Composition I: Join the Conversation

COMPOSITION I: JOIN THE CONVERSATION

Lexi Stuckey

CONTENTS

PART I

WELCOME TO YOUR WRITING CLASS

1

WELCOME TO ANOTHER WRITING CLASS!

Or, Why the &%# Am I Taking Writing Again?*

Rob Drummond

Close up shot of keys on a red surface by Miguel Á. Padriñán / Pexels.

Let's begin by being real with each other: you're probably in this class because you have to be. It fulfills a gen ed writing requirement you need to graduate, and you wouldn't be here otherwise. And there is a good chance you're not absolutely thrilled about it.

That's OK. I think I understand, but let me take a stab at some of your potential reactions to finding yourself in this writing class this term:

- You're in kinesiology, business, psychology, dentistry, nursing, and so on, and you're *absolutely **positive*** you won't be doing any writing in your future professional life. This class is just one more hoop to jump through in your undergrad career, one more time the university takes your money through no choice of yours, slowing your progress through your major and toward that sweet j-o-b waiting at the end of it.
- And/or maybe you feel you've already taken a gazillion writing classes since you started school, which has only ever meant writing boring essays about *Romeo and Juliet* or *Animal Farm* or, even worse, poetry. The only thing you *actually* learned about writing in those classes was that your job as a student was to figure out a particular writing teacher's Secret Writing Formula and give it back to them, and you've done that plenty. So why do you have to do it again now, when you should be spending every class and dollar on your major that will lead to that j-o-b? Or worse still, those writing teachers' Secret Writing Formulas never seemed accessible to you, and you long ago threw up your hands in despair.
- Or you truly enjoyed your writing and literature courses—you may even possibly enjoy the act of writing (imagine!)—and, not for nothing, you feel like your writing is pretty darn good already, so you can't help but resent finding yourself in this required course among all these nonwriters because you already know all this stuff and more.

If any of these overlap with your feelings about being in this course, I get it. I also readily acknowledge that

you might not fit neatly into any of these categories—one of the best things about Oregon State University is that our students come from all different cultures and stages of life and scholastic and socioeconomic backgrounds. So instead of trying to identify all of your individual circumstances, let me state two things everyone reading this shares:

1. You've all made it this far somehow, jumping through hoop after writing-requirement hoop, and
2. Your schooling is much closer to its end than its beginning.

Which means, in your immediate future, there will be no more teachers to please or impress and no more Secret Writing Formulas to decipher and reproduce. For most of you, this class represents your last—and in a tragedy for another day, possibly your first and only—course devoted solely to writing in your undergraduate career. You are spiraling at full tilt toward the moment when you will never again receive any help or advice or instruction on anything you've written, and you obviously won't get a grade on it, either.

You may silently or openly cheer as you read those sentences. Good riddance to writing and the teachers who teach it! But consider that no matter your major or your career, the one thing you'll *still* have to do from time to time in your done-with-school life is try to convince someone to do a thing you want them to do. And I'm sorry to add that sometimes you'll have to do it in writing.

You will, in other words, petition gatekeepers to open their gates for you. And as you may already know, these moments tend to be rather high-stakes in our lives.

So there you are: you *really* need another person to do something for you, to give you something, to let you into something, or to stop doing something, but if you can't apply the elements of strong, clear, and moving argument-making to your writing in those high-stakes moments, this person or organization won't just give you a C– and invite you to revise for a better grade.

They'll simply say *no*.

No, we're not giving you that raise. No, the city council rejects your proposal for a new business, thanks but no thanks for working on it for the last two years. No, we're not bringing you in for an interview for your dream job. Nope, you've failed to convince us that our grad school program is the right fit for you. No, you haven't convinced your uncle on social media to reconsider his stance on that far-out conspiracy theory, and the next family gathering is going to be a nightmare as a result. No, we're sorry to inform you that at this time, we are unable to fund your project; we received 374 more compelling and persuasive applications, and we have limited funds available. And no, I'd prefer not to marry you; I'm going to marry this other person who has proven far better at persuading me they will be a better roommate, partner, and coparent.

Skillful Persuasion Is Hard

So maybe take a pause on blindly celebrating that in ten short weeks, you'll be done with your life's writing instruction, and instead consider how little time you've spent in your schooling thinking about how to use your writing to get what you want, to get what you *need*.

