Tips for Responding to Analytical Writing

1) **Prepare students to attend to and benefit from your responses**, and those of their peers by:

   - Immersing them—before you receive major papers from them—in a common vocabulary that all such responses will use—e.g. "Twelve Elements of the Scholarly Essay."
   
   - Stating clearly and explicitly in your assignments the writing tasks (not necessarily the questions) that you expect the students to perform (i.e. close analysis, contextual analysis, use of multiple sources).
   
   - Talking about what it means, intellectually and (for them) emotionally to take prudent risks in an essay, and to own the essay and these risks.
   
   - Formulating roomy assignments, in response to which you could imagine multiple excellent arguments or ways of explaining.
   
   - Having students turn in cover letters with both drafts and revisions, in which they state their thesis and/or agenda, articulate the greatest difficulties they are having on the project; say what elements they have used well; state the elements, or other features, with which they think they need most help (and why); and say two or three things they would work on most urgently in their revisions.

2) **Look for patterns.** To avoid excessive correcting (which can be both demoralizing for the student and send the wrong message about what it means to revise), focus on features that represent the essay’s larger strengths and weaknesses. Limit your criticisms in end-comments to no more than three or four substantial points.

3) **Be as precise as possible in marginal comments.** Where you are tempted to write vague comments like “vague” or “awkward,” which are unlikely to help in any practical way, say instead what your confusion is: “not sure whether you mean x or y here,” or “what do you mean by the term ‘human’ here? Can you say more specifically what you are getting at when you use it?” Or “When you use the passive voice here, you underemphasize who is perpetrating the action. Who is doing it, and what impact might that have on your argument?”

4) **Assume a respectful, even modest tone that also challenges, both in oral and written responses.** Consistent with this is the habit of asking questions rather than giving commands. Consistent with this is also the habit finding ways to restate, in your own terms, or with the use of quotation marks, the writer’s thesis and/or agenda, so that you communicate to the writer an openness and enthusiasm about the writer’s genuine intellectual endeavor.

5) **Treat drafts differently from revisions, in order to encourage revision, rather than mere editing.** (For a way to articulate the difference between editing and revision, click here). In drafts, note important patterns of stylistic and mechanical problems, as well as structural problems, particularly where they are symptomatic of problems with argument or agenda, but make argument—thesis, agenda, analysis, evidence, and key terms—priority, unless argument is in fine

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shape already, or unless style is so problematic that it cripples argument. Some people have students read drafts out loud and comment on them orally, then make written comments on revisions.

6) **Do not avoid responding to CONTENT**, or invoking your knowledge or expertise, either in marginal or in end comments. Certainly correct data or evidence you know to be false.

7) **On the other hand, where an essay is unpersuasive or untrue, don't just correct the argument or say what it should say, but examine the use of evidence, or ASK what the student would say to a specific counter-argument;** make sure you discuss the in terms of the elements of writing with which you and they are familiar, and leave open the possibility of multiple approaches. Use your knowledge to ask genuine QUESTIONS, not necessarily give answers.

8) **Remember that apparent problems with structure or transitions often suggest larger problems with thesis or agenda.** Students will often suggest that all that is needed is reorganization, or better “flow” between paragraphs, or “too many complicated ideas.” Often this impression masks an overall problem with thesis, agenda, or terminology, or evidence. Where you see incoherence (particularly in a draft), look in those places first.

9) **Remember that an effective response to a polished but superficial essay usually involves agenda.** What is this essay really accomplishing for your reader? Why should your reader read it? What is the plausible counter-argument to your argument? What are you doing that might be news to an educated reader?

10) **Where an essay is hard to read, either because too complex, too simple, or otherwise problematic in syntax, students usually benefit from reading out loud.** Another interesting trick: ask the student to avoid the verb “to be” in the next draft. This helps work “syntax muscles.”

11) **Plan workshops VERY carefully, for maximum effectiveness, and so that they are interesting for the students.** I find that the workshops that are best for everyone are those in which discussions of content and discussions of writing strategy are inseparable.

