

CM220 - Developing Effective Persuasive Communication Skills

The goal of CM220 is to develop the skills to use persuasive communication strategies in a variety of contexts. In this course, you will focus on developing persuasive skills in scholarly writing contexts by developing a clear thesis, seeking research to understand and prove an issue, and presenting a clear argument for change.

In this week's readings, you will learn about academic writing standards and how writing can be used to enhance understanding a topic of exploration. This week's readings will introduce you to the basics of the persuasive model you will be using in College Composition II. These concepts will form a foundation for the rest of your learning this term and help you prepare for this week's discussion.

Part 1: Really? Writing? Again? Yes. Writing. Again.

In the age of email and smartphones, you might already be writing more often than speaking. However, when it comes to writing, there is no such thing as too much practice. In fact, research shows that deliberate practice makes a difference in how one performs. Practicing your ability to write effectively in personal, professional, and academic contexts can strengthen your communication skills and save you time and hassle in your studies, advance your career, and promote better relationships and a higher quality of life. Honing your writing is a good use of your scarce time.

A recent survey of employers conducted by the Association of American Colleges and Universities found that 89 percent of employers say that colleges and universities should place more emphasis on “the ability to effectively communicate orally and in writing” (Hart Research Associates, 2010, p. 9). It was the single-most favored skill in this survey. In addition, several of the other valued skills are grounded in written communication: “Critical thinking and analytical reasoning skills” (81%); “The ability to analyze and solve complex problems” (75%); and “The ability to locate, organize, and evaluate information from multiple sources” (68%). Employers seek out professionals who interact frequently with others, can anticipate and solve complex problems, and coordinate their work with others (Hart Research Associates, 2013, p. 2).

Formal written work is a critical part of online education. Creating and sharing knowledge depends on writing. The assumption behind college instruction is that students are the engine of learning and that most of the significant learning happens while students are working on their own. Most online college classes meet only once a week for seminar and do the bulk of their collaboration in the discussion boards. Consequently, college instructors think of class meetings as an opportunity to prepare you for the heavy lifting that you'll be

doing on your own. Sometimes, that involves direct instruction (how to solve a particular kind of problem or analyze a particular kind of text). More often, professors want to provide you with material not contained in the reading or facilitate active learning experiences based on what you read.

Professors assign papers because they want you to think rigorously and deeply about important questions. To your instructors, writing is for working out complex ideas, not just explaining them. They expect you to look deep into the evidence, consider alternative explanations, and work out an original, insightful argument that you care about. Writing a paper isn't about getting the "right answer" and adhering to basic conventions; it's about joining an academic conversation with something original and borne of rigorous thought. Virtually all instructors shape their expectations for a final project around the idea that you're writing to learn, writing to develop, writing to think—not just writing to express.

So what do professors want?

When professors create writing assignments, they craft them to be challenging to write and to advance your skills and knowledge.

Professors want to see that you've thought through a problem and taken the time and effort to explain your thinking in precise language. These skills will help you in college and in your everyday lives. Communication isn't just about expressing yourself; it's about connecting with others. And it's other people—in families, couples, communities, and workplaces—that shape the most important experiences of your life.

Don't get discouraged! On my first college paper, I got a very low grade. It felt like a slap in the face because I was a straight-A student in high school. It's just a fact of life. Talk to your professor about what you could have done differently. This will help you be better prepared for future papers.

--Kaethe Leonard

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Hart Research Associates. (2013). It takes more than a major: Employer priorities for college learning and student success: Overview and key findings. *The Association of American Colleges and Universities*.
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(Reading from Guptill, A. (2016). Really? Writing? Again? Yes. Writing. Again. *Writing in college: From competence to excellence*. (pp. 1-8). Open SUNY Textbooks.)

Part 2: Writing as self-exploration and self-enrichment

Often, when people think about writing, they think about the need to communicate a message. Common communication models present a sender (e.g., a writer) and a receiver (e.g., a reader) and different concepts of what happens as information is shared. Sometimes, the purpose for writing isn't about sending information to some other receiver or reader. Sometimes, your purpose for writing might simply be to explore an idea or even just to figure out what you think. The author Flannery O'Connor summed up this need by saying, "I write because I don't know what I think until I read what I say." If you take some time to think about it, this probably doesn't come as a big surprise. Just like students, many people write all kinds of things solely for themselves: lists, goals, notes, journals, and more.