Because when your cap and gown are in the rearview and you find yourself faced with a high-stakes writing task demanding that you move some powerful gatekeeper from a *no* to a crucial *yes*—your future, your happiness, your whole *life plan* depend on getting them to *yes*—you'll beg, borrow, and steal any concrete strategies that might work to persuade that powerful entity to open their specific gate to you.

Will you sometimes find yourself in situations that are more subtle and decidedly less "me versus them"? Absolutely and of course. But I find it refreshing and helpful at the outset to set aside academese and focus on stripped-down persuasion in its most basic form, simply getting that important person from no to yes.

The problem? Getting someone, anyone, from no to yes is, well, *hard*. Maybe you're thinking, "Oh, please, it can't be *that* hard. I've written five-page papers in two hours with my eyes closed countless times and still gotten As. I'll be just fine out there." But alas, your past successes at reproducing a teacher's Secret Writing Formula or BSing your way to an A in eleventh grade won't actually help as much as you might think. Believe it or not, real-life human beings can actually see right through that stuff pretty quickly. (And newsflash: your writing teachers saw through it too. They just kept it to themselves in the name of higher-order concerns.)

In fact, I bet you'll find that getting an acceptable grade on an essay is far easier than changing another person's mind in the real world. Why? Human beings don't like changing their minds. We like to think we know what we want and don't want, we believe what we believe, we are quite sure we know what's best for our company, our medical school, our city, our lives, and we don't much listen to folks who want to convince us of something to the contrary.

If you're still viewing this class as just one more course disconnected from the important work you'll be

doing once you land that sweet j-o-b, let me be more direct: there is no job, and no life situation, that won't involve persuading folks in all sorts of ways all the time. This course is going to teach you how to perceive and address the needs of those people so that you can have a shot to persuade them successfully.

Catch 'Em in the Act

To persuade is, technically, to move your audience to action. And to do it well, it pays to notice how you yourself are moved to actions by external forces. Because despite how set we humans are in our ways, we're nonetheless constantly succumbing to the quietly effective arguments that come at us all day every day and implicitly move us to action, most of the time without our awareness.

So in this course and with this text, we'll pay attention. How has this social media platform gotten me back on the app fifteen minutes after I closed it, vowing I wouldn't open it again until morning? Why am I drinking this neon-blue beverage no human should rightly consider drinkable or watching thirty-one women fight for one man to marry in a period of weeks on my TV? Why am I voting for this person instead of that one or not voting at all? Why do I believe this should happen with guns and that should happen with vaccines? Did I just decide about these things of my own free will? (No.) Or did something quietly or not so quietly persuade me to do or think them? (Yes.)

If you enjoy being manipulated into believing and doing things you might not otherwise believe or do, things that are very often not in your best interest, then OK, great—you do you. Someone has to fall for Ponzi schemes and keep the cable news networks on air. But if you want to start spotting the subtle and insidious persuasion tactics bombarding you constantly and shaping your actions and reactions before you catch them in the act (if you ever do), then pay attention, because once again, you've come to the right place.

Learning how to persuade entails understanding how you are persuad**ed**. That means understanding how these implicit forces work, how they necessarily play on your deeply held cultural values, often by merely reinforcing the unexamined assumptions you already hold. We *must* understand how those latent beliefs work, in ourselves and in the audiences we're trying to convince, if we want to learn the art of persuasion.

Which is a fancy way of saying that in this writing class, we're not just trying to recognize those savvy persuasion tactics; we're looking to *steal* them. Well, at least the ethical and sound tactics. Our goal will always be to identify, isolate, and snatch the tools being used to persuade us and turn them back around to persuade *them*.

So the questions you should be asking yourself now, while there's still time to practice, are these: When I am out there in the world trying to get a real person to shift their thinking subtly or simply to say yes instead of no, what works? What doesn't? What is vital? What is a deal breaker? What will kill my request before it's even made? And what brings it home?

I'm so glad you asked, because that's precisely where our writing class comes in: a nice little class focused solely on teaching you to do that very thing and nothing else.

No eight-page analysis of chapter 14 of *The Catcher in the Rye*, no two-thousand-word explication of a single sonnet, just, can you move that gatekeeper to the action you want to move them toward or not? Can you build an ethical, well-supported argument that evokes the necessary emotion at just the right time with just the right tone and style and support and logic to make the thing happen, or will you stay in that dead-end job until you die?