12) **Do everything you can to get students to take the draft stage very seriously, while preparing them in advance for the strong possibility of starting again, for revision, on a blank page.** This includes:

- recognizing how difficult it can to work hard on a draft, knowing that revisions may require starting again, and coming up with some ways to motivate oneself anyway, at the draft stage;
- counting drafts and draft conferences in class participation grade, or in some other way;
- having students sign up for specific times for draft conferences;
- encouraging students to take notes in draft conferences;
- focusing on the larger issues of thesis, agenda, analysis, and evidence, and key terms first and discussing mechanical and grammatical problems selectively;
- having students read out loud: good writing often speaks!

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Guide to Making and Using Writing Assignments

Creating assignments can be a way of structuring a First Year Seminar. Putting in the time to create assignments first can help “writing” and “content” work together so that “writing” does not appear to distract from “content” but, to the contrary, enhances the teaching of content, and vice-versa. Here is some advice for creating writing assignments that help students to learn “content” and think about and discuss it innovatively, precisely, and assertively. This is ONLY advice, and it may or may not be new to you. If you already know it, feel free to use it as a checklist. If you have anything to add, by all means add it, and educate the FYS director about it!

1. Aim for assignments that are roomy, that might prompt writing and thinking of which you yourself would be proud.

   • One way to begin: work backwards from a piece of writing, imagined, or real, that you might admire. Analyze it: figure out why you admire it. Then try to formulate the question that it is addressing, and, from there, a prompt that might inspire both the question and the essay (see, as an example, "The Cancer-Cluster Myth" by Atul Gawande from The New Yorker, February 8, 1999, and (hand-written on it) the rough question and essay prompt formulated from it; or see, as another example, by a first-year College student, Max J. Kornblith, Politically Incorrect--Would an Academic Bill of Rights 'Balance' Academia--or Tip the Scale?" Harvard Expose 2006-7). Doing this, by the way, can be an excellent exercise for students!

   • Imagine several good papers that the assignment might prompt. If you can only imagine one good argument or piece of writing that your prompt might elicit, the assignment may not be roomy enough. Think about adjusting accordingly.

   • Be sparing and judicious with questions in assignment prompts. Sometimes it makes sense, in early papers, to supply an essay question in your assignment prompt; sometimes it makes sense to make your prompt a description of a writing task, requiring students to come up with and justify questions of their own in short writing exercises and in class. This may be labor intensive, as you may find yourself helping each student formulate a question, but it may be rewarding in the long run. A paper addressing a question formulated by a student is likely to help the student take responsibility for her writing. In coming up with such a question, the student must consider what is at stake in her essay. Moreover, coming up with a question often makes for excellent combinations of writing strategy and discussion of content. A series of questions can be confusing in an essay prompt, unless you indicate how they are to be understood. Is it a checklist of things to answer in the paper, or a way of inspiring in-depth exploration of a topic?

2. Make sure that any assignment you are constructing is clear, achievable, and justifiable.

   • Try to name the task that the assignment is prompting in one sentence (though the assignment prompt as a whole may be much longer). For instance: “Write a paper, using multiple sources, that discusses the reasons for and the implications of a common public response to or myth about cancer—e.g. responses to tests, perceptions of clinical trials, research by patients, perceptions and realities of treatment, attempts at alternative therapies—and explores its implications.

   • Say—in the prompt, in class, or in both—how this assignment might help students to achieve any or all of the goals of the course as you understand them. If it’s a first assignment, how is it basic to the skills you want students to develop in the course? If it’s a second or third assignment, how does it build on or incorporate skills practiced previously, and what does it ask of students that may be new? Finally, how might the skills to be practiced in this assignment be transferable to other courses and other kinds of assignments, and how are they unique to the kind of work the students will be doing in this course? In doing this, you might use a rubric specifying common elements of the kind of writing you are asking your students to do. Compose that rubric yourself, or use one that works for you, tweaking, if necessary, so that you are completely comfortable with it. See, for instance, the Twelve Elements of the Scholarly Essay on this website.