The act of writing has the power to help you make connections between yourself and the world. Writing can help you establish your own experiences and ideas in relation to the experiences and ideas of others. In short, it can help you figure out what you think about things and help you to situate those thoughts in relation the world and among the multitude of opinions and ideas that exist within it. That's a powerful tool!

Creativity



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You might already be sensing that the process of self-exploration described above is a creative one. Writing your observations and thoughts and how they relate to other observations and thoughts can ignite your imagination and expand the possibilities of what you can accomplish—personally, academically, professionally, and creatively. It can also help you develop and shape those ideas in a way that makes them useful, entertaining, and thought-provoking for others.

Comprehension and Academic Performance

The previous paragraphs have already discussed the potential for writing to help you think, so it also should come as no surprise that it's a wonderful tool to help you learn. At some point in your experience as a student, you may have noticed that you understand a concept better once you've used it or worked with it. We learn more about how to build a birdhouse by actually building one than we do by reading a book about how to build one. The book is helpful, but we need to work with the materials and the tools to help us understand the process.

One of the reasons that experiencing or working with a concept helps you understand and remember it is that experience requires action. Have you ever read a chapter or two in a textbook only to ask yourself a few hours later (or even a few minutes later), "What did I just read?" The consumption of media and information can be a passive experience. We read. We watch. We listen. It takes effort to keep our brains engaged in a passive experience. Moreover, educational materials usually lack the level of excitement of our favorite action movie franchise or the allure of cute animal videos on YouTube. It's easy for our entertainment-hungry brains to check out and stop absorbing the meaning of what we're reading. If we can experience a subject in multiple ways, with increasing levels of engagement, we are more likely to remember what we're trying to learn. More importantly, beyond simply remembering it, it will allow you to understand its relevance to our own lives.

Writing about what you're learning can expand your understanding of a topic by helping you make connections between that topic and other things that you already understand or to other things that you're learning about. You can use writing to help you organize complex topics, to pick out main ideas, and to help you remember important concepts. If you can say it in your own words, you can move beyond merely knowing something to comprehending it. Part of this process of understanding involves extending our usual thoughts and reactions to a topic to gain new thoughts and new perspectives. Part of the process of academic writing (or even personal writing) involves wrestling with new or contradictory ideas. And even if right now you're mostly writing for your teachers, as your academic and professional experience broadens, through writing, you can participate effectively in your academic or professional community.

Effective Communication and Persuasion

Whether for the benefit of your academic or professional life or even for your personal life, writing is an effective tool to help you to be understood and to influence others. Much of what we've talked about so far regarding the value of writing has been about its ability to help you understand yourself and to help you

understand the world. But writing also has the power to help others to understand your message.

As we've already stated in discussing its creative potential, writing gives you a voice. Writing can help you to state your position and support it in a way that might persuade others not only to understand your perspective, values, and beliefs but also to adopt them. And when you're unsure about something, you can even use writing as a method for self-persuasion, to help you make up your mind about an important topic.

From resumes to term papers to work-related documents to journaling and self-exploration, writing is an important and powerful tool to have at the ready. This text can help you sharpen that tool and to use it to the best of your ability.

(Reading from Babin, M., Burnell, C., Pesznecker, N.R., & Wood, J. (2017). *The word on college reading and writing*. <https://openoregon.pressbooks.pub/wrd/>)

Reading - Part 3 - The Rhetorical Situation in College Composition II

We live in a world filled with language. Language imparts identity, meaning, and perspective to our human community. Writers are either polluters or part of the cleanup team. Just as the language of power and greed has the potential to destroy us, the language of reason and empathy has the power to save us.

Writers can inspire a kinder, fairer, more beautiful world, or incite selfishness, stereotyping, and violence. Writers can unite people or divide them.

Change writers hope that readers will join them in what Charles Johnson calls 'an invitation to struggle.' Whereas writers of propaganda encourage readers to accept certain answers, writers who want to transform their readers encourage the asking of questions. Propaganda invites passive agreement; change writing invites original thought, open heartedness, and engagement. Change writers trust that readers can handle multiple points of view, contradictions, unresolved questions, and nuance. If, as André Gide wrote,

In this class, you will explore persuasion through the theoretical lens of rhetoric, which is the art of persuasion. Rhetoric helps us to advocate for the things that we need and value. It also influences how we think and see the world. We engage in a persuasive interaction any time we read a billboard, watch a commercial, or participate in an election cycle. In those circumstances, we are members of the audience, receiving and digesting a message. At other times, we are the speakers and we are actively seeking to influence an audience.