Writing Is Hard

I hope I've at least opened the possibility that

- You are in fact going to have to write things in your postcollege future,
- The things you'll very often have to write will be attempts to persuade people to change their thinking and do a thing for you, and
- Persuasion is difficult, and we need all the practice we can get before we fly from our undergraduate nest.

You know what else is very difficult? Writing. Even harder? Writing well. And definitely writing well in support of getting that thing you want and need.

For proof that writing is hard, consider that there are few activities we procrastinate more than writing.

Most people will use a toothbrush to clean the bathroom they share with six roommates sooner than tackle a high-stakes writing project; they will get two root canals and do their back taxes before they'll sit down to write a persuasive argument.

And that's for good reason. Our brains rebel from the blank page; the higher the stakes, the more our brains rebel. After all, the writing task demands all parts of the brain to kick into overdrive at once. You need logic; you need to consider the audience and the situation; you need to organize your thinking and translate that thinking to black symbols on a white page; you need to attend to the order and sequence of those black symbols in every way, from grammar to the active voice to transitions to openers and closers; you need research and citations and formatting and more. And at the exact same time, you need to activate the creative part of your brain; to write anything, no matter how boring, is truly an act of creation, because the thing (an essay, a cover letter, a please-take-me-back-I'm-so-sorry email) literally doesn't exist until you create it. It's just you and that blank page and your cursor taunting you with every blink. And because none of us are born writers, you have to work at it. You have to *practice*.

And here again, like magic, you find yourself in a class equally devoted to that challenging enterprise. So while our thematic focus in this writing class is persuasion and argumentation, we're also, of course, focused on your writing itself—voice, tone, style, concision, precision, all of it.

What follows in this text on your screen is about half-and-half: half devoted to analyzing our own and others' persuasion techniques and half to writing strategies—and all about their constant and necessary overlap. We are going to infuse you with tools to take on that blank page with laser-focused, tried-and-true strategies and, crucially, with an added dose of confidence: "I know I have the necessary tools in my bag to move through this prewriting anxiety phase and produce something that will be, after revision, not just well written but also highly persuasive."

We've curated this text for this class at Oregon State specifically. And not for nothing, your instructor has devoted their professional life to helping people write well. If you want to get your money's worth this term or if you just want to stick it to the powers that be as you jump through this particular hoop, why not take full advantage of these two resources at your disposal while you still can?

The Real Rip-Off

So to return to the top and your objections to having to take this writing class, consider that the real rip-off is not that you are forced to take this one ten-week course but rather that this is the *only* course you get to develop these crucial skills you'll need for the rest of your life—at least if you want to get what you want and have a real shot at being happy.

So I invite you to tune in to this text with care and diligence while you can. Because while after this term you will never again have to write an argument of definition (or write about weird things like discourse communities or develop revisionist profiles or write a discussion board about catching rhetorical moves in the wild), you will without question encounter in your future personal and professional life multiple high-stakes writing tasks in which a very big chunk of your potential happiness or misery will depend keenly on your ability to move a crucial audience to action. And in those moments, you'll have to transfer everything you learn in this class to a task that is well outside your comfort zone. When that moment comes (repeatedly and sooner than you think), knowing how to read the rhetorical situation, determining exactly when to inject your plea with a dose of pathos and when to lean hard on logos, and figuring out just exactly how to address that daunting counterargument you can't necessarily defeat—either these skills will be there, in your pocket, ready to roll, or they won't.

And whether you have them at the ready will absolutely mean the difference between a no and the yes you *need*.

So read up. Listen well. Heed all the wisdom that comes out of your instructor's mouth, and maybe even a classmate or two. Practice. Ask questions. Stretch your brain and consider new approaches to drafting and researching. Revisit your good and bad writing habits, become mindful of the ways you procrastinate, make major and minor adjustments to your researching and argument-growing—in short, roll up your sleeves one more time, and soak up every drop of advice you can get.

Your future depends on it.

2

THERE IS MORE THAN ONE CORRECT WAY OF WRITING AND SPEAKING

Anjali Pattanayak

Adapted by Liz Delf, Rob Drummond, and Kristy Kelly

Rewrite edit text on a typewriter by Suzy Hazelwood / Pexels

People consistently lament that kids today can't speak properly or that people coming to this country need to learn to write correctly. These lamentations are based on the notion that there is a single correct way of speaking and writing. Currently, the general sentiment is that people should just learn to speak and write proper English. This understanding of writing is rooted in *current traditional rhetoric*, which focuses on a prescriptive and formulaic way of teaching writing that assumes there is only one way to write (or speak) something for it to be correct. However, over the past several decades, scholars in writing studies have examined the ways in which writing has a close dialectical relationship with identity, style, genre, and culture. In other words, the rules for writing shift with the people and communities involved as well as the purpose and type of writing.

