

Learning Outcomes Assessment - Critical Thinking

Assessment ID: 192

Assessment Type: General Learning Outcome

Year/Term: 2010 / 2

Name: St.Germain, Tonia

Email: tstgerma@eou.edu

Program: Gender Studies

Prefix / Course Number: GEND / 220

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 type="checkbox"/> Undergraduate Research | <input type="checkbox"/> Diversity / Global Learning |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Service Learning / Community-Based Learning | <input type="checkbox"/> Internship / Practicum / Field Work |
| <input 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: 7

	Developing (# of students)		Adequate (# of students)		Proficient (# of students)	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
1. Identifies and explains issues	3	42.9%	4	57.1%	0	0.0%
2. Recognizes contexts and assumptions	3	42.9%	4	57.1%	0	0.0%
3. Acknowledges multiple perspectives	3	42.9%	4	57.1%	0	0.0%
4. Evaluates evidence to reach conclusions	3	42.9%	4	57.1%	0	0.0%
Averages: (based on 7 student sample size)	3	42.9%	4	57.1%	0	0.0%

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 57.1% Actual percent of students meeting "Adequate" or "Proficient" levels

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Question / Prompt / Assignment: Constructing a Gender, Work and Society
(used for the assessment) GEND 220 (CRN: 31242), Fall 2010

Argument/Thesis Assignment (5%) Due: Monday, October 18

Introduction: The assignment is presented in three parts:

- 1) Background information on making an argument
- 2) Description of thesis statement
- 3) The instructions for the assignment

Be sure to read the background material as you will need to apply it in constructing the thesis.

Part I: Background information on the argument

You may be surprised to hear that the word "argument" does not have to be written anywhere in your assignment for it to be an important part of your task. In fact, making an argument expressing a point of view on a subject and supporting it with evidence is often the aim of academic writing. Your instructors may assume that you know this and thus may not explain the importance of arguments to you in class. Nevertheless, if your writing assignment asks you to respond to readings and class discussion, your instructor likely expects you to produce an argument in your paper.

Most material you learn in college is or has been debated by someone, somewhere, at some time. Even when the material you read or hear is presented as simple "fact," it may actually be one person's interpretation of a set of information. In your writing, instructors may call on you to question that interpretation and defend it, refute it, or offer some new view of your own. In writing assignments, you will almost always need to do more than just present information that you have gathered or regurgitate facts that were discussed in class. You will need to select a point of view and provide evidence (in other words, use "argument") to shape the material and offer your interpretation of the material.

If you think that "fact," not argument, rules intelligent thinking, consider these examples. At one point, the great minds of Western Europe firmly believed the Earth was flat. They assumed this was simply an uncontroversial fact. You are able to disagree now because people who saw that argument as faulty set out to make a better argument and proved it. Differences of opinion are how human knowledge develops, and scholars like your instructors spend their lives engaged in debate over what may be counted as "true," "real," or "right" in their fields. In their courses, they want you to engage in similar kinds of critical thinking and debate.

Argumentation is not just what your instructors do. We all use argumentation on a daily basis, and you probably already have some skill at crafting an argument. The more you improve your skills in this area, the better you will be at thinking critically, reasoning, making choices, and weighing evidence.

Making a claim

What is an argument? In academic writing, an argument is usually a main idea, often called a "claim" or "thesis statement," backed up with evidence that supports the idea. In the majority of college papers, you will need to make some sort of claim and use evidence to support it, and your ability to do this well will separate your papers from those of students who see assignments as mere accumulations of fact and detail. In other words, gone are the happy days of being given a "topic" about which you can write anything. It is time to stake out a position and prove why it is a good position for a thinking person to hold. That is why we call your final writing project a position paper to reinforce the important point about making a convincing argument and taking a position supported by evidence.

Claims can be as simple as "Protons are positively charged and electrons are negatively charged," with evidence such as, "In this experiment, protons and electrons acted in such and such a way." Claims can also be as complex as "The

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end of the South African system of apartheid was inevitable," using reasoning and evidence such as, "Every successful revolution in the modern era has come about after the government in power has given and then removed small concessions to the uprising group." In either case, the rest of your paper will detail the reasoning and evidence that have led you to believe that your position is best.

When beginning to write a paper, ask yourself, "What is my point?" For example, the point of this handout is to help you become a better writer, and we are arguing that an important step in the process of writing effective arguments is understanding the concept of argumentation. If your papers do not have a main point, they cannot be arguing for anything. Asking yourself what your point is can help you avoid a mere "information dump." Consider this: your instructors probably know a lot more than you do about your subject matter. Why, then, would you want to provide them with material they already know?