Sometimes the stakes for an argument are low, like the daily arguments with our children about doing their homework or trying to convince a spouse to

load the dishwasher. At other times, the stakes can be high. We may need to convince a judge that we should have primary custody of our children or convince a school to provide disability accommodations for our child. We may need to convince an aging parent to move closer so that we can support them better or prove that we are the best candidate for a job.

This term, you will use persuasive writing to practice presenting ethical, carefully considered, logical arguments that advocate for a change in your community. You will identify a community problem, critically examine that problem, and then propose the best possible solution to address that problem. Students who have recently moved, are deployed, or feel disconnected from the town they live in sometimes worry about how they will write about a community issue. With that in mind, we will define community loosely. While we often think of our physical community first, like the town, county, state, and country that we live in, a community can also be understood as a group of people with shared values, beliefs, priorities, or even interests. In a work community, everybody collaborates to advance the mission of the company. In a sporting community, the shared value can be the success of a team. In a spiritual community, members connect around shared beliefs. In our learning community, we share the goal of advancing understanding, regardless of what discipline we want to get a degree in.

Shared values are often what help to define a community; however, within any community, one can expect to find both common ground and areas of disagreement. Take this class as an example of a specific community. In the CM220 learning community, most students and the instructor can agree that writing has value. Students share the common goal of working toward a degree. However, some students may feel like writing is going to be minimal in their career whereas other students believe writing will be essential. The points of disagreement give rise to a persuasive opportunity--the opportunity to prove why students should care about persuasive writing.

When a writer needs to enter a persuasive conversation, she can start by considering the rhetorical situation, which has five key elements: **the text, writer, audience, purpose, and context**. Let's look at your first reading of the term, "Really? Writing? Again? Yes. Writing. Again." by Guptill (2016) through the lens of the rhetorical situation. Guptill's (2016) chapter is attempting to convince students that persuasive writing is important in a variety of contexts.

Guptill is the **writer** or the one who has to convince students that the work is valuable and relevant. Students are the **audience**. To effectively engage students, Guptill has to understand their priorities and provide information that feels practical and relevant to the student both now and in their future roles as engaged citizens, family members, and professionals. She does this by citing a survey that indicates that 89% of employers want to see "more" emphasis on effective communication (Association of American College and Universities as cited in Guptill, 2016), talking about the pay-off students will experience from developing writing skills, and explaining how writing can help students demonstrate their knowledge in college courses. The **text** is a book chapter. The **purpose** is to motivate students to take the course seriously and empower

students by giving them information that will help them strengthen their writing skills. Finally, the **context** is the classroom.

What we just reviewed gives us a surface understanding of the rhetorical situation. Let's drill down into this more and focus on audience. When we consider audiences, we can examine them at a group or individual level. Sometimes we have a lot of knowledge about the priorities of our audience and sometimes, especially in academic exercises, we have to rely on our imaginations.

Each audience member shows up with a wealth of experience that is influenced by his background, culture, choices, and priorities. We refer to each individual's unique story and the perspectives that arise from that story as **situated knowledge**. You carry situated knowledge too and your situated knowledge can be explored by seeking the **story-behind-the-story** in any given situation. When we bring each individual perspective together, we have a rich variety of experiences and perspectives that can be used to create a shared understanding of an issue. This range of situated knowledge on a topic can be used to gain a complex understanding of the issue, possible solutions, and the implications of those solutions.

Let's use an imagined audience to get a sense of how situated knowledge and priorities can influence the way students think and what the instructor must consider when trying to persuade students of the value of persuasive writing. John, Eric, and Alice are members of the CM220 writing community. Each brings their own situated knowledge to the work and ideas in the class. Their situated knowledge influences how they think about the course, what their priorities are, and what they will value most as they complete the course.

John is here to study business because he wants to open a restaurant when he graduates. John believes that he will have to write to finish his degree, but his requirements for writing will be limited once he becomes a restaurant owner. He's not looking forward to the course.

Eric is studying nursing and wants to work as a nurse and help patients with heart disease. He believes that he will have to do a lot of writing because he will have to document information about each patient and communicate that information clearly. He thinks most of his writing will be informative, so he is a bit skeptical about the relevance of persuasive writing to his career.