Most people implicitly understand that the way they communicate changes with different groups of people, from bosses to work colleagues to peers to relatives. They understand that conversations that may be appropriate over a private dinner may not be appropriate at the workplace. These conversational shifts might be subtle, but they are distinct. While most people accept and understand these nuances exist and will adapt to these unspoken rules—and while we have all committed a social faux pas when we didn't understand these unspoken rules—we do not often afford this same benefit of the doubt to people who are new to our communities or who are learning our unspoken rules.

While the idea of arguing whether there is one correct way of communicating or whether writing is culturally situated might seem to be a pedantic exercise, the reality is that espousing the ideology that there is one correct way to speak and write disenfranchises many populations who are already denigrated by society. The writing most valued in this binary is a type of writing that is situated in middle-class white culture.

In adhering to so-called correct language, we are devaluing the nonstandard dialects, cultures, and therefore identities of people and their communicative situations that do not fit a highly limited mold.

The way in which correctness in language devalues people is already troubling, but it becomes exacerbated by the current trends in education. Given this shift and the way that Standard Written English is deeply rooted in white upper/middle-class culture, we see more and more students from diverse backgrounds gaining access to college who are facing barriers due to their linguistic backgrounds.

This means that while minority students and working-class students are ostensibly being given greater access to education, careers, and other facets of society they had been previously barred from, they are still facing serious barriers that their upper-class white counterparts do not, particularly in terms of culture, language, and literacy. J. Elspeth Stuckey argues that literacy, rather than enfranchising students, is a means of oppression and that it does little to help the economic futures of minority students because of how literacy teaches a particular set of values—ways of communicating and identity. In the context of educational settings, the cultures and identities of academia are valued more than those of the students, which sends the message that how they, their families, and members of their community speak and act are wrong by comparison. In essence, it sends the message starting at a very young age that who they are and where they come from is somehow lesser.

In this sense, education, while well intentioned, serves to further the marginalization of certain identities and cultures that do not fit. This is particularly evident in Latino, African American, and English as second language communities. In the book *Paying for the Party*, Elizabeth Armstrong and Laura Hamilton note that colleges like the school they studied for five years, which they call Midwestern University, do not help facilitate social mobility. Frequently, the students who entered college best prepared were those who were already middle or upper class, meaning the opportunities the working- and lower-class students received were more limited (Armstrong and Hamilton 1–26). When you look at this alongside what Gloria Ladson-Billings calls the *educational debt*, or the compounded impact of educational deficits that grow across generations of poor minority students, literacy efforts as they are currently framed paint a bleak picture for poor minority students (3–12).

The issue is not just one of unequal access to opportunities. Jacqueline Jones Royster and Carmen Kynard illustrate how attitudes toward students as writers are interwoven with attitudes toward them as people. Language cannot be disassociated from people, which has important consequences for those who grow up speaking different dialects. By continuing to propagate the notion of correct and incorrect ways of speaking, we effectively devalue the intelligence and character of students, employees, and colleagues who, for whatever reasons, don't speak or write what in historical terms has been called the King's English (among other names). We use the perception of improper communication as evidence of others' lesser character or ability, despite recognizing that this country was united (if only in name) after declaring independence from that king (Kynard; Royster).

This perception becomes all the more problematic because it is about not just devaluing individuals but the widespread practice of devaluing the literate practices of those who are already marginalized. David Gold highlights how the literacy of African Americans, women, and working-class and rural people has been marginalized in our understanding of writing. Gold writes about how the literacy practices of African Americans in universities laid the groundwork for the civil rights movement. Indeed, the schools he studied were decades ahead of the larger national conversation on how literacy, identity, and power were interrelated. In her work examining how literacy and identity formation were key for African American women and for social change, Jacqueline Jones Royster discusses the importance of understanding these cultural, identity, and social movements, echoing the impact marginalized scholars had in academia. Both demonstrate the detrimental impact of sidelining groups of people and their literate practices by devaluing their languages and their experiences, not just for those who are marginalized but for our larger understanding of how we as a society write.

