The Critical Writing Project
Welcome!

Arum and Roksa (2011) report that many high-school graduates are simply unprepared for college-level work.

In particular, their ability to think critically and write effectively is in decline.

The Office of Faculty Development responded to the need to help faculty bridge the gap between under-preparation and achievement with The Critical Writing Project.
The Critical Writing Project: An Overview

- The Critical Writing Project was a series of panels and workshops in the Fall of 2012.

- It aimed to provide faculty of every discipline with strategies, feedback, and opportunities for faculty input on how to develop our students’ critical thinking and effective writing skills given the unique demands of our campus.
The Critical Writing Project: An Overview

The series began with a panel discussion focused on research demonstrating the link between targeted, problem-based writing assignments and critical thinking development within the disciplines.

The keynote speaker was Jim Herron, Director of the Harvard Writing Project at Harvard College and Head Preceptor in Expository Writing for the University.
The Critical Writing Project: An Overview

That panel was followed by workshops targeted to specific needs:

- “Critical Writing Online”
- “Complex Reasoning and Critical Writing in the Sciences and Engineering”
- “Critical Writing in the Humanities and Social Sciences”

The final event offered faculty the opportunity to get feedback on their ideas for critical writing assignment design.
The Critical Writing Project: An Overview

- Our feedback indicates that the Critical Writing Project was a success!

- This **online module** synthesizes the insights gained during those panels and workshops, making them available to the wider UMD community.

- OFD would like to thank the UMD faculty who served as panelists and facilitators: Carlos Benavides, Vijaya Chalivendra, Maureen Eckert, Karen Gulbrandsen, Trina Kershaw, Michelle Lafrance, Pia Moisander, Jennifer Mulnix, Chandra Orrill, Tara Rajaniemi, and Robin Robinson.
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Critical Writing Online

Tips for Composing Learning Outcomes
What is Critical Writing?

- Critical writing prompts the author to engage with and attempt to solve a problem by writing about it.
- The focus on problem-solving transcends disciplines or course levels.
- Any course of any discipline includes problems that students can work through by writing about them.
Step 1: Learning Outcomes

• The first step in constructing a successful critical writing assignment is to determine what critical thinking skills you want that assignment to develop.

• Those skills should be listed in the learning outcomes for your course.

• Chose a few specific skills from your learning outcomes to begin constructing your assignment.
# Examples of Critical Thinking Skills

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Critical Writing and Learning Outcomes

• More examples of critical thinking skills can be found in L. Dee Fink, *Creating Significant Learning Experiences*.

• Your learning outcomes should reflect one or more of these skills.

• If you’d like advice on writing learning outcomes geared towards critical writing, jump to [Critical Writing Learning Outcomes](#)
Step 2: What Kind of Writing?

- The next step in designing a critical writing assignment is to determine what kind of writing you want students to undertake.

- The kind of writing you choose may depend on your discipline, or which critical thinking skills you want to develop.

- There are a number of kinds of academic writing...
Kinds of Academic Writing

- Argumentative writing
- Expository writing
- Narrative writing
- Scientific writing
- Business writing
- Journalistic writing
- Professional writing
- Grant writing
- Creative writing
- Reviews
Writing Tasks

• Also keep in mind that a variety of tasks count as writing.
• There’s no need to fixate on the five page essay.
• Lab reports, short summary paragraphs, minute papers, etc., all count as writing tasks.
Step 3: Critical Reading

- A crucial component of developing students’ critical thinking skills through writing is developing their critical reading skills.

- Similar to writing, a variety of texts count as appropriate objects for critical reading.

- These include data tables, diagrams, charts, and graphs.
Critical Reading

Critical reading might involve any of the following:

• Being able to judge which texts are appropriate sources (i.e.: journals v. wikipedia).

• Being able to distinguish between factual reports and opinions.

• Being able to identify the evidence for an author’s conclusion.

• Being able to identify background assumptions.

• Being able to identify fallacies.
Step 4: Choosing a Problem

• The next step in constructing a critical writing assignment is to choose a problem for the students to address.

• The problem can be a hypothetical scenario, a real-life event, a case study, etc.

• You might also consider challenging your students by giving them an ill-structured problem, and asking them why it’s ill-structured.
Choosing a Problem

• For instance, a mechanical engineering professor might ask students to do a product tear-down, and explain why certain materials were used for specific parts rather than other materials.