Alice wants to become a crime scene investigator when she graduates. She believes that she will have to use writing extensively to illustrate critical elements of a crime scene. She has heard that her reports could be used in court and she could be asked to testify to defend her conclusions, so she is especially interested in learning how to write effectively and convincingly.

To persuade John, Eric, and Alice that College Composition II will be beneficial in the long run, the instructor needs to figure out the story-behind-the-story that influences how they think about writing. The story-behind-the-story can help us tap into that person's situated knowledge. One of the best ways to find out the story-behind-the-story is to start with key questions. What does the teacher need to learn to understand each community stakeholder's perspective on the issue of writing? What is their background in writing? How have those

experiences shaped how they think about writing? Once she has that information, she can think about how persuasive communication is relevant to each student.

What would create a need for persuasive communication for John? Say John opens a taco restaurant. He may want to create a commercial that motivates people to try it. John can apply the rhetorical situation to make sure the money he spends on advertising is well spent. His rhetorical **text** will be a commercial, which means he can use music, actors, and written words to convey his message. Next, he has to think about his role as the **writer**. This is a brand new restaurant, so he can't rely on reviews and word-of-mouth. He has to find some way to entice people to his restaurant based on novelty and what his restaurant adds to the community. His **purpose** will be to showcase the restaurant and get new patrons. As he thinks about purpose, he needs to consider his **audience**. Does this audience want something new or exotic? These considerations will influence what he chooses to showcase in his commercial. Finally, he thinks about the **context**. What does the community already have and what does it want? How can his commercial demonstrate that this restaurant fits well with the community it is situated in?

Let's turn to Eric. He has to convince a patient to follow a doctor's recommendation. Eric works in a cardiac ward at a hospital and has been counseling Elsa, who recently had a heart attack. Elsa eats a lot of highly processed foods and doesn't exercise. She feels overwhelmed about the idea of completely changing her diet and starting an exercise regimen. Eric somehow has to motivate her to make these necessary changes. Eric is the **writer** and his **text** is a conversation. Elsa is the **audience**. Eric's **purpose** is to convince her that the difficulty of making these changes and going through the transition to a new lifestyle is in Elsa's best interest. To convince Elsa, Eric needs to find the story behind Elsa's resistance to change. He can ask her questions to better understand her relationship with food. Knowing this will empower Eric to provide her information that addresses that backstory. If he discovers that food is a major source of comfort for her, he may need to recommend non-food based comfort tools to replace food. Alternatively, he may offer resources and recipe sites that follow the dietary guidelines while still maintaining some of the comfort food features, like replacing the deep fryer with an air-fryer. Eric needs to get to know his patient and understand the resistance that this patient is going to raise before he can advocate for a solution. The **context** may be to Eric's benefit because he is talking with her in a hospital ward, which demonstrates the urgency of her health condition.

Finally, let's consider Alice, who has become a Crime Scene Investigator and has to appear in court to provide evidence in a trial for a crime that she helped to investigate. Her conclusions are being used in the prosecution of a crime. The **text** is her testimony and the documents she wrote in the initial investigation. Alice is the **writer**. Her **audience** is the judge and jury, but she will be questioned by a defense attorney and a prosecutor who may prove to be one of the toughest audiences. The defense attorney's job is to undermine her investigative conclusions, so she has to present herself as credible, careful, and

accurate. Her **purpose** is to provide evidence that convinces the jury that her conclusions were accurate and valid. The **context** will largely be established by the attorneys and the information they present before and after her testimony.

As you can see, each persuasive situation starts with a need to communicate. Once the need to persuade is established, you can use the rhetorical situation to figure out how to proceed. The participants (both writer and audience), the environment (context), the purpose of the communication, and the best method of communication (text) work together to ensure a successful argument.

In this class, you will practice using the rhetorical model to advocate for a change in your community. You will be the agent for a positive change. In the process, you will deepen your understanding of a community issue and hopefully gain new insights. As you can see from the scenarios above, the solution is often not the first one that we thought of. John may have wanted to start by opening a sushi restaurant, but when he surveyed community members and looked at what already existed in the community, he realized there was no demand, so he adjusted his ideas and decided to open a taco restaurant. Eric wanted Elsa to shift to a Mediterranean diet, but after he talked with her, he realized that her dietary changes would have to be more gradual, and she may need a nutritionist to work with her directly as she makes the changes. By considering her story-behind-the-story, he was able to come up with a solution that was feasible for both of them. This highlights the negotiation involved in effective persuasion. In Alice's case, negotiation may be detrimental. She has to appear certain and clear. Alice may have a lot of highly specialized knowledge and terms to explain her ideas, but she needs the information to be meaningful to a jury that has little understanding of her work. As a result, she has to figure out how to explain it in layman's terms. By doing so, she deepens her understanding of the scientific process that she uses and the limitations that she needs to consider when drawing conclusions.