Instructors are usually looking for two things:

- 1) Proof that you understand the material, AND
- 2) A demonstration of your ability to use or apply the material in ways that go beyond what you have read or heard.

This second part can be done in many ways: you can critique the material, apply it to something else, or even just explain it in a different way. In order to succeed at this second step, though, you must have a particular point to argue.

Arguments in academic writing are usually complex and take time to develop. Your argument will need to be more than a simple or obvious statement such as "Frank Lloyd Wright was a great architect." Such a statement might capture your initial impressions of Wright as you have studied him in class; however, you need to look deeper and express specifically what caused that "greatness." Your instructor will probably expect something more complicated, such as "Frank Lloyd Wright's architecture combines elements of European modernism, Asian aesthetic form, and locally found materials to create a unique new style," or "There are many strong similarities between Wright's building designs and those of his mother, which suggests that he may have borrowed some of her ideas." To develop your argument, you would then define your terms and prove your claim with evidence from Wright's drawings and buildings and those of the other architects you mentioned.

Evidence

Do not stop with having a point. You have to back up your point with evidence. The strength of your evidence, and your use of it, can make or break your argument. You already have the natural inclination for this type of thinking, if not in an academic setting. Think about how you talked your parents into letting you borrow the family car when you were a new driver (If your family had a family car). Did you present them with lots of instances of your past trustworthiness? Did you make them feel guilty because your friends' parents all let them drive? Did you whine until they just wanted you to shut up? Did you look up statistics on teen driving and use them to show how you didn't fit the dangerous-driver profile? These are all types of argumentation, and they exist in academia in similar forms.

Every field has slightly different requirements for acceptable evidence, so familiarize yourself with some arguments from within that field instead of just applying whatever evidence you like best. Pay attention to your textbooks and your instructors' presentations. What types of argument and evidence are they using? The type of evidence that sways an English instructor may not work to convince a Sociology or Gender Studies instructor. Find out what counts as proof that something is true in that field. Is it statistics, a logical development of points, something from the object being discussed (art work, text, culture, or atom), the way something works, or some combination of more than one of these things?

Be consistent with your evidence. Unlike negotiating for the use of a parents' car, a college paper is not the place for an all-out blitz of every type of argument. You can often use more than one type of evidence within a paper, but make sure that within each section you are providing the reader with evidence appropriate to each claim. So, if you start a paragraph or section with a statement like Providing for on-campus day care will increase college attendance do not follow with your evidence on how much more money the university could raise in tuition by providing

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free day care to students who might not attend college because of concerns about child care. While more tuition could follow, a better follow up would be to provide information about how support for student parents can show these students that they matter, which can raise their aspiration for college as a place they can belong. You might use the argument about tuition somewhere in a paper on child care provision, but if your goal is to promote college attendance by student parents, focusing on the financial benefit to the university would not be the best place to start.

Counterargument

One way to strengthen your argument and show that you have a deep understanding of the issue you are discussing is to anticipate and address counterarguments or objections. By considering what someone who disagrees with your position might have to say about your argument, you show that you have thought things through, and you dispose of some of the reasons your audience might have for not accepting your argument. Recall our discussion of providing child care on campus for student parents. To make the most effective argument possible, you should consider not only what supporters of such a proposal would say about it but also what students who are not parents would say (if expected to pay for this through increases in student fees) or what local community day care providers might say about this new competition.

You can generate counterarguments by asking yourself how someone who disagrees with you might respond to each of the points you've made or your position as a whole. If you can't immediately imagine another position, here are some strategies to try:

Do some research. It may seem to you that no one could possibly disagree with the position you are arguing, but someone probably has. For example, some people argue that the American Civil War never ended. If you are making an argument concerning, for example, the outcomes of the Civil War, you might wish to see what some of these people have to say.

Talk with a friend or with your instructor(s). Another person may be able to imagine counterarguments that haven't occurred to you. Consider your conclusion or claim and the premises of your argument and imagine someone who denies each of them. For example, if you argued "Cats make the best pets. This is because they are clean and independent," you might imagine someone saying "Cats do not make the best pets. They are dirty and needy." Once you have thought up some counterarguments, consider how you will respond to them—will you concede that your opponent has a point but explain why your audience should nonetheless accept your argument? Will you reject the counterargument and explain why it is mistaken? Either way, you will want to leave your reader with a sense that your argument is stronger than opposing arguments.

When you are summarizing opposing arguments, be charitable. Present each argument fairly and objectively, rather than trying to make it look foolish. You want to show that you have seriously considered the many sides of the issue and that you are not simply attacking or caricaturing your opponents.

It is usually better to consider one or two serious counterarguments in some depth, rather than to give a long but superficial list of many different counterarguments and replies.