• If such explanations are done in writing, the students are encouraged to evaluate what they’ve learned about the properties of various materials.
Choosing a Problem

• In another example, a social sciences professor might ask students to explain what they would change or update about a theory they’ve learned.

• If the students are asked to defend their choices in writing, they’re encouraged to think critically about that theory as well as their amendment to it.
Step 5: Create A Rubric

- The penultimate step in constructing a successful critical writing assignment is to create a rubric for that assignment.

- Rubrics inform the students about your grading criteria and expectations for various levels of performance.

- Consider making the rubric available to students before the assignment is due.

- Resources for constructing effective rubrics may be found at: https://confluence.umassonline.net/display/ZEC/Resources+and+Live+Video+Links+for+Events
Step 6: Reflection and Revision

- The final step in constructing a critical writing assignment is to build in time for reflection or revision.

- Reflection exercises include:
  - Prewriting or post-writing.
  - Peer review.
  - Revision Checklists or rubrics.
  - Reading written work aloud.
Critical Writing Online

- Many critical writing tasks can be done online through instructional technology tools such as myCourses.
- For instance, revision and reflection exercises may be submitted through online learning modules.
- Similarly, rubrics may be distributed online.
Critical Writing Online

• Critical reading exercises may also be conducted online.
• Students may be prompted, for instance, to identify background assumption or fallacies in an assigned text, and post their findings on a discussion board.
• Keep in mind that students may get lost if they have to follow too many links to find the modules they need.
• So, try to put as much information as possible within two “clicks” of the main page.
Good Luck!

If you’re interested in tips for composing measurable critical writing learning outcomes, please continue to the next slide.
Critical Writing Learning Outcomes

• Learning outcomes should articulate skills that students should be able to perform and knowledge that students should have by the time a course is completed.

• There are three steps to writing a measurable, specific learning outcome:

  1. Choose a skill level.

  2. Choose a verb.

  3. Specify an object.
Mistakes to Avoid

• Learning outcomes shouldn’t be abstract or unspecific.

• Nor should they be too narrow or confined to a list of topics that must be covered.

• There shouldn’t be too many learning outcomes - a half-dozen or less is preferable.

• Tip: If all of your assignments satisfy two or more learning outcomes, try combining them into a single learning outcome.
Must Haves

• Learning outcomes should be specific and measurable.
• They should be targeted to the level of a course.
• They should be results-oriented.
• There should be clear, realistic methods for attaining them.
3 Key Components of Strong Learning Outcomes

1. Each learning outcome should contain a verb.
2. Each learning outcome should contain a task.
3. Each learning outcome should contain a standard.
3 Key Components of Strong Learning Outcomes

• The verb describes the type of behavior that the learning outcome targets.

• The task describes the expression of that targeted behavior. (Often, the task is implied by the verb.)

• The standard described the criteria against which the behavior is to be evaluated.
Step 1: Choose a Skill-Level

› Specify a skill-level that reflects the difficulty of the course:

› **Knowledge** (understanding, remembering)

› **Application** (applying theory, using a concept in a new context)

› **Integration** (connecting ideas, perspectives, contexts)

› **Problem-Solving** (analyzing, synthesizing, evaluating)

› These may be used to distinguish upper-level from lower-level courses.
Step 2: Choose a Verb

- Choose one or more action verbs to include the learning outcome for the chosen skill-level.

- Sample verbs include:

  - Explain
  - Describe
  - Demonstrate
  - Analyze
  - Evaluate
  - Compare
  - Measure
  - Assess
  - Design
  - Report
  - Review
  - Identify
Step 3: Specify an Object

Examples of objects include the following:

- Facts
- Concepts
- Theories
- Problems
- Results
- Models
By the end of the course students will be able to:

- Identify, summarize, explain and evaluate the theories of Locke, Berkeley and Hume.

Objects:

Comprehension verbs: Identify, summarize, explain and evaluate

Critical Thinking verb:
Example

“At the end of the course students will be able to...

[verb] **demonstrate** understanding of...

[task] by **effectively explaining** it to others orally or in writing...

[standard]... **in their own words**…”
Resources

- L. Dee Fink, *Creating Significant Learning Experiences*.