

Encouraging Critical Thinking in Student Writing

Three Cognitively Immature Essay Structures (from Bean ch. 2):

1. *“And Then” Writing, or Chronological Structure.* Writers who have been asked to analyze a piece of literature will sometimes hand in a summary of the piece with little or no analysis. You also might see literature reviews that summarize articles without offering arguments about what is known or unknown.

A promising strategy: The key to moving past “And Then” writing is to view this chronological structure as a way of collecting ideas from memory before converting them, through revision, into focused, thesis-driven material. Even experienced writers produce this kind of writing early in the process.

2. *“All About” Writing, or Encyclopedic Order.* This structure offers a bit of everything on a topic. Papers written in this way might be logically broken into subheadings, but they still lack a driving thesis. Writing in encyclopedic order can certainly increase the writer’s knowledge of a subject, but it does little to encourage their growth as thinkers.

A promising strategy: We can facilitate writers’ critical thinking by actively engaging students in academic inquiry, emphasizing exploration and question asking as the seeds of research projects.

3. *Data Dump, or Random Organization.* Sometimes students are overwhelmed with the amount of information they find on their subject and, instead of assimilating it, resort to throwing it all into their paper. They may even copy and paste passages from the Internet directly into their paragraphs, sometimes rearranging the words, sometimes not. This kind of writing (or *patchwriting*, as it’s called) usually exhibits no real structure or critical thought on the student’s part.

A promising strategy: Present academic knowledge as dialogic rather than informational, and teach students the “rhetorical moves” used in academic prose, specifically in your discipline (see below).

Strategies for Promoting Critical Thinking (from Bean ch. 2)

- *Create cognitive dissonance* to encourage students to question assumptions and reflect on alternatives. One way to do this is play the “believing and doubting” game (see Bean ch. 9).
- *Present knowledge as dialogic rather than informational.* Much of what students read in textbooks and think of as “current knowledge” started out as hypotheses and arguments that were tested and contested. New knowledge develops every day in this way as writers contribute to the academic “conversation.”
- *Teach the “moves” and genres that are important in your discipline.* “They say/I say” encourages students to research differing perspectives on a topic and then offer their own contribution to advance the conversation. “Yes, no, OK but” offers students three ways of responding to what they read: agreeing, disagreeing, and complicating the idea. “Plant a naysayer in your text” challenges students to entertain and respond to the perspectives of skeptics. “So what?” asks students to

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defend the relevance of an argument. (For more on rhetorical moves, see Bean ch. 13 or *They Say / I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing* by Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein.)

- *Create opportunities for active problem solving that involve dialogue and writing.*

“What our students need to understand is that for expert writers the actual act of writing causes further discovery, development, and modification of ideas. If one examines the evolving drafts of an expert writer, one sees the messy, recursive process of thinking itself as new ideas emerge during the drafting process” (p. 33).

Students need to see their own writing from a reader’s perspective, need to accommodate multiple perspectives while contributing their own ideas, and need to think of the document from global and local perspectives.

References

- Bean, J.C. (2011). *Engaging ideas: A professor’s guide to integrating writing, critical thinking, and active learning in the classroom* (2nd ed). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Graff, G., Birkenstein, C. (2010). *They say / I say: The moves that matter in academic writing* (2nd ed). New York: Norton.