   • Specify, as much as possible, what kind of evidence might or should be used in the paper. Laboratory findings? Field observations? Graphics? Statistics? Primary research? Archives of some kind? Text? Conversational language? Paintings? In some cases, you may wish to supply evidence, so that you can focus on how to use it; in others, you may wish to train students to find it themselves. You might want to discuss what kinds of evidence are to be trusted, what not.
• Anticipate and articulate possible pitfalls. What might seem to be easy in this assignment that will actually be difficult? What challenges should students look out for? What are potential errors or misconceptions to be avoided? Spelling these out can be helpful.

• Specify (where in doubt) the readership for whom you would like your students to write, and the conventions implicit in writing for such an audience. Probably the readership should not be the teacher alone. Often best for FYS writing would be a readership of intelligent non-specialists, since the students themselves have not necessarily decided on a major. Be frank about how these conventions may not be the same in more specialized kinds of writing.

3. Build the process of preparing papers and presentations into your course structure and your classes.

• Structure your course and syllabus so that you do between assignments not only teaches the material but prepares students for the assignments you are asking them to do. Wherever it’s practical, use readings and short assignments—response papers, emails, posts, paragraph-long descriptions and summaries—to accomplish this preparation. Plan these carefully, giving clear instructions and explaining to students how they can help in preparation for larger assignments.

• Make liberal use of the small assignments in class, especially when they introduce terminology that might come in handy for major assignments. This may help to ensure that the “content” of your course and skills in thinking, writing, and speaking are getting enough attention all the time.

• Space the small assignments on a calendar so that there is time to do them, and so that they can inform what you do in class. Start with a one-page “treatment” of the course as a whole, naming your major assignments and listing the exercises (if any) that will prepare students to do them (click here for examples). Let the process of preparation help determine the number of major assignments you do and the timing of such assignments.

• When crafting small, preparatory assignments, emphasize the formulation and refining of questions and/or hypotheses. Formulating a good question can provide the focus needed for an effective, well-defined paper while at the same time encouraging inductive thinking that can accounts for counter-arguments and complexities. Formulating those, as opposed to hypothesis or questions, too early in the process may result in formulaic writing—coherent but implausible or overly simplistic. Sometimes (in writing that involves argument) it’s good to encourage students to stay at the question or hypothesis stage for quite a while (frustrating though this may be) before committing to theses.

• As much as possible, plan preparatory lessons on writing (analyses of paragraph structure, discussions of effective topic sentences or transitions, articulation of effective theses or compelling agendas, etc.) so that they help students think about the content of the course too. Readings pertaining to content might serve to help students recognize an effective thesis, or effective structuring while giving them information they need about the topic at hand. Introduce the elements of writing you want students to learn as ways of thinking about the content of the course, not just as abstract rhetorical techniques.

• But don’t hesitate to take time away from content when you really need to. Especially be careful about “scooping” students by providing model papers that address the very same questions and evidence they are trying to address in their own writing. Sometimes you may indeed want to model essays or portions of essays that are off topic but similar in task to what you are writing.

• Make sure there are AT LEAST three important writing assignments, not just one or two. The only way to learn to write is to practice. A First Year Seminar needs to ensure that students are practicing all semester.

• Avoid overloading your syllabus. You have only twelve weeks, and working on writing requires preparation and time for reflection. You also may want time for workshops and revision Workshops can combine content and writing lessons beautifully (more about that, I hope, at the August retreat) so you don’t have to regard them as time off from content. But if you want to do them, you may have to economize in other places. Provide choices in readings, depending on what avenues students wish to take in their writing assignments. This allows students to report to each other on what they are doing, and provides more time than you would otherwise have for honing writing skills.