The notion of one correct way of writing is also troubling because it operates under the assumption that linguistic differences are the result of error. The reality is that for many speakers, what we might perceive as a mistake is actually a system of difference. One notable example of a different dialect of English is Ebonics, which has different patterns of speech rooted in the ancestral heritage of its speakers. Similarly, immigrant groups will frequently speak and write English in a way that mirrors the linguistic heritage of their mother tongue.

The way that we conceptualize language is not just detrimental to minorities; it also devalues the identities that working- and lower-class people bring to communicative situations, including the classroom. Lynn Z. Bloom writes that "Freshman Composition is an unabashedly middle-class enterprise." She argues that one

of the reasons composition is required for all students is because it promulgates middle-class values and ways of thinking. These values in the writing classroom are embodied in everything from the notion of property, which undergirds the way that plagiarism and intellectual property are treated, to the formality of language and rhetorical choices that are encouraged in papers (654–675).

Indeed, the way many instructors teach writing, plagiarism, citation, and word choice in papers is not in and of itself good but rather is the socially accepted way of interacting with text as defined by the middle class. Mike Rose and Irvin Peckham often write about the tension of middle-class values on working-class students and the cognitive dissonance and struggles with identity that come with imposing such values in writing under the guise of correctness. The idea that there is one correct way of writing devalues the writing, thoughts, intelligence, and identities of people from lower-class backgrounds.

Pragmatically, many argue that standard English should be dominant in the binary between academic English and all other dialects in order for speakers and writers to communicate with credibility in their communities. This argument has been used to justify the continued attention to correctness at the expense of authors' voices, but we can teach people to adapt while also valuing their identities. We can talk about writing as something that they can employ to their benefit rather than a hegemonic standard that supersedes their backgrounds, identities, and experiences.

In order to value the diversity of communication and identities that exist in the US, we need to start teaching and envisioning writing as a cultural and social activity. We need a more nuanced view of writing in society that encourages everyone to adapt to their audiences and contexts rather than placing an undue burden on those who do not fit the mold of standard English.

One strategy for teaching academic English without devaluing a writer's identity is code-switching, a concept already taught in schools with significant minority populations as a way of empowering young people. While instruction in code-switching is valuable because it teaches students that they can adopt different linguistic choices to appeal to different audiences, it is deeply problematic that the impetus is still placed on minority students with nonstandard dialects to adapt. While code-switching is meant to empower people, it is still rooted in the mentality that there is one correct way of writing, because even as code-switching teaches an incredibly nuanced way of thinking about writing, it is still being taught in the context of preparing writers to deal with a society that will use errors in speaking as evidence that they are lesser. As a result, it is a less-than-ideal solution because it plays into—rather than undermines—the racism of academic English.

By perpetuating the myth of one correct way of writing, we are effectively marginalizing substantial swaths of the population linguistically and culturally. The first step in combating this is as easy as recognizing how correctness reinforces inequality and affects our own perceptions of people and questioning our assumptions about communication, and a second step is valuing code-switching in a wide swath of communicative situations.

The original chapter, *There Is One Correct Way of Writing and Speaking* by Anjali Pattanayak, is from Bad Ideas about Writing

Additional Resources

1. While the notion of what constitutes academic English has remained relatively static in popular culture, the reality of writing in the university has broadened to include many other types of writing. Patricia Bizzell, Helen Fox, and Christopher Shroeder compile arguments for addressing these other types of communication in *Alt Dis: Alternative Discourses and the Academy*.
2. In *College Writing and Beyond*, Anne Beaufort provides a framework in which to understand how writing is dynamic. In her article "Freshman Composition as a Middle-Class Enterprise," Lynn Z. Bloom articulates the ways in which the cultural values of the middle class are being taught in the writing classroom as objectively good or true and the impact of this mentality. Additionally, Asao Inoue compiles a collection of articles in *Race and Writing Assessment* that provides frameworks for considering race in assessment practices.
3. In 1974, the Conference for College Composition and Communication passed the resolution *Students' Right to Their Own Language*. In the time since it passed, there has been a great deal of discussion around the wisdom of that resolution. Editors Austin Jackson, David E. Kirkland, and Staci Perryman-Clark compile short articles for and against this resolution.
4. Bruce Horner, Min-Zhan Lu, Jacqueline Jones Royster, and John Trimbur write about how the increasing number of

English speakers in the world is increasing linguistic diversity in "Opinion: Language Difference in Writing: Toward a Translingual Approach." Additionally, Irvin Peckham writes extensively with a focus on working-class students in the classroom and the impact of college and academic writing as a middle-class enterprise in "The Stories We Tell." For more on the history and cultural development of African American Vernacular English, consider *Beyond Ebonics: Linguistic Pride and Racial Prejudice* by John Baugh.