As you can see, persuasive communication is less about winning than it is about discovery. While we may have a very clear goal in mind, we have to be open to learning new information and seeing things in a new light. We have to ask critical questions to get to the story-behind-the-story and to expose the areas of disagreement. We need to seek out perspectives that challenge our own so that we can round out our understanding of an issue and increase the effectiveness of our argument.

References

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The Ethics of Persuasive Writing

This week's readings introduce you to the rhetorical lens that we will use to explore persuasive communication this term. In the first reading, you will read about the concepts of community literacy and intercultural rhetoric through Linda Flower's "Rhetoric of Community Engagement." The second and third readings focus on the expectations for college writing and critical reading skills. These will help you to interpret the expectations of any assignment that you receive and start critically analyzing information that you encounter in this class, other classes, at work, and in the community.

Linda Flower's Rhetoric of Community Engagement

Community literacy is a form of literate action that allows:

Everyday people within the urban community to take agency in their lives and for their community;

Everyday people from places of privilege to participate in this struggle for understanding social justice.

Community literacy depends on the social ethic and strategic practice of intercultural rhetoric to:

Draw out the voices of the silenced and the expertise of marginalized people;

Draw people normally separated by difference into new roles as partners in inquiry;

Recognize and use difference in the service of discovery and change, transforming rather than erasing its conflicts and contradictions.

Community literacy is, in short, a working hypothesis about how we might construct a community that supports dialogue across difference.

--Linda Flower (2008).

Persuasive communication often takes place in the context of a specific community rather than just in face-to-face interactions between two people. When advocating for a community-level change, we must establish an understanding of the community. To do this, we must consider the many different stakeholders and how the issue affects each of them in unique ways. **Situated knowledge** is the treasure trove of experience and the meaning made from those experiences. It shapes how each community member thinks about an issue and their hopes and fears in relation to the issue.

The effort to understand and address an issue across community differences has given rise to a specific persuasive framework created by Linda Flower (2003) and referred to as **intercultural rhetoric**. The goal of intercultural rhetoric is to bring forth all voices in the community, regardless of education or training in persuasive communication, so that each has a place at the table in the effort to solve a problem. This means that intercultural rhetors are not easily

satisfied with the surface understanding of an issue. Instead, they are actively engaged in uncovering the missing, unrepresented voices in an issue and creating a negotiated understanding of the problem along with potential solutions.

Partners in inquiry turn to literate strategies to help them to elicit something of the situated, affective, and embodied knowledge behind the speakers' words (where important differences may lie); to embrace these as rival interpretations; and to draw themselves into a joint, reconstructive negotiation with their own understandings. An intercultural rhetoric based on inquiry is, then, a deliberate meaning-making activity in which difference is not read as a problem but *sought out as a resource for constructing more grounded and actionable understandings*.

--Linda Flower (2003)

There are three key processes involved in intercultural inquiry: seeking the **story-behind-the-story**, proposing **rival hypotheses**, and exploring **options and outcomes** (Flower, 2003).

You might remember the **story-behind-the-story**. The story- behind-the-story helps to uncover the situated knowledge that each stakeholder has. It seeks out a range of viewpoints and actively looks for stakeholders in the community that have a vested interest in the issue but haven't yet been heard in the conversation (Flower, 2008). For example, people often argue about how to improve prisons, but do we seek input from prisoners? If we wish to help the homeless, they are one of the most important voices that we should consult. What about stopping high school students from dropping out? Conversations with at-risk students and even those who have already dropped out can be a great source of information when trying to understand the cause of the problem and what would help motivate them to stay in school.

Our narrative about issues in prisons, homelessness, and dropout rates may only skim the surface of the issue if we don't pause to try to understand what is behind the surface story of prisoners, homeless community members, and at-risk students. When we find ways to engage a wide range of stakeholders, we can think about what concerns are important to them and advocate for change *with* these community members rather than *for* them.

Ethical persuasion in the community is focused on learning rather than winning an argument. Through openness and the willingness to negotiate meaning with other community stakeholders, writers can actually tune in more successfully to their own interests and positions (Flowers, 2008). Once community understanding has been negotiated, the intercultural communicator can establish a preliminary argument for change.