Be sure that your reply is consistent with your original argument. If considering a counterargument changes your position, you will need to go back and revise your original argument accordingly.

Audience

Audience is a very important consideration in argument. A lifetime of dealing with your family members has helped you figure out which arguments work best to persuade each of them. Maybe whining tended to work with one parent, but the other only accepted cold, hard statistics. It's usually wise to think of your audience in an academic setting as someone who is perfectly smart but who doesn't necessarily agree with you. You are not just expressing your opinion in an

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argument ("It's true because I said so"), and in most cases your audience will know something about the subject at hand—so you will need sturdy proof. At the same time, do not think of your audience as clairvoyant. You have to come out and state both your claim and your evidence clearly. Do not assume that because the instructor knows the material, he or she understands what part of it you are using, what you think about it, and why you have taken the position you've chosen.

Critical reading

Critical reading is a big part of understanding argument. Although some of the material you read will be very persuasive, do not fall under the spell of the printed word as authority. Very few of your instructors think of the texts they assign as the last word on the subject. Remember that the author of every text has an agenda, something that he or she wants you to believe. This is OK—everything is written from someone's perspective—but it's a good thing to be aware of. We will be exploring objectivity and bias more deeply in the evaluating sources assignment.

Take notes either in the margins of your source (if you are using a photocopy or your own book) or on a separate sheet as you read. Put away that highlighter! Simply highlighting a text is good for memorizing the main ideas in that text—it does not encourage critical reading. Part of your goal as a reader should be to put the author's ideas in your own words. Then you can stop thinking of these ideas as facts and start thinking of them as arguments.

When you read, ask yourself questions like "What is the author trying to prove?" and "What is the author assuming I will agree with?" Do you agree with the author? Does the author adequately defend her argument? What kind of proof does she use? Is there something she leaves out that you would put in? Does putting it in hurt her argument? As you get used to reading critically, you will start to see the sometimes hidden agendas of other writers, and you can use this skill to improve your own ability to craft effective arguments.

Part II: Thesis Statement Description

Introduction:

Writing in college often takes the form of persuasion—convincing others that you have an interesting, logical point of view on the subject you are studying. Persuasion is a skill you practice regularly in your daily life. You persuade a roommate or a partner to clean up your common living spaces, your work colleague to cover a shift, your friend to vote for your favorite candidate or policy. In college, course assignments often ask you to make a persuasive case in writing. You are asked to convince your reader of your point of view. This form of persuasion, often called academic argument, follows a predictable pattern in writing. After a brief introduction of your topic, you state your point of view on the topic directly and often in one sentence. This sentence is the thesis statement, and it serves as a summary of the argument you'll make in the rest of your paper.

What is a thesis statement?

A thesis statement:

1. Tells the reader how you will interpret the significance of the subject matter under discussion.
2. Tells the reader what to expect from the rest of the paper.
3. Directly answers the question asked of you. A thesis is an interpretation of a question or subject, not the subject itself. The subject, or topic, of an essay might be World War II or the growth of social networking on-line; a thesis must then offer a way to understand war or the increasing use of electronic communication for connecting with others.
4. Makes a claim that others might dispute.
5. Is usually a single sentence somewhere in your first paragraph that presents your argument to the reader.

The rest of the paper, the body of the essay, gathers and organizes evidence that will persuade the reader of the logic of your interpretation. If your assignment asks you to take a position or develop a claim about a subject, you should convey that position or claim in a thesis statement near the beginning of your draft. The assignment may not explicitly state that you need a thesis statement because your

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instructor may assume you will include one. When in doubt, ask your instructor if the assignment requires a thesis statement. When an assignment asks you to analyze, to interpret, to compare and contrast, to demonstrate cause and effect, or to take a stand on an issue, it is likely that you are being asked to develop a thesis and to support it persuasively.

How do I get a thesis?

A thesis is the result of a lengthy thinking process. Formulating a thesis is not the first thing you do after reading an essay assignment. Before you develop an argument on any topic, you have to collect and organize evidence, look for possible relationships between known facts (such as surprising contrasts or similarities), and think about the significance of these relationships. Once you do this thinking, you will probably have a "working thesis," a basic or main idea, an argument that you think you can support with evidence but that may need adjustment along the way.

Tips for doing well:

1. A thesis may answer a question or respond to a specific prompt offered by an instructor.

Hint: Re-reading the question prompt after constructing a working thesis can help you fix an argument that may have missed the focus of the question.

2. A thesis takes a position that others might challenge or oppose.

Hint: If your thesis simply states facts that no one would, or even could, disagree with, it's possible that you are simply providing a summary, rather than making an argument.