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3

WHAT DOES THE INSTRUCTOR WANT?

Understanding the Assignment

Amy Guptill

Adapted by Liz Delf, Rob Drummond, and Kristy Kelly

Student browsing smartphone at table with books by Andrea Piacquadio / Pexels

Writing for Whom? Writing for What?

The first principle of good communication is knowing your audience. This is where writing papers for class gets kind of weird. As Peter Elbow explains,

> When you write for a teacher you are usually swimming against the stream of natural communication. The natural direction of communication is to explain what you understand to someone who doesn't understand it. But in writing an essay for a teacher your task is usually to explain what you are still engaged in trying to understand to someone who understands it better. (255)

Often when you write for an audience of one, you write a letter or email. But college papers aren't written like letters; they're written like articles for a hypothetical group of readers that you don't actually know much about. There's a fundamental mismatch between the real-life audience and the form your writing takes. It's kind of bizarre, really.

It helps to remember the key tenet of the university model: you're a junior scholar joining the academic community. Academic papers, in which scholars report the results of their research and thinking to one another, are the lifeblood of the scholarly world, carrying useful ideas and information to all parts of the academic corpus. Unless there is a particular audience specified in the assignment, you would do well to imagine yourself writing for a group of peers who have some introductory knowledge of the field but are unfamiliar with the specific topic you're discussing. Imagine them being interested in your topic but also busy; try to write something that is well worth your readers' time. Keeping an audience like this in mind will

help you distinguish common knowledge in the field from that which must be defined and explained in your paper. Understanding your audience like this also resolves the audience mismatch that Elbow describes. As he notes, "You don't write *to* teachers, you write *for* them" (220).

Another basic tenet of good communication is clarifying the purpose of the communication and letting that purpose shape your decisions. 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, reaction paper, reflective paper, lab report, discussion question, blog post, essay exam, project proposal, or what have you—is ultimately about your learning. To succeed with writing assignments (and benefit from them), you first have to understand their learning-related purposes. As you write for the hypothetical audience of peer junior scholars, you're demonstrating to your professor how far you've gotten in analyzing your topic.

> 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 job to make us think and ponder about many things. Take your time and enjoy the paper. Make sure you answer the question being asked rather than rant on about something that is irrelevant to the prompt. – Timothée Pizarro, writing student

Instructors don't assign writing lightly. Grading student writing is generally the hardest, most intensive work instructors do. You would do well to approach every assignment by putting yourself in the shoes of your instructor and asking yourself, "Why did they give me this assignment? How does it fit into the learning goals of the course? Why is this question/topic/problem so important to my instructor that they are willing to spend evenings and weekends reading and commenting on several dozen papers on it?"

Most instructors do a lot to make their pedagogical goals and expectations transparent to students: they explain the course learning goals associated with assignments, provide grading rubrics in advance, and describe several strategies for succeeding. Other instructors…not so much. Some students perceive more open-ended assignments as evidence of a lazy, uncaring, or even incompetent instructor. Not so fast! Instructors certainly vary in the quantity and specificity of the guidelines and suggestions they distribute with each writing assignment.

It is understandably frustrating when you feel you don't know how to direct your efforts to succeed with an assignment. However, except for rare egregious situations, you would do well to assume the best of your instructor and to appreciate the diversity of learning opportunities you have access to in college. Like one first-year student told Keith Hjortshoj, "I think that every course, every assignment, is a different little puzzle I have to solve. What do I need to do here? When do I need to do it, and how long will it take? What does this teacher expect of me?" (4). The transparency that you get from some professors—along with guides like this one—will be a big help to you in situations where you have to be scrappier and more proactive, piecing together the clues you get from your professors, the readings, and other course documents.

The Prompt: What Does "Analyze" Mean Anyway?

Often, the handout or other written text explaining the assignment—what instructors call the assignment prompt—will explain the purpose of the assignment, the required parameters (length, number and type of sources, referencing style, etc.), and the criteria for evaluation. Sometimes, though—especially when you are new to a field—you will encounter the baffling situation in which you comprehend every single sentence in the prompt but still have absolutely no idea how to approach the assignment. No one is doing anything wrong in a situation like that. It just means that further discussion of the assignment is in order. Here are some tips:

Focus on the verbs

Look for verbs like "compare," "explain," "justify," "reflect," or the all-purpose "analyze." You're not just producing a paper as an artifact; you're conveying, in written communication, some intellectual work you have done. So the question is, What kind of thinking are you supposed to do to deepen your learning?