Dialogue *with* culturally different others must start in inquiry. It takes an active search for diversely situated knowledges and experiential meanings to understand not only one another but also the social problems we face together. In the spirit of Paulo Freire, the purpose of dialogue is not to achieve a *warm* feeling of mutuality. It is a search for understandings that can transform reality (Flower, 2013).

Once this argument is presented, the speaker actively seeks **rival hypotheses**. These **rival hypotheses** present alternative scenarios that challenge the presentation of the problem by the speaker (Flower, 2013). For example, in a recommendation for mental health support in prisons, a prisoner might argue that the current prison environment makes it difficult for prisoners to safely pursue their mental health needs. They may present a rival hypothesis that efforts to improve their mental health could make prisoners appear weak and thus a target for violence. They may argue that something larger has to change in prison culture for mental health programs to be effective. This information can be used by the speaker as a prompt for examining prison culture and how it may undermine efforts by mental health advocates.

Finally, rather than just attempting to win an argument, the writer of intercultural rhetoric seeks resolution within the community. Resolution is found by evaluating **options and outcomes** in a way that can bring about positive change (Flower, 2008). As new information comes to light, the solution is analyzed and reconsidered in an evolving process. Going back to the desire to provide mental health support in prisons, community members may offer a range of options. What if prisoners in mental health programs were kept in a different wing of the prison? Would that be special treatment? How might that increase the target on prisoners if they are perceived to have special treatment? Should every prisoner be required to undergo a mental health evaluation and rehabilitation protocol regardless of mental health status? Could specific prisons be designated as treatment facilities that try to build a culture of rehabilitation instead of the traditional prison culture? How would one decide who gets to go to the treatment-based prisons?

This exploration of options and possible outcomes through the lenses of different community members enables the rhetor to present a more effective argument by speaking *with* rather than *for* marginalized community members (Flower, 2008). Each community member's situated knowledge is valid and relevant as the writer explores solutions.

When we expand the definition of community to include the workplace or even the family environment, these same ideas can be applied. A decision within a company about establishing a new family leave policy will affect staff in different ways. Alice, who has a child in preschool and often has to take time off when her daughter is sick, is in a different situation than John, who is supporting an elderly parent who recently had a heart attack and lives six hours away. Alice and John will each bring their situated knowledge based on their experience to the table when negotiating a new family leave policy. The employer that learns to communicate across differences can expand the number of available solution

and can even test out those solutions by assessing the possible outcomes and how those outcomes may impact different workers.

References

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What Does the Professor Want? Understanding the Assignment

Writing for whom? Writing for what?

The first principle of good communication is knowing your audience. Another basic tenet of good communication is clarifying the purpose of the communication and letting that purpose shape your decisions. In scholarly writing, your professor wants to see you work through complex ideas and deepen your knowledge through the process of producing the paper. Each assignment— be it an argumentative paper, lab report, or discussion question—is ultimately about demonstrating your learning.

Don't be scared whenever you are given an assignment. Professors know what it was like to be in college and write all kinds of papers. They aren't trying to make your lives difficult, but it is their jobs to make us think and ponder about many things. Take your time and enjoy the paper.

--Timothée Pizarro

You would do well to approach every assignment by putting yourself in the shoes of your instructor and asking yourself, "Why did she give me this assignment? How does it fit into the learning goals of the course?"

Put the assignment in context. Many professors think in terms of assignment sequences. For example, a social science professor may ask you to write about a controversial issue three times: first, arguing for one side of the debate; second, arguing for another; and finally, from a more comprehensive and nuanced perspective, incorporating text produced in the first two assignments. A sequence like that is designed to help you think through a complex issue. Another common one is a scaffolded research paper sequence: you first propose a topic, then prepare an annotated bibliography, then a first draft, then a final draft, and a final reflective paper. The preparatory assignments help ensure that you're on the right track, beginning the research process long before the final due date and taking the time to consider recasting your thesis, finding additional sources, or reorganizing your discussion.

Review Instructions, Rubrics, and Sample Projects: All courses at Purdue Global will include assignment instructions and rubrics. Some will even include sample assignments. The rubrics and sample assignments can be

a great way to check your understanding and get a sense of what the final product should look like. A best practice to consider is printing two copies of an assignment rubric. The first copy can be used as a checklist while writing an assignment. The second copy can be used in the final editing stage to ensure that all of the necessary requirements have been addressed. If something in the rubric is unclear, you can email your instructor that section of the rubric and ask them for clarification.

