ways. Many faculty members already incorporate letters to the editor, journals, and grant proposals to their assignment repertoire, but one might also explore other genres—blogs, brochures, film scripts, news stories; we could even try crossing disciplinary lines—lab reports in literature class, book reviews in chemistry! And not all writing assignments have to be formal, of course. Victoria’s memo and *Rolling Stone* assignments are take-home exams meant to complement more formal, thesis-driven papers.

Designing thought-provoking writing takes some effort, but the results will no doubt be worth it when the next set of papers arrives during mud season.



"The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference be-