3. A thesis statement is specific.

Hint: Thesis statements that are too vague often do not have a strong argument. If your thesis contains words like "good" or "successful," see if you could be more specific: why is something "good"; what specifically makes something "successful"?

4. A thesis passes the "So what?" test.

Hint: If a reader's first response is, "So what?" then you need to clarify, to forge a relationship, or to connect to a larger issue.

5. A thesis passes the "how and why?" test.

Hint: If a reader's first response is "how?" or "why?" your thesis may be too open-ended and lack guidance for the reader. See what you can add to give the reader a better take on your position right from the beginning.

Part III: Instructions for this Assignment

Present your paper in standard format, 12 pt. font, with standard margins and include your name, course name, professor's name and the date. Your work must demonstrate concise and coherent writing, excellent grammar and spelling. You must use correct APA style citations as appropriate.

Introduction:

After reviewing materials we studied in weeks one through three and the film Working Girl, construct a thesis that incorporates ideas from one article or chapter (Reskin and/or Dubeck/Dunn) construct a thesis of your own about gender equality in the workplace. This should be a thesis that you could develop into a position paper. This is only a practice assignment, and you are not expected to write your final paper using this thesis. If you practice well now, when asked for your actual thesis later in the term, you should have a clearer idea about how to approach the task.

Step One: Before you begin be sure to write an abstract on the article or chapter you chose (see week one assignment). In short you need provided specific evidence the author of the article selected offered in support of the thesis, and identified the purpose and audience. Then you can go onto to the next step and make an argument your own. I suggest using one of the scenes in the film Working Girl that provoked you to thought. For example: (1) the scene in the limousine might prompt you to write about sexual harassment; (2) the scene where Tess has to explain to her boyfriend about her career goals might prompt you to write on gender parity in family relationships; (3) Tess's interactions with her boss might

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prompt you to write about class and its impact on upward mobility. Use the scenes that you found interesting and relate well to your own life to prompt your research.

Step Two: Respond to each prompt below using complete sentences and proper formatting and grammar. Be sure to identify the assignment, and provide your name and the date at the top of the page. You do not need to write this as an essay, but may just complete each section separately.

1. Identify in one sentence the topic you are going to address in the assignment, and the argument made by the author of the article/chapter you selected and that you will use in constructing your own thesis.
2. Provide a thesis statement about the topic (either agreeing or disagreeing with the author) by completing the following sentence This paper argues Review the background information above to be sure your thesis passes all the tests of a strong thesis. Your response to this prompt must be only one sentence long.
3. Identify three supportive piece of evidence for your thesis from the article/chapter you selected or from other course materials. If your thesis is in opposition to the author's, identify one scholarly source using the Pierce library databases to support your argument. Your response to this prompt must be one sentence long, properly cited, using APA format. Here is where your command of the complex sentence using the colon and semicolon to create a list would be appropriate.
4. Identify one counterargument that calls your thesis into question, based on evidence from the course resources or scholarly sources obtained from Pierce. The response to this prompt should be one sentence long and concisely explain what a reasonable person would say to disagree with your position.
5. You must use correct APA style citations as appropriate.

Grading Rubric

This assignment is worth 5 points. Each item above is worth one point.

Works consulted in creating background material:

These instructions were adapted from:
<http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/argument.html>

Anson, C. M. and R. A. Schwegler. (2000) The Longman Handbook for Writers. 2nd ed. New York: Longman.

Booth, W. C. (2003). The Craft of Research. 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Ede, L. (1989). Work in Progress. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Gage, J. T. (1991). The Shape of Reason: Argumentative Writing in College. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company.

Hairston, M. and J. J. Ruskiewicz. (1996). The Scott, Foresman Handbook for Writers. 4th ed. New York: HarperCollins.

Lunsford, A. and R. Connors. (1995). The St. Martin's Handbook. 3rd ed. New York: St. Martin's.

Rosen, Leonard J. and Laurence Behrens. The Allyn & Bacon Handbook. 3rd ed. Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1997.

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Commentary / Explanation: (provide context within the course/activity for the question/prompt/assignment) This is the third assignment in a set of 8 that teach writing the argumentative essay. I come in around week four.

Data Analysis: What do these results mean? (what do the results indicate regarding student proficiency in the outcome assessed) Gender Studies cannot have prerequisites like WR 121 as this makes enrollment go down. Our program is assessed on enrollment more than anything and has been on the block for being cut during each budget crisis (about every two years). If I did not have to focus so much on the business model of students in the seats and could focus on student learning, I could make the course more rigorous.

Closing the Loop: I would have to dedicate 50% or more of my time teaching writing and not content. Students do not come prepared to write at the college level.

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)

Developing Example (web address)

Adequate Example (web address)

NOTE: Student names cannot be used on the samples.

Proficient Example (web address)