• If you have a choice between adding more readings or units than absolutely essential and having open space on your syllabus, favor the open space. Especially the first time you teach an FYS, you won’t always know how long it will take students to learn what they need to know to write, or how long it will take to discuss what they learn. Open days are therefore precious, and where you can find one, don’t waste it!
Scaffolding Assignments—Two FYSE Treatments

One approach—Five Papers

- **Paper 1: Content**—concentrate on one thing in depth a (book, piece of art, a plant, an organ of the body, a moment in time, etc.). What does it mean to write as a literary scholar, a botanist, a political scientist? What are the key words or approaches or genres the writer needs to know? **Writing**—shape unified paragraphs, form coherent arguments with evidence, integrate analysis.

- **Paper 2: Content**—expand to include, at least, one more thing, similar or different. For me, that is a novel and a film. Writers learn to explore and understand the characteristics of two different genres. **Writing**—Compare and contrast. It’s not enough to say how things are similar and/or different. The trick here is in intelligently analyzing the similarities and differences, in considering what the comparison reveals about each thing. Begin to concentrate on style.

- **Paper 3: Content**—more complexity in dealing with the subjects, more aspects, theories, more expert knowledge needed to complete this assignment. **Writing**—“Wheels within wheels” assignment. As the content gets more complicated, writing skills may seem to decline. Encourage students to think carefully and perhaps list all the aspects of the assignment they need to consider. Sometimes encouraging students to just have bullet points for the first and second paragraph can help them get started in the body of the paper. An introduction written later can be more compelling and accurate. Try moving paragraphs around to make more sense.

- **Paper 4: Content**—formulate own topic. At this point, students’ knowledge of this subject, their familiarity with keywords, theories and approaches should enable them to form compelling arguments and studies of the content. I still give some parameters and guidelines (pages numbers, topics covered, etc.). Optional—integrating the ideas of others. **Writing**—Organization and analysis potentially may suffer as students warm to their own topics. The challenge is for their own ideas to make sense to the reader. Concentrate on clarity and coherence.

- **Paper 5: Content**—integrating the arguments of others. Carefully considering expert opinions, previous studies, and theories of others. **Writing**—summarizing, analyzing sources, learning and using correct citation methods for this area of study. Concentrate on emphasis.

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COURSE TREATMENT: SHAKESPEARE’S CHARACTERS

ASSIGNMENT 1 (4 WEEKS)—Close analysis of text from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*:
“explore how the language of the play reveals character,” and how this way of revealing
character is significant for the play as a whole.

Exercises and Prewriting
1) Pick a character to write about and justify your choice—present in class.
2) Pick a passage pertinent to a character, which is somehow confusing or problematic. In a
paragraph, explain why it is confusing or problematic, and use the problem to come up with a
question about the character. Present in class
3) Skim critical sources (provided by me), pick one or two pertinent to your question, and, in a
paragraph, explain how the criticism is pertinent to your passage and question.
4) “Tropical Brainstorming”: gloss or annotate five lines of *A Midsummer Night’s* extensively, using
*Oxford English Dictionary*, Shakespeare search engine, Bible search engine, online list of 200
rhetorical devices, and two scholarly, well-annotated editions of the play. Use what you have
learned to refine your question again. Present in class.
5) Study a model essay.

ASSIGNMENT 2 (4 WEEKS)—Comparative or lens analysis of performance: explore the
treatment of a character by the Michael Radford film version of *The Merchant of Venice*, in
comparison to a reconstructed Elizabethan performance of the play, or vice versa.

Exercises and Prewriting
1) Select a passage and come up with a question, and a paragraph justifying the question, about the
*The Merchant of Venice*. Homework leading to group work.
2) Reconstruct an Elizabethan performance of a scene or episode from the play, inferring gestures
or movements onstage (using the playtext and information from a book about Shakespearean
staging and Elizabethan playing conditions). Come up with, and justify a question based on findings.
3) skim critical sources (provided by me) come up with one pertinent to your reconstruction, and
refine your question. Present in class.
4) Studying a scene on film, select a scene, take notes, consider brief reviews, and refine or rewrite
question.
5) Study a model essay.

