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Sound critical thinking involves understanding points of view, evaluating positions, and then establishing a critical position. Students need multiple opportunities to practice critical thinking skills and receive feedback to guide improvement. Create a set of written journal assignments that develop the following three goals for student learning related to critical thinking.

### **Goal 1: Paraphrase what was said**

Encourage students to listen to ideas, examine views carefully, gather information, and understand the various points of view on their own terms without immediately judging the merits of the positions. This step involves a willingness to be open-minded and to understand what is being said, how it is being said, and why it is asserted. Teach students how to identify key elements of a logical statement, the principles and assumptions informing the positions, and the evidence used to support the points of view stated in a written work.

### **Goal 2: Evaluate what was said**

The next step requires that students critically evaluate the legitimacy of the arguments advanced in a written work. Students should examine the following elements of the argument:

**Logical consistency.** Does the author's position make logical sense? Did the author commit logical or emotional fallacies? Is the author's position self-defeating? Are principles and assump-

tions adequate to sustain the point of view?

**Empirical adequacy.** Does the author provide sufficient evidence to support the claims? Does the author present evidence accurately and use evidence appropriately? Did the author avoid or ignore known evidence that contradicts the claims?

**Existential relevance.** Does the author's position make sense to real-world experience? Can the author's proposals be reasonably implemented in a real world setting?

Students who complete all three parts of this analysis should have developed enough material to present a sound evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the author's position.

### **Goal 3: Establish a position on the topic**

After completing the first two steps, students should be sufficiently prepared to establish, explain, and defend their own position. Students frequently offer statements such as "Well, it is just my opinion," "These are my beliefs," or "How can anyone question how I feel?" If students assume that all opinions and positions have equal value (Perry, 1970/1999), they might also believe they should not be required to defend or explain their position or, worse, argue that no one has the right to challenge their positions and views. However, sound critical thinking requires that students move beyond personal opinions and support their arguments with clear logic, accurate descriptions of reliable evidence and relevant experience.

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This tip is based on a contribution to the Western Kentucky University Writing Consortium written by David Hogsette, Associate Professor, English, New York Institute of Technology ([iris.nyit.edu/~dhogsett/](http://iris.nyit.edu/~dhogsett/)) and Francine Glazer, Assistant Provost & Director, Center for Teaching & Learning, New York Institute of Technology ([www.nyit.edu/ctl](http://www.nyit.edu/ctl)).

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## Create opportunities for students to practice critical thinking skills with journal writing assignments

It can be challenging for students to learn these essential steps to effective critical thinking. Students need to practice these skills in multiple contexts so that they can understand how to think critically in academic, professional, and personal contexts.

A critical thinking journal assignment can be adapted to a first-year writing class, applied in core courses/seminars, and assigned in major program courses.

### Example of a critical thinking journal assignment

The following example of a critical thinking journal assignment is based on a core literature seminar.

**Reading assignment.** The instructor assigns a scholarly article that relates to the literature read in the course (in this example, a novel).

**Journal assignment.** Students write a 500-600 word journal entry in which they

- State the main focus or purpose of the article
- Summarize one key point or argument the student finds interesting

- Explain why the student finds it interesting
- Discuss one example from the literature read (in this example, the novel assigned) that illustrates this idea
- Explain the extent to which the student agrees or disagrees with the author's main point.

This journal assignment encourages students to practice three key phases of critical thinking:

- Understanding (summarize a key point)
- Evaluating arguments (discuss to what extent the student agrees and disagrees and why)
- Establishing a position (in this example, explain how the assigned article helped the student understand the novel more clearly).

Ideally, a course will include 4-5 such assignments that allow students to engage in critical thinking and practice their writing skills. The example above illustrates the general pattern for a critical thinking journal assignment. Each journal assignment should be slightly different. Faculty should provide feedback on each journal entry before the next assignment is due to engage the students and enable them to improve their work.

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## References

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