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, arguing 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 make the first draft, then make the final draft, and finally, perhaps, create a 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. (Most instructors are perpetually frustrated with the "one-and-done" attitude that most students bring to their work, and some sequences are specifically designed to force you to really rethink your conclusions.)

If the assignment isn't part of a sequence, think about where it falls in the semester and how it relates to readings and other assignments. Are there headings on the syllabus that indicate larger units of material? For example, if you see that a paper comes at the end of a three-week unit on the role of the internet in organizational behavior, then your professor likely wants you to synthesize that material in your own way. You should also check your notes and online course resources for any other guidelines about the workflow. Maybe you got a rubric a couple of weeks ago and forgot about it. Maybe your instructor posted a link about "how to make an annotated bibliography" but then forgot to mention it in class.

Try a freewrite

When I hand out an assignment, I often ask students to do a five-minute or ten-minute freewrite. A freewrite is when you just write, without stopping, for a set period of time. That doesn't sound very "free"; it actually sounds kind of coerced. The "free" part is what you write—it can be whatever comes to mind. Professional writers use freewriting to get started on a challenging (or distasteful) writing task or to overcome writer's block or a powerful urge to procrastinate. The idea is that if you just make yourself write, you can't help but produce some kind of useful nugget. Thus, even if the first eight sentences of your freewrite are all variations on "I don't understand this" or "I'd really rather be doing something else," eventually you'll write something like "I guess the main point of this is…" and—booyah!—you're off and running. As an instructor, I've found that asking students to do a brief freewrite right after I hand out an assignment generates useful clarification questions. If your instructor doesn't make time for that in class, a quick freewrite on your own will quickly reveal whether you need clarification about the assignment and, often, what questions to ask.

Ask for clarification the right 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, though, 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. In general, avoid starting a question with "Do we have to…" because I can guarantee that your instructor is thinking, "You don't have to do anything. You're an adult. You chose college. You chose this class. You're free to exercise your right to fail." Similarly, avoid asking the professor about what he or she "wants." You're not performing some service for the instructor when you write a paper. What they "want" is for you to really think about the material.

Table 2.1 Suggested alternatives to frequently asked (and potentially annoying) questions

Potentially annoying 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 art historians analyze a painting. Could you say more about what questions I should have in mind to do this kind of analysis?"
"**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 (preprepared) 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?"

Rubrics as Road Maps

If an instructor provides a grading rubric with an assignment prompt, you can be sure that he or she will use it to grade your paper. He or she may not go over it in class, but it's the clearest possible statement of what the professor is looking for in the paper. If it's wordy, it may seem like those online "terms and conditions" that we routinely accept without reading. But you really should read it over carefully before you begin and again as your work progresses. A lot of rubrics do have some useful specifics. Mine, for example, often contain phrases like "makes at least six error-free connections to concepts or ideas from the course" or "gives thorough consideration to at least one plausible counterargument." Even less specific criteria (such as "incorporates course concepts" and "considers counterarguments") will tell you how you should be spending your writing time.

Even the best rubrics aren't completely transparent. They simply can't be. Take, for example, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) rubric. It has been drafted and repeatedly revised by a multidisciplinary expert panel and tested multiple times on sample student work to ensure reliability. But it still seems kind of vague. What is the real difference between "demonstrating a thorough understanding of context, audience, and purpose" and "demonstrating adequate consideration" of the same? It depends on the specific context. So how can you know whether you've done that? A big part of what you're learning, through feedback from your professors, is to judge the quality of your writing for yourself. Your future bosses are counting on that. At this point, it is better to think of rubrics as road maps displaying your destination rather than GPS systems directing every move you make.

Behind any rubric is the essential goal of higher education: helping you take charge of your own learning, which means writing like an independently motivated scholar. Are you tasked with proposing a research paper topic? Don't just tell the professor what you want to do; convince him or her of the salience of your topic as if you were a scholar seeking grant money. Is it a reflection paper? Then outline both the insights you've gained and the intriguing questions that remain, as a scholar would. Are you writing a thesis-driven analytical paper? Then apply the concepts you've learned to a new problem or situation. Write as if your scholarly peers around the country are eagerly awaiting your unique insights. Descriptors like "thoroughness" or "mastery" or "detailed attention" convey the vision of student writers making the time and rigorous mental effort to offer something new to the ongoing, multistranded academic conversation. What your professor wants, in short, is critical thinking.

