

Writing Matters



Writing and Critical Thinking

Language and thinking are linked in ways much deeper than we often realize. We think in language; therefore, writing is thinking made visible. Do you want to make sure your students are truly engaging with and thinking about your course's content? Of course you do! We all know that critical thinking is important, but how do we access it? We do so through problems. In problem-based thinking, students wrestle with the content, thereby making it their own. As we encourage our students to wrestle with the central problems of our disciplines, writing can be used as both a process and a product: a process that shows a student thinking through, around, and about the problem and a product that communicates to you the results of that critical thinking. Each discipline asks its own questions, wrestles with its own problems, and uses data in its own way. As the expert in your discipline, it is up to you to help your students learn these unique patterns, and one beneficial way to do that is to introduce problem-based writing assignments.

Designing Problem-Based Assignments

A problem-based assignment poses an authentic question of students that requires them to use the concepts and conventions particular to your course and your discipline. Problems can be set up in different ways. Many times, instructors will present a common situation faced within their fields: "Imagine you are consulting with a client who has asked you to design a website for her business..." or "Solve this physics problem...now explain your answer to a fellow student who seems to be arguing for the wrong answer." Asking students to *write* their answers to these problems encourages them

to sustain the deep, critical thinking that is required for these issues.

In reality, then, our students are faced with two different sets of problems with these types of assignments. First, they must wrestle with the problem of content—what the correct "answer" is to this question. Second, students must think critically about how to write about the answer to the problem. If the assignment asks students to respond to an imaginary client, students will need to use language, data and a format that is familiar to a typical client within your field. Writers must communicate their

ideas as clearly and as efficiently as possible to their audiences, thereby creating the second layer of "problems" that the students must solve.

When you've created these kinds of questions and problems for students, it is tempting to only use them on exams or assessments. However, don't waste these kinds of meaty issues on only exams! Instead, think of ways to integrate these problem-based assignments into your class. Often, these are the types of writing assignments that can generate valuable discussion about the content—the very issues

you want students to wrestle with in the first place. If you have students write arguments for or against their thinking, these often foster deep discussion. Further, you could use this type of assignment to illustrate to students the ways they are expected to write within your discipline. Give students the assignment, have them write a rough draft in response, and then use those drafts as a chance to bring out writing issues that are pertinent to your field of work. Student writing, then, can move beyond mere communication. Instead, it becomes a vehicle through which students display their critical thinking.

It's not that I'm so smart; it's just that I stay with problems longer.

—Albert Einstein

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Support Your Students' Writing

WAC Research Writing Workshops Available to Your Classes!

“Successful courses balance challenges to think critically with support tailored to students’ developmental needs.” —John Bean, *Engaging Ideas*, San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2011.

If you assign research papers in your classes, this is the time of year that a WAC workshop would be helpful! You can support your students’ writing through an in-class workshop on any of the following topics:

- Gathering Research/Taking Notes
- Formatting the Research Paper (APA, MLA, or Chicago Style)
- Revising, Editing and Proofreading Your Writing Efficiently
 - Using Smarthinking.com

Or a workshop can be tailored to meet your class’s specific needs!



Using SafeAssign and Helping Students Avoid Plagiarism

**A workshop presented by Linda
Venturo and Jennifer Hippensteel
Wednesday, Nov. 30, 2011 at 2 PM
Bradford Conference Room**

No problem can stand the assault of sustained thinking.

—Voltaire