

Using Writing to Promote Critical Thinking Chapter 3

Why write if no one is going to read your work? Now I know that I do have a voice.

Katie, freshman in Visual and Performing Arts

Before the semester was half over, I realized practically all the business papers that I had written freshman year were completely full of biases. I had searched for what I wanted to prove, weeded out all the things that disproved my claim, and boasted on all the glorious statistics that supported my theory. More importantly however, I realized that the business sources which I read, the business plans and financial statements, all contained biases within them.

Geoff, junior in School of Management

In class we were instructed to write three things on a piece of paper, two of which were false, and one was true. On my sheet I wrote that: I am Jewish, I have a tatoo on my back, and I listen predominately to rap music. The class reacted just the way I predicted. The majority of the class ruled out rap music because I do not fit the stereotypical role of a rap listener. I was dressed casual and I am white, both of which do not fit the mold of rap fans. This left two options on the board. A few of my classmates chose the tattoo on my back, though I do not seem to have the personality of someone who would have a tattoo. Lastly, by default and through their biases, most chose that I was Jewish. In fact, the third option was true. I do listen to rap music. This emphasized that biases and stereotypes do exist.

Kevin, junior in School of Management

I must admit that I did not previously give much thought to the bias of writers, or readers for that matter. This course taught me to take a deeper look and establish not only what is being said, but also why it is said that way.

Liz, junior in School of Management

Most students do not feel much urgency to become adept at writing and reading critically. They often say, things like:

"The author didn't mean anything with this word choice."

"It's random. You're analyzing too much."

"It's just information. These are facts. There is no bias."

Many students are not trained to do close readings; they gloss over the power of language and remain unaware of its impact and potential for their own use. Critical reading, which entails more than simply reading for main ideas, leads to a better understanding of the material. Most students have never reflected on the idea that writing can be used to convey passions, to persuade, or to achieve in both academic and non-academic communication. Writing *can* serve as clarification of self and world, or as a connector between self and world, but only if students understand the subtleties of the written word. Writing is not just an exercise for class; it's a necessary element in understanding and engaging in life.

This chapter will strive how critical reading and analyzing skills can be enhanced through writing. It will give you some ideas about how to implement those concepts in your class while at the same time teaching students to think critically about the world represented in texts. Through the class dialogues generated by the exercises suggested here, students should see there is a need for them to finesse their critical writing/reading skills in order to use their voices as essential, valuable, and useful tools for success both in and out of the academic setting.

Connecting Critical Thinking to Writing

Writing in the classroom can be used to teach critical thinking through reading and analyzing exercises. When using writing in this manner, one obstacle that often needs to be overcome getting students to believe that writing needs to be critically read and analyzed. Students might not be aware that writing has power, words have meaning, and authors have intent.

What does thinking critically mean? In this sense, it means going beyond the surface meaning of the work. It means that students need to realize that texts they read and ones they write themselves are more than just words strung together. The texts have a connection to and an impact on the world around them. This type of solid thinking and awareness leads to solid writing.

It's helpful to convince students of the importance of writing by helping them become aware of its prevalence. Once they notice how writing bombards them everyday, they are more likely to think critically about it. As an instructor you can show them there is a need for thinking about how pervasive writing is in the world.

Teaching

Recognizing the Power of Writing

A short exercise followed by a class discussion can illustrate the pervasiveness of writing in our lives or our disciplines.

Brainstorm: Have the class generate a list of types of writing on the board (letters, bills, graffiti, traffic signs, equations, sky writing, etc.).

Develop: Get students to identify the purpose(s) of each type of writing.

Discuss: Have students reflect on the scope, format, and uses of writing in the world or your discipline: *How would the author engage with the world if a specific type of writing or if any writing did not exist? How does being able to read/understand the writing affect the purpose? Who has control over the purpose? The outcome?*

Differentiating Between Reading and Critical Reading

When you give your students a document and tell them to read it, chances are they will come to the next class able to reiterate the main concepts. If you give them the same document and tell them to read it critically, they might come to class and once again, paraphrase the main concepts. However, reading and reading critically do differ. Reading allows your students to paraphrase material. Critical reading allows them to interpret and then move on to analysis. Reading critically involves doing a close read of the work in order to understand why and how the text was created and what purpose the text serves now (culturally, historically, politically.)

Students should be aware that writing generally involves at least two people: the writer and the reader. Being able to read and analyze a text critically will help students with their own writing. A critical read of an article can reveal to the students the author's technique for writing, whether it be persuasive, argumentative, analytical, or informative, and they can apply those techniques in their own assignments.