ASSIGNMENT 3 (4 WEEKS)—Entering a Scholarly Conversation: Analysis of text,
performance, criticism, or film pertaining to *Othello*, using multiple sources (research
paper).

Exercises and Prewriting
1) Library visit
2) Select an episode from *Othello*, and using rhetorical analysis and knowledge of Elizabethan
performance, come up with a question and a paragraph justifying the question.
3) Annotated bibliography of 2 or more sources contemporary with primary object of analysis of 5
or more secondary or critical sources; refine question.
4) Study a model essay.
Twelve Elements of the Scholarly Essay*

1. **Thesis**: your main insight or idea about a text or topic, and the main proposition that your essay demonstrates. It should be true but arguable (not obviously or patently true, but one alternative among several), limited enough in scope to be argued in a short composition and with available evidence, and central to the topic you are discussing (not peripheral). The entire essay should be relevant to it. **Note**: some explanatory or descriptive essays or papers may not require a thesis as described here. In some kinds of writing, the thesis always comes at the beginning of the essay. In some, it can appear elsewhere. If the thesis does not appear at the beginning of the essay, or if the essay is not argumentative, **agenda** (see next element) becomes especially important as a way of rendering the essay coherent. Make sure you know what kind of essay you are expected to write, and how much leeway you have, before you begin work.

2. **Agenda**: what you are accomplishing for your readers with your analysis, description, or argument—not so much what you are saying as what you are doing, in your essay, by saying it. From the start of the essay, and throughout, a clear demonstration of agenda provides a compelling motive for a particular kind of reader (you must determine what kind of reader this is) to read. Your agenda thus won't necessarily emphasize your own interest in a topic—your own idiosyncratic motivation or desire, which could just be completing an assignment. Your articulation of agenda is what you say to show that your essay accomplishes something worthwhile for others interested in your topic.

In the case of an argumentative essay (an essay with a thesis), agenda often involves the word "but" or equivalent, since, in articulating an agenda for such an essay, you will probably be showing why your argument isn't obvious but requires demonstration or elaboration; how it is useful insofar as it reveals something different from what others might know, expect, or say; how it speaks to a puzzle or conflict that others might experience; or how it has a larger implication that others might not immediately see. Especially in the case of an argumentative essay, these "others"—imagined or actual—shouldn't be dummies; you need to make clear that their misapprehension or rival claim can be argued for. In other words, there is a plausible counter-argument to your argument, which you must answer, and not just a flimsy counter-claim. Or there is the likelihood of puzzlement or uncertainty on the part of your intelligent readers, who might overlook what you have discovered.

In the case of an essay in which you are not advancing a particular thesis, your agenda may simply involve providing your readers with a clear sense of what you are doing—a sense of direction—from the beginning of the essay to the end. Perhaps what you are explaining is especially difficult to understand, and your work is designed to make it accessible. Perhaps you are describing how something works or providing a description of an event or process from a certain point of view that will be of interest to your readers.

3. **Evidence**: the data—facts, examples, or details—that cite, discuss, quote, or summarize to support your thesis. There needs to be enough evidence to be persuasive; it needs to be the right kind of evidence to support the thesis (with no pertinent, important evidence overlooked, especially if such evidence tends to counter your argument); it needs to be sufficiently concrete for the reader to trust it (e.g., in textual analysis, it often helps to find one or two key or representative passages to quote and focus on); and if summarized, it needs to be summarized accurately and fairly.

4. **Analysis**: the work of breaking down, interpreting, and commenting upon the data, of saying what can be inferred from the data such that it supports a thesis (is evidence for something). Analysis is what you do with data when you go beyond observing or summarizing it: you show how its parts contribute to a whole or how causes contribute to an effect; you draw out the significance or implication not apparent to a superficial view. Analysis is what makes the writer feel present, as a reasoning individual; so your essay should do more analyzing than summarizing or quoting.

