

# **Critical Thinking On the Ground**

## **Integrating Critical Thinking Into Assignments and In-Class Exercises**

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## Planning a Critical Thinking Assignment in a Mixed Approach Class

1. List and prioritize the **disciplinary objective(s)** of the assignment. (You may not have one if the focus is wholly on critical thinking. That's okay.) How do these relate to the learning outcomes of your syllabus?
2. List and prioritize the **trans-disciplinary critical thinking skill(s)** (use the Delphi list, or another standard list for easy reference) on which you wish to focus. How do these relate to the learning outcomes of your syllabus?
3. Check your answers to the former two questions against what you want your students actually to generate as products of this assignment. Is there a strong enough **alignment** between the products of the assignment and your objectives? If not, what adjustments will you make?
4. Did you **introduce and explain** the trans-disciplinary critical thinking skills on which you want to work to your students at a previous session, or will they have to learn it on the fly? (Expect to do a lot more coaching in the latter case!)
5. From a pedagogical point of view, assess the **practical compatibility** between the trans-disciplinary skills and disciplinary objectives that move this assignment. If they are compatible, consider how they might complement each other. If they are not compatible, how will you restructure your assignment and/or unit plan so that students get both the critical thinking and disciplinary content?
6. How will you explicitly **communicate** your disciplinary and CT objectives to students?
7. How will you **assess** students' performance on the CT component of the assignment? Do they know you will assess them in this way? (If your answer is no, you will need to make them aware of the standards you will use!)

## Tips for Creating an Effective Critical Thinking Assignment

### 1. Don't Underestimate Preparatory Sessions

As instructors in our disciplines we hate to give up precious space on our disciplinary content. When we wish to teach critical thinking, however, it is very often desirable to do just that. Training students in trans-disciplinary CT skills will make them more effective at employing those skills in your class. Developing reading lists or out-of-class assignments to make up for lost disciplinary content. Students with CT training will be better equipped to tackle such assignments independently than students without such training.

### 2. Be Explicit About Everything

Tell students what skills they will use, why they are using them, and how they will be evaluated. This holds even for low or no-stakes in-class assignments.

### 3. Build More Complex Competencies Out of Basic Competencies

Especially early on, tasks devoted to cultivating a small subset of trans-disciplinary critical thinking skills can be more effective than global scale, multi-dimensional tasks like writing term-papers. Build up to these in smaller units. For example, if your term paper requires argumentation, do a preparatory session on argumentation so that students will know what they are supposed to do.

### 4. Don't Worry About Duplication

It is a good thing—*absolutely* not a bad thing—for students to hear about critical thinking concepts, skills and principles over and over again. The more times they hear them and practice them, the better they retain them and the more effective they become at such tasks. Abandon the myth that such tasks belong to a particular department or class. Like writing, trans-disciplinary critical thinking skills can and should be taught across the curriculum, at all levels, across the disciplines.

### 5. Employ Collaborative Learning

Though it isn't quite settled yet, there is a good deal of evidence pointing to the utility of collaborative learning. Trans-disciplinary critical thinking skills are no exception. Do make sure, however, to employ best practices for collaborative learning!

### 6. Don't Just Give Feedback, Give *Useful* Feedback

The traditional alphabetical grade or numerical score gives a student only one data point. Differences between instructors and disciplines make the interpretation of that data point problematic for students. Narrative evaluations that explain where a student went wrong and what they could have done to achieve a better result can be far more helpful. Feedback should be as timely as possible, as concise as possible, and calibrated to evaluative criteria that have been introduced and explained to students beforehand.

### 7. Make Your Standards Transparent

Explain your performance standards early and often. Having students do exercises in which they grade each other using the criteria you will use to grade them develops their familiarity with your standards and helps them better understand what is expected of them.