How can you make it apparent to your students that being able to read critically connects directly to being able to write/think well? Start by introducing some different reading strategies and explaining the different kinds of information each one will give them. It's helpful to bring in actual texts for the students to practice each type of reading. After completing a close reading, the students should try to employ writing techniques in their own work.

Being able to read critically is important to your students for another reason. If students cannot read a text critically, they can't separate their own thoughts from those of the author. Therefore, writing papers becomes even trickier and accidental plagiarism could become a classroom issue. Students who merely skimmed the assignment and did not take the time to make a connection between the writing and their own world will make no exciting discoveries of their own. If a student reads the article once, quickly, and did not completely understand it, or did not take the time to question parts he/she did not understand, when it comes time to write the paper, the student may copy the text verbatim or slap in several closely paraphrased quotes out of fear of appearing un-knowledgable.

See Chapter 8 for a more about academic honesty.

Using Writing to Read Critically

- Write a one sentence summary after each chapter.
- Keep a double-entry reading journal. Record summary and quotations on the right and responses, questions and analyses on the left.
- Develop an annotation system. Underline, circle, or highlight as you read.
- Keep a writing strategy log. Record the kinds of arguments, stylistic choices, and sources that the writer employs.
- Create a concept map (picture, graph, outline) of the reading by identifying the main argument and supporting evidence.
- Write a letter to the author that responds to, argues with, or questions the text.



Teaching

Ideas

See Chapter 4 for additional writing activities.

Using Writing to Prepare Students for Discussion

Before class

- Ask students to write journal or reading responses as homework. *Before discussion*
- Ask students to write before discussion. Such informal writing might be prompted by: a question or keyword prompt, a response to the title and content, a summary, identification of the thesis, or the generation of questions.

During discussion

- Ask students to write during the discussion. This might function as a means of transition between content and rhetorical analysis, a way to invigorate or control a conversation, or a method of bringing more voices into the discussion. *After discussion*
- Ask students to write after a discussion. This might be a synthesis of their thinking/learning during discussion, a letter to author/editor, connections to paper topic/process or other reading, etc. This is also a way to make a transition to other class activities, a way to hear from quiet students, or a method for inviting comments on *uncomfortable* material if the class is silent.

Teaching



Ideas

Writing Texts for Critical Reading

The objective of the activity below is to produce two student-generated texts which can be read critically in class. By annotating and noting word choice, students will be able to identify the different audiences of the texts.

- Have students give you a topic dealing with a current event.
- Hand out a slip of paper to each student. Some slips will say *rap convention*, and some will say *presentation for the chancellor*. They should not show the slips to other students.
- Instruct students they are to write three paragraphs about the topic they generated. The audience for their topic is either rappers or the chancellor.
- When they have completed the paragraphs, they should switch with a partner.
- The partner reads the paragraphs *critically*, looking at language and content to determine the audience.
- Read several different paragraphs aloud in class and discuss the changes the intended audience made.
- Hand out articles from your discipline and have the students look at the words, sentence construction, etc.
- Have them create a character sketch of the intended audience

A close reading of texts also leads to an accurate, informed read of the world. Through such a close read, a student can begin to recognize word choices and their connotations. They will begin to see how those connotations can explain the background of the author or give insight about the intended audience. However, making those connections is not a given. Close reading involves being able to analyze. Analyzing involves looking for more meaning. Students often want to give their opinions on subject and are eager to provide arguments about issues without considering all the details. Because analysis requires strong critical thinking, students often do not have the same excitement for it. However, critical analysis stands as one crucial element in both strong writing and reading.

Engaging Students in Critical Analysis

Just as students are not necessarily aware of how prevalent/useful writing is in everyday life, they are also not aware that they already use analytical skills everyday. The same skills that they use to decide if someone is *cool* or not can be used when reading and writing critically. Helping students see that they already possess analytical skills can build their confidence in the writing classroom. Analyzing others' texts also helps them recognize the bias in their own writing.

Helping Students Recognize Types of Claims

Analysis:

Is the claim subject centered?

Does it center around what something means, how it does what it does, why it is the way it is?

Does it stress understanding over judgement?

Does it explore a question in search of an explanation?

An *analysis* of the Diesel brand of jeans would focus on the name-brand jeans themselves. A student paper could focus on why Diesel is worn by certain groups of people, what the name brand Diesel means in comparison to Levi's, what the price of Diesel jeans says, or how wearing Diesel jeans creates a certain image.

(Continued on the next page.)



Things To

Helping Students Recognize Claims (Cont'd)

Argument:

Is it reader centered?

Does the claim attempt to persuade?

Does it say something is better?

Does it say action needs to be taken?

