

Learning Outcomes Assessment - Critical Thinking

Assessment ID: 208

Assessment Type: General Learning Outcome

Year/Term: 2010 / 2

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Program: English/Writing

Prefix / Course Number: WR / 222

High Impact Practice (HIP):

<input type="checkbox"/> First Year Experience	<input type="checkbox"/> Learning Community
<input type="checkbox"/> Leadership Training	<input type="checkbox"/> Co-Curriculum
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> University Writing Requirement	<input type="checkbox"/> Collaborative Assignments and Projects
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Undergraduate Research	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Diversity / Global Learning
<input type="checkbox"/> Service Learning / Community-Based Learning	<input type="checkbox"/> Internship / Practicum / Field Work
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Performance	<input type="checkbox"/> Portfolio
<input type="checkbox"/> Capstone Project	

Learning Outcome: Critical Thinking

Assessment Method/Tool: Rubric

Measurement Scale: 1 - 3

Sample Size: 24

	Developing (# of students)		Adequate (# of students)		Proficient (# of students)	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
1. Identifies and explains issues	9	37.5%	10	41.7%	5	20.8%
2. Recognizes contexts and assumptions	12	50.0%	9	37.5%	3	12.5%
3. Acknowledges multiple perspectives	4	16.7%	5	20.8%	15	62.5%
4. Evaluates evidence to reach conclusions	10	41.7%	9	37.5%	5	20.8%
Averages: (based on <u>24</u> student sample size)	8.8	36.5%	8.3	34.4%	7	29.2%

Benchmark: 85% Institutional benchmark goal for percent of students to meet "Adequate" or "Proficient" levels
 (This institutional benchmark does not take into account the level of the course and the preparedness of the students in the sample. Results will help the institution understand the learning needs of participating students.)

Percent Achieving Benchmark 63.5% Actual percent of students meeting "Adequate" or "Proficient" levels

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Question / Prompt / Assignment: Project: A Palette for Persuasion
(used for the assessment)

A painter's palette is not only for separating colors, but mixing them into unusual, but often appropriate, combinations and colors. As rhetoric and writers we also need an ability to mix and match different strategies, depending upon our purposes, the needs and disposition of the audience or others in the debate and the nature of the occasion and the issue at hand. Often, arguing a single position involves many shifts in style and method, as the situation around us changes or new contexts arise. The Greek term *kairos*, roughly translated as "timing," has long been a key, but puzzling, term for rhetoricians, since it suggests that some arguments and ways of making arguments, become more palatable at certain times—and can go out of favor as well.

Here is a list of alternative ways of arguing, which can be used to build a persuasive project that functions in flexible ways. Your project—which should be around three pages—may contain:

1. A Formal Argument in the Academic Style

The old stand-by of academic culture remains an important intellectual strategy for developing a reasoned, clear and well-supported argument. In this piece, you should state a position and use a range of evidence to support it. You may include support from your personal experience, but you should also bring other support to bear, including information gathered through research. You should anticipate some of the counters or criticisms other thinking people might think of in response to your argument, and try to answer their claims. You should show that you understand both your argument and its counters well enough to see the strongest and weakest points of each. In the end, you should show why you believe your position is the right, or best, one. Make clear what you see as the determining factors.

2. A Dialogue

Often, persuasion occurs best through conversations, discussions or debates among people who respect one another. In this piece, you will project yourself explaining, defending and arguing on behalf of your views to another person or a group of other people. You can create a scenario that interests you, such as:

"a relaxed dinner conversation with a friend

"a conversation with a child who is hard to convince

"an internal argument where different parts of you argue different positions or you defend a view against your internal critic

"a public or private meeting of a group where you have been invited to speak or put yourself on a speakers' list

"a formal debate on issue staged by an interested group

"a wilderness camp where you are in the company of people with various opinions, or who do not agree with you

Other scenarios would also be fine, but no matter what, it is important that you are talking with a person or group who doesn't completely agree with you. They don't have to be fully against you, either. For instance, a friend might not have a strong opinion about the issue, but might be interested in finding out why you think as you do. If you are debating in front of a group, you might have supporters in the crowd making comments and asking questions, as well as people who don't agree with you criticizing your views and arguing other positions.

When you write this piece, be clear about the scenario. Set the scene for us. Then, write the actual dialogue as a playscript. You can use physical descriptions instead of names if the scenario has you speaking to people you don't know well. If you want to, you can make up a character to state your views, rather than imagining you doing it.

You should try to show, however, that you can state your opinion clearly, perhaps in different ways as the discussion goes on, and support it with a range of evidence and rhetorical strategies. Also, show how you might handle challenges to your position.

Do you have to convince everyone in the end? Not necessarily. Convincing people is hard to do. But see if you can get them to think. And, think about what they are saying. One possible outcome for this piece is to use it to further develop your position, understand it and why you support it. Another possible outcome is to find a middle ground, or at least a new respect, for the positions of others. See where your scenario and characters take you.