What's Critical about Critical Thinking?

Critical thinking is one of those terms that has been used so often and in so many different ways that it often seems meaningless. It also makes one wonder, is there such a thing as uncritical thinking? If you aren't thinking critically, then are you even thinking?

Despite the prevalent ambiguities, critical thinking actually does mean something. The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) usefully defines it as "a habit of mind characterized by the comprehensive exploration of issues, ideas, artifacts, and events before accepting or formulating an opinion or conclusion" ("Value Rubrics").

That definition aligns with the best description of critical thinking I ever heard; it came from my junior high art teacher, Joe Bolger. He once asked us, "What color is the ceiling?" In that withering tween tone, we reluctantly replied, "White." He then asked, "What color is it really?" We deigned to aim our preadolescent eyes upward and eventually began to offer more accurate answers: "Ivory?" "Yellowish tan." "It's gray in that corner." After finally getting a few thoughtful responses, Mr. Bolger said something like, "Making good art is about drawing what you see, not what you think you're supposed to see." The AAC&U definition above essentially amounts to the same thing: 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, you need to establish the question or problem, evaluate your sources, interrogate the assumptions informing the ideas you encounter, and develop a nuanced position that accounts for multiple perspectives ("Value Rubrics").

While you are probably used to providing some evidence for your claims, you can see that college-level expectations go quite a bit further. When professors assign an analytical paper, they don't just want you to

formulate a plausible-sounding argument. They want you to dig into the evidence, think hard about unspoken assumptions and the influence of context, and then explain what you really think and why.

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 and more practice in closely examining claims, their underlying logic, and alternative perspectives on the issue, it'll begin to feel 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 through both the feedback they get from others and their own reflections. Artists of all kinds find satisfaction in continually seeking greater challenges. Continual reflection and improvement are 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 explains that our brains aren't designed to think; rather, they're designed to save us from having to think (44). Our brains are great at developing routines and repertoires that enable us to accomplish fairly complex tasks like driving cars, choosing groceries, and having conversations 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. Kahneman and his colleagues often used problems like this one in experiments to gauge how people used fast and slow thinking in different contexts (44):

> A bat and ball cost $1.10.
> The bat costs one dollar more than the ball.
> How much does the ball cost?

Most people automatically say the ball costs $0.10. However, if the bat costs $1 more, then the bat would cost $1.10, leading to the incorrect total of $1.20. The ball costs $0.05. Kahneman notes, "Many thousands of university students have answered the bat-and-ball puzzle, and the results are shocking. More than 50% of students at Harvard, MIT, and Princeton gave the intuitive—incorrect—answer." These and other results confirm that "many people are overconfident, prone to place too much faith in their intuitions" (45). Thinking critically—thoroughly questioning your immediate intuitive responses—is difficult work, but every organization and business in the world needs people who can do that effectively. Some students assume that an unpleasant critical-thinking experience means either that they're doing something wrong or that it's an inherently uninteresting (and oppressive) activity. While we all relish those times when we're pleasantly absorbed in a complex activity, 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, incompetent. The kind of critical thinking your professors are looking for—that is, pursuing a comprehensive, multifaceted exploration in order to arrive at a debatable, nuanced argument—is inevitably a struggle, and it may be an emotional one. Your best bet is to find ways to make those processes as efficient, pleasant, and effective as you can.

> The thing no one tells you when you get to college is that critical thinking papers are professors' favorites. College is all about learning how to think individual thoughts, so you'll have to do quite a few of them. Have no fear though; they do get easier with time. The first step? Think about what you want to focus on in the paper (a.k.a. your thesis) and go with it. – Kaethe Leonard, writing student

The demands students face are not at all unique to their academic pursuits. Professional working roles demand critical thinking, and it's pretty 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 instructors want, overall, is for you to join them in asking and pursuing important questions.

The original chapter, What Does the Professor Want? Understanding the Assignment by Amy Guptill, is from Writing in College: From Competence to Excellence

Additional Resources

1. The Online Writing Laboratory (OWL) at Purdue University is a wonderful set of resources for every aspect of college writing. Especially germane to this chapter is this summary of the most common types of writing assignments.
2. The Writing Center at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill has a helpful page with tips for understanding assignments.

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