Ask for clarification in an effective way. Even the most skillfully crafted assignments may need some verbal clarification, especially because students' familiarity with the field can vary enormously. Asking for clarification is a good thing. Be aware that instructors get frustrated when they perceive that students want to skip doing their own thinking and instead receive an exact recipe for an A paper. Go ahead and ask for clarification, but try to convey that you want to learn and you're ready to work.

It also helps to be as specific as possible. Below are some examples of vague questions that are hard for professors to answer and preferable alternatives.

Vague or difficult to answer questions	Preferable alternatives
I don't get it. Can you explain this more? or What do you want us to do?	I see that we are comparing and contrasting these two cases. What should be our focus? Their causes? Their impacts? Their implications? All of those things? or I'm unfamiliar with how nurses write up case notes. Could you say more about what key elements I should address to make sure I meet the guidelines?
How many sources do we have to cite?	Is there a typical range for the number of sources a well-written paper would cite for this assignment? or Could you say more about what the sources are for? Is it more that we're analyzing these texts in this paper, or are we using these texts to analyze some other case?

What do I have to do to get an A on this paper?	Could I meet with you to get feedback on my (pre-prepared) plans/outline/thesis/draft? or I'm not sure how to approach this assignment. Are there any good examples or resources you could point me to?
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What's critical about critical thinking?

The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) defines critical thinking as “a habit of mind characterized by the comprehensive exploration of issues, ideas, artifacts, and events before accepting or formulating an opinion or conclusion” (Rhodes, 2010, p.1). Ultimately, critical thinking means taking a good look and deciding what you *really* think rather than relying on the first idea or assumption that comes to mind.

The critical thinking rubric produced by the AAC&U describes the relevant activities of critical thinking in more detail. To think critically, one must ...

(a) “clearly state and comprehensively describe the issue or problem”, (b) “independently interpret and evaluate sources”, (c) “thoroughly analyze assumptions behind and context of your own or others’ ideas”, (d) “argue a complex position and one that takes counter-arguments into account,” and (e) “arrive at logical and well informed conclusions” (Rhodes, 2010, p.2).

Interestingly, the AAC&U defines critical thinking as a “habit of mind” rather than a discrete achievement. And there are at least two reasons to see critical thinking as a craft or art to pursue rather than a task to check off. First, the more you think critically, the better you get at it. As you get more practice in closely examining claims, their underlying logic, and alternative perspectives on the issue, it’ll become automatic. You’ll no longer make or accept claims that begin with “Everyone knows that ...” or end with “That’s just human nature.” Second, just as artists and craftspersons hone their skills over a lifetime, learners continually expand their critical thinking capacities, both through the feedback they receive from others and their own reflections. Professionals find satisfaction in continually seeking greater challenges. Continual reflection and improvement is part of the craft.

Critical thinking is hard work. Even those who actively choose to do it experience it as tedious, difficult, and sometimes surprisingly emotional. Nobel Prize-winning psychologist Daniel Kahneman (2011) explains that our brains aren’t designed to think; rather, they’re designed to save us from having to think. Our brains are great at developing routines and repertoires that enable us to accomplish complex tasks like driving cars, choosing groceries, and having a

conversation without thinking consciously and thoroughly about every move we make. Kahneman calls this “fast thinking.” “Slow thinking,” which is deliberate and painstaking, is something our brains seek to avoid. That built-in tendency can lead us astray.

Some students assume that an unpleasant critical thinking experience means that they’re either doing something wrong or that it’s an inherently uninteresting activity. While we all relish those times when we’re pleasantly absorbed in a complex activity--what psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990) calls “flow”--the more tedious experiences can also bring satisfaction, sort of like a good workout. Critical thinking can also be emotionally challenging, researchers have found. Facing a new realm of uncertainty and contradiction without relying on familiar assumptions is inherently anxiety-provoking because when you’re doing it, you are, by definition, not yet clear about something. Think about children learning to walk. They get frustrated more easily and they fall over and over again as they figure out the movements and coordinate them into their first steps. The frustration is a necessary part of the process, and the breakthrough of walking makes it worth every moment. Fortunately, as we age, we also learn that we can take steps to minimize frustration as we work through creative tension and critically explore a topic.