3. A Soundbite

While a dialogue or discussion often allows you to develop your views in length, the media culture we live in tends to chop arguments into very small chunks that are easily digested by a busy, sometimes scanning, audience. The "soundbite" is often criticized for "dumbing down" public discourse by changing nuanced positions into catchy slogans and simplifying complicated debates into two opposed positions, but it remains an omnipresent form in an accelerating culture. Describe a scenario where you, or a spokesperson you create, has only about twenty seconds

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to say something convincing. Perhaps it is at the end of a TV debate show where the host gives the participants one last chance to persuade the audience. Perhaps it is at the end of a meeting that has run late, where you are given only a chance to preview your views, which will be featured at the next meeting. Perhaps it is a TV talk show about to go to commercial, or a radio commercial where only words and sound can be used. What would you or your worthy character say that would stick in people's minds as they think more about the issue?

4. A Persuasive Image

Pictures, as they say, speak louder than words, and many times this is shown even by words that paint a picture. In the 1960s, for instance, Rachel Carson's book, *Silent Spring*, inspired many people to join the environmental movement by showing us a world dead from toxic pollutants; a few years later, television images of American dead and wounded from the Vietnam War convinced viewers that the United States should pull out. What images have made an impact on your life and the positions you hold? Now think about a persuasive image related to this project or the position you are arguing. What do you see? Where do you see it presented? Are words needed to complement the image? Or should words create it? Write, draw, paint or otherwise create a persuasive image. Then, in paragraph write about the scenario you imagine for its use and describe the audience who you hope it engages.

5. Additional Arguments

Arguments come in many genres of writing, media, and forms in our culture. Here is a list of possibilities for you to consider or develop for your project:

Post-it Note

Postcard

Poem

Bumper Sticker

T-Shirt

Letter to the Editor

Voter's Pamphlet

Cartoon

Quotation

Parable

Flash-mob

Blog

Song

Picket Sign

Chant

Question

Documentary

TV Commercial

E-mail

Campaign Speech

Brochure

Newsletter

Testimonial

What items would you add? Which two or three would you like to develop for your project? You may want to try several to find those that work the best. Again, include a scenario that sets the scene for the use of the forms you select

6. An Analysis of Your Work

Here is a chance to think about the choices you have made and methods you have used to construct your argument. Analyze your work, considering some of the following questions:

"□What purposes or purposes did you set out to fulfill? Did your purpose change along the way? If so, how is this change reflected in your final project?

"□What attitudes in the audience or ideas about your subject did you wish to change? How did you go about doing this? What attitudes or ideas about the subject did you wish to affirm?

"□Did you try to appeal to the powers of reason of your audience? If so, how?

"□Did you try to arouse emotions? If so, which emotions? What strategies did you use to inspire an emotional response?

"□Did you construct an ethical argument, which appealed to the audience's sense of right and wrong? Or, was your argument more rooted in more practical questions, such as procedure or how to get things done?

"□What changes do you wish your project could make in the thoughts and actions of others? Once your audience has considered your project, what would you like them to see and do?

"□How could you have made your project even more effective? What would you do differently, or how would you expand or alter your arguments, if you have the time, expertise or budget?

7. A List of Works Cited

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Such a list also has a persuasive quality, showing you have done your research and are knowledgeable about the issue at hand.

8. A Re-gathering of Mystery

Some of the most important work we do as thinkers and rhetoricians is often hidden from the world, and sometimes even from ourselves. Others may hear us making arguments, but few see us rethinking or altering our positions or mulling the possibilities and problems presented by the argument of others. Sometimes it seems as if the changes in our mindsets emerge all at once, but in truth they are usually the result of long mental processing. Here is a chance to make this process visible by "re-gathering the mystery" of your argument and its issues. You may have seemed rather sure in making the various portions of your argument, but why not end by allowing yourself the luxury of doubt? □

Try some or all of the following to open a route for continued thinking:

"□ Create a list of questions that remain unanswered for you about your issue or argument. These may be questions that you have wondered about before, or ones your argument tries to answer. They may also be new for you, perhaps having arisen as you worked on the assignment.

"□ Reconsider the arguments of those who don't agree with the position you've taken in this assignment. What are the best arguments that can be raised against you? Are there any that you don't know an immediate answer to? List these arguments.

"□ Write an agenda of things you can do to further your thinking about the issue. Discuss with friends an agenda for continuing to think about the issue you've raised. What questions do you most want to think about? Is there additional research you'd like to do? Are there books you'd like to read or people to talk to? What other kinds of writing might be interesting to try?