An *argument* about Diesel jeans would be written not about the jeans, but for a specific group of people. It would not focus on how or why Diesel jeans are what they are. It would instead persuade a target audience to think a certain way about the jeans.

Opinion:

Is it personal?

Does it center around simple like/dislike, agree/disagree?

Does it not delve in-depth into the question?

An *opinion* about Diesel would not try to persuade an audience, but would merely state whether or not the author liked/disliked the jeans. It would use only personal evidence.

Using Writing to Analyze

If your class allows students to see how prevalently writing is used everyday and that they already possess basic analytical skills that can be honed, by the end of the semester they will see that writing/reading/analyzing critically is not something that is only necessary in the academic classroom. Those skills are the ones that nurture the critical thinking people rely on everyday. Your students will leave your class understanding that writing does actually serve a purpose and does not happen in a void. Helping your students understand the nuances in writing and the strategies for reading and analyzing will give them a competitive edge in and out of the classroom.

The following exercises show students that they already use analysis. They provide the students with opportunities to use their analytical skills to closely read and discuss visual and textual images. By having a guided class discussion after each exercise, you can help your students take the ideas generated from the examples and apply them directly to their own writing.

Imagining Alternative Perspectives

The following activity helps students to create different perspectives to help make students aware of their own perspective on an issue before trying to understand an author's perspective. Before analyzing a text it is often helpful for the students to clearly understand what they think about the subject. By creating an opportunity for students to write in different viewpoints, this exercise helps them discover the similarities and differences in perspectives.

See Chapter 5 for more ideas on analysis.

Perspective Classroom Activity

- Have the students randomly pick two names (not of classmates).
- Write the names on the board.
- Under the names, have the class decide the following information for each person: age, marital status, job, education level, place of residence, place of birth, economic level, hobbies, typical clothing.
- Have the class pick a current debatable issue.
- Give the class 15-20 minute to write about the issue from three different perspectives: first, the perspectives of the imaginary people they created and then their own perspective.
- Read some of the perspectives aloud in class and discuss how/why they changed.



Comparing Perspectives

The next activity emphasizes that all authors write from particular perspectives and with intent. Those factors influence what the authors see and what they put in and leave out of their writing. This is a good exercise to use at the beginning of semester. Generally, students are willing to debate the meanings of the ink blots and often cannot come to a consensus. They will refuse to believe one student's opinion is more *valid* than another's interpretation. With an explanation of how an author is actually a real human also who interprets the world in a certain way, like the students each interpreted the ink blots, this exercise creates a strong parallel to writing/reading. It should help the students see why they might need to analyze the texts they read.

Ink Blot Classroom Activity



- Start off class by showing students five different ink blots
- Each student writes down his/her *answer* (two copies)
- Students exchange with a partner and compare his/her own responses to the other response
- Brainstorm reasons for the differences (such as previous experience, major, age)
- Discuss the colors—Do they affect the interpretations?
- Speculate—Why were these colors used? How would the blots change if the colors excluded were included?

After the ink blot discussion, you can hand out two articles on the same subject but from different sources to show how different authors looking at the same subject can come up with different conclusions. For example, you could find articles about smoking. One article could be written by someone associated with the tobacco companies. The other article could be written by someone associated with the Surgeon General's office. Students should complete a close read looking at word choice, connotations, quotes, information included/excluded.

Analyzing Assumptions

The objective of the next activity is to help students analyze how a cultural perspective—looking at objects/events/world in a certain way—affects the perspective an author presents. Students should be able to discuss the importance of knowing an author's background. They should also see a connection between language and naming, and an individual's view of the world (does not necessarily have to be onions or juggling, but should be some material object that can have multiple/unique uses).

Juggling Onions Classroom Activity

- Bring to class enough onions so that each student can eventually end up with three.
- Hold up onion and on board brainstorm what it is (get names in different languages, get students to come up with alternatives to onion and food—like weapon, toy, decoration).
- Discuss why *food* was probably the first response.
- Can end the activity there, or continue by handing out two more onions to each student and trying to teach them how to juggle.
- Freewrite about their feelings when trying to learn how to juggle onions.

In their freewrites, hopefully they will write about taking risks, experiencing frustration, striving for a set goal, and following a *form*. Ideally, they will also mention that juggling isn't a skill that can be mastered in five minutes. In discussion, make the connection between the exercise and analyzing. Ask the students to come up with other parallels between the activity and writing. For example, all students walk into class with some basic skills (the basic tossing in juggling, maybe complete sentence construction in writing) and in class, those skills will be refined, practiced over and over until at the end of the semester, they have an impressive new skill.