The demands students face are not at all unique to their academic pursuits. Professional working roles demand critical thinking, as 81% of major employers reported in an AAC&U-commissioned survey (Hart, 2010), and it’s easy to imagine how critical thinking helps one make much better decisions in all aspects of life. Embrace it. And just as athletes, artists, and writers sustain their energy and inspiration for hard work by interacting with others who share these passions, look to others in the scholarly community—your professors and fellow students—to keep yourself engaged in these ongoing intellectual challenges. While writing time is often solitary, it’s meant to plug you into a vibrant academic community. What your professors want, overall, is for you to join them in asking and pursuing important questions about the natural, social, and creative worlds.

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(Reading from Guptill, A. (2016). What does the professor want? *Writing in College: From Competence to Excellence*. (pp. 9-18). Open SUNY Textbooks.)

Critical Reading

Critiquing a Text

Here's a new term: when we critique (crih-TEEK) a text, we evaluate it, asking it questions. Critique shares a root with the word "criticize." Most of us tend to think of criticism as being negative or mean, but in the academic sense, doing a critique is not the least bit negative. Rather, it's a constructive way to better explore and understand the material we're working with. The word's origin means "to evaluate," and through our critique, we do a deep evaluation of a text. (see the [glossary of terms](#)).

When we critique a text, we interrogate it. Imagine the text, sitting on a stool under a bright, dangling light bulb while you ask, in a demanding voice, "What did you mean by having Professor Mustard wear a golden yellow fedora?"

When we critique, our own opinions and ideas become part of our textual analysis. We question the text, we argue with it, and we delve into it for deeper meanings.

Here are some ideas to consider when critiquing a text:

- How did you respond to the piece? Did you like it? Did it appeal to you? Could you identify with it?
- Do you agree with the main ideas in the text?
- Did you find any errors in reasoning? Any gaps in the discussion?
- Did the organization make sense?
- Was evidence used correctly, without manipulation? Has the writer used appropriate sources for support?
- Is the author objective? Biased? Reasonable? (Note that the author might just as easily be subjective, unbiased, and unreasonable! Every type of writing and tone can be used for a specific purpose. By identifying these techniques and considering *why* the author is using them, you begin to understand more about the text.)
- Has the author left anything out? If yes, was this accidental? Intentional?
- Are the text's tone and language text appropriate?

- Are all of the author's statements clear? Is anything confusing?
- What worked well in the text? What was lacking or failed completely?
- What is the cultural context* of the text?

These are only a few ideas relating to critique, but they'll get you started.

When you critique, try working with these statements, offering explanations to support your ideas. Bring in content from the text (textual evidence) to support your ideas.

Synthesizing

To synthesize is to combine ideas and create a completely *new* idea. That new idea becomes the conclusion you have drawn from your reading. This is the true beauty of reading: it causes us to weigh ideas, to compare, judge, think, and explore—and then to arrive at a moment that we hadn't known before. We begin with a simple summary, work through analysis, evaluate using critique, and then move on to synthesis.

Check Your Understanding: Jargon

Jargon refers to language, abbreviations, or terms that are used by specific groups—typically those people involved in a profession. Using jargon within that group makes conversation simpler, and it works because everyone in the group knows the lingo. The problem with using jargon when writing is that if your readers do not know what those terms mean, you'll lose them.

Read this paragraph that relies heavily on jargon:

- *Those who experience sx of URI might consider visiting a PCP. This should happen ASAP with pyrexia >101, enlarged cervical nodes, purulent nares drainage, or tonsillar hypertrophy. Tx may include qid antibiotics, ASA, fluids, and a mucolytic.*
If you're in a medical field, you probably understood that paragraph. Otherwise, it probably sounded like another language! Now read this translation in lay (non-jargon) terms:
- *Those who have cold symptoms might consider visiting their primary care provider. This should happen quickly if there is fever over 101, swollen glands in the neck, green or yellow drainage from the nose, or inflamed, swollen tonsils. Treatment may include antibiotics, aspirin, fluids, and medications designed to loosen phlegm and make it easier to cough.* That's quite a change, yes? It's a good example of why we usually want to avoid jargon, only use it with an audience that understands it, or explain each term carefully as we use it.
- What did you discover about jargon? What areas are you familiar with that may have their own types of jargon?

(Reading from Babin, M., Burnell, C., Pesznecker, N.R., & Wood, J. (2017). *The word on college reading and writing*. <https://openoregon.pressbooks.pub/wrd/>)