Commentary / Explanation:
(provide context within the course/activity for the question/prompt/assignment)

Even if many schools have dropped a third term of first-year composition devoted entirely to argument, the ability to write and argue persuasively continues to be a goal of writing and of writing across the curriculum programs. During years of surveying my own first-year students, I have found that students dread, more than anything but long research papers, the idea of writing an argumentative piece. Whether or not they fear confrontation for personal or cultural reasons, they are often afraid of argument as something historical, formal and boring.

Therefore, I have developed a pedagogy of "multiwriting," where students combine personal and academic passions they care about representing and persuading others to focus upon. Each student does a persuasive multiwriting project, composing and researching in multiple genres, disciplines, media and cultures.

This assignment, The Palette of Persuasion, is a mini-version of the larger project, which asks them to argue/persuade toward a specific rhetorical message/purpose for a known audience of classmates and professor with three different genres. Most also include other media (e.g. a photo embedded in text, or graphics like flow charts), a few other disciplines (e.g. the psychology of domestic violence might be examined alongside the biology of the on-going injuries of domestic violence), and other cultures.

Data Analysis: What do these results mean?
(what do the results indicate regarding student proficiency in the outcome assessed)

These results are for the first version of the assignment usually turned in mid-term. The numbers go up at the end, after they have time to revise the assignment. Most students have trouble now identifying and explaining issues. Perhaps this is because they live in a world where Wikipedia and the internet constantly paraphrase data and ideas? Most first-year university students refuse to deepen detail in their abstract writing until 1) they know the class/audience is safe and 2) they are shown that line between too much and too little detail. By the end of the term students in this class have learned to identify and explain issues more carefully according to what will, and will not, fit their projects. This means they will often have tough decisions about what to include. If their project is to persuade people that knowing more about their own blood, they have to decide if they will focus more upon diseases of the blood to scare their audience into attention, or how far they may go into the information of medicine before their audience is lost.

While most general education students have some recognition of contexts (e.g. knowing that an assignment will be seen by the teacher and rest of class), they are less conscious of assumptions. Many write initially as if others share their every experience. This means that □ critical thinking □ in this argument/persuasion class has to develop a change of consciousness, and students have to learn not to assume too much. This leads, in turn, back to learning how to paraphrase and

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summarize and synthesize materials they are researching. It also means that students must study rhetorical process (e.g. writer, message, purpose, audience, occasion) and begin to construct an either/an consciousness rather than only an either/or one. In this sense, critical thinking becomes collaborative thinking: only by trying out their persuasive ideas on an audience can they find effective methods of changing minds/hearts.

With this multiwriting perspective, students must learn more quickly to honor and discover multiple perspectives. In an age where class, race and gender continue to blur more, this is a very useful skill. The assignment forces them toward multiple perspectives because that's the way we think critically in daily life on and off-campus. For example, if we are trying to make up our minds about abortion, we may do it by viewing billboards, research essays, bumper stickers or magazine ads, just as we may listen to relevant interviews with doctors and women experiencing abortion, or to sermons or lectures. Multiple perspectives go hand in hand with multimedia now.

Evaluating evidence and reaching conclusions goes to the heart of probably every definition of "critical thinking," and it involves returning to rhetoric to understand and practice logical fallacies (as students do after mid-term in the course). Being persuasive now includes emotional as well as intellectual appeals, and both reach back to the rhetorical tradition, from at least ancient Greece on. Students must also learn to evaluate data on primary, secondary and tertiary levels. For example, if students are trying to persuade us with their project that airline travel is getting more difficult, inefficient and annoying, they may have to look not just at summaries of performance from the airlines, but at the raw, primary data of lost luggage and delayed flights. Then they have to evaluate tertiary critiques of the airlines based upon both the raw data and summaries from all sides. The most difficult thing for students to learn is that with so much competition for print text with visual rhetoric conclusions in evaluation must be more than summaries. They must synthesize ideas/data in detail, and often leave the reader with a picture of their argument, to remember it with.

Closing the Loop: This assessment has helped me understand that, instead of having students choose three genres toward a persuasive project out of interest first, that they need to start by firming up their message/purpose, then make a list of possible and relevant genres. Instead of connecting genres after writing them, I'll now try to have them identify and explain issues and write about contexts and assumptions around their message first. I'll also include work on logical fallacies sooner. This way they can choose their multiple perspectives more carefully to work toward the message. I will also include a short reflective writing about how they reached their conclusions, and how these synthesize and summarize their findings. The creativity will remain in their choice of genres and delivery, but the framework will be aimed more toward critical thinking as planning around a message, expectations for objectives, methods and outcomes and self-reflection about surprises and what changed over time.

How will you use the results to improve student learning?

How do these results relate to University, Program, and General Education Learning Outcomes?

Student Samples (optional):
(web links to posted, online files)

NOTE: Student names cannot be used on the samples.

Developing Example (web address)

Adequate Example (web address)

Proficient Example (web address)