5. **Key terms**: the recurring terms or basic conceptual oppositions upon which your argument rests, usually literal but sometimes metaphorical. An essay's key terms should be clear in meaning (defined if necessary) and appear throughout (not be abandoned half-way); they should be appropriate for the subject at hand (not unfair or too simple, e.g., implying a false or constraining opposition); and they should not be inert clichés or abstractions (e.g., "the evils of society").

6. **Assumptions**: the underlying beliefs about life, people, history, reasoning, etc. that are implied by the key terms or
by the logic of an argument. As a writer, you will inevitably make assumptions. Some of these you can take for granted and assume that your reader will too (e.g. the belief that valid evidence for a claim makes it more likely to be true), but wherever your assumptions are arguable or unclear (e.g. whether a certain piece of evidence validly counts as evidence in a particular case) they should be brought out and acknowledged. Note that insofar as assumptions are broadly held cultural beliefs, writers and readers may often fail to notice that they are making them, so writing well often requires attention to others' assumptions, as well as one's own. Where such assumptions are debatable, exploring them can lead to effective analysis, as well as a thesis with a compelling agenda.

7. **Structure**: the sequence of main sections or sub-topics, and the turning points between them. The sections should follow a logical order, and the links in that order should be apparent to the reader (see "stitching"). But it should also be a progressive order—there should have a direction of development or complication, not be simply a list or a series of restatements of the thesis ("Macbeth is ambitious: he’s ambitious here; and he’s ambitious here; and he’s ambitions here, too; thus, Macbeth is ambitious") (or even, "Cancer clusters are misleading: they are misleading here; they are misleading here, and they are misleading here, too; thus, cancer clusters are misleading.") And the order should be supple enough to allow the writer to explore the topic, not just hammer home a thesis. (If the essay is complex or long, its structure may be briefly announced or hinted at after the thesis, in a road-map or plan sentence.)

8. **Transitions**: language that ties together the parts of an argument, most commonly (a) by using linking or turning words as signposts to indicate how a new section, paragraph, or sentence follows from the one immediately previous; but also (b) by recollection of an earlier idea or part of the essay, referring to it either by explicit statement or by echoing key terms or resonant phrases quoted or stated earlier. The repeating of key or thesis concepts, or the clarification of or emphasis on agenda, is especially helpful at points of transition from one section to another, to show how the new section fits in.

9. **Sources**: persons or documents, referred to, summarized, or quoted, that help a writer demonstrate the truth of his or her argument. They are typically sources of (a) factual information or data, (b) opinions or interpretation on your topic, (c) comparable versions of the thing you are discussing, or (d) applicable general concepts. Your sources need to be efficiently integrated and fairly acknowledged by citation.

10. **Orienting**: bits of information, explanation, and summary that orient the reader who isn’t expert in the subject, enabling such a reader to follow the argument. The orienting question is, what does my reader need here? The answer can take many forms: necessary information about the text, author, or event (e.g. given in your introduction); a summary of a text or passage about to be analyzed; pieces of information given along the way about passages, people, or events mentioned (including announcing or “set-up” phrases for quotations and sources). The trick is to orient briefly and gracefully.

11. **Stance**: the implied relationship of you, the writer, to your readers and subject: how and where you implicitly position yourself as an analyst. Stance is defined by such features as style and tone (e.g. familiar or formal); the presence or absence of specialized language and knowledge; the amount of time spent orienting a general, non-expert reader; the use of scholarly conventions of form and style. Your stance should be established within the first few paragraphs of your essay, and it should remain consistent.

12. **Style**: the choices you make of words and sentence structure. In scholarly writing designed to speak to a wide variety of educated readers (as opposed to specialized readers well-versed in the vocabulary of a particular discipline), style should be exact and clear (should bring out main idea and action of each sentence, not bury it) and plain without being flat (should be graceful and perhaps, at moments, interesting, without being stuffy or overdone). Your style must depend on the kind of writing you are being asked to do, so, as with thesis, make sure you understand what kind of writing this is as you begin your project.

*Adopted and modified, with the author's permission, by James Berg, with help from Middlebury College Faculty, from Gordon Harvey's "Elements of the Academic Essay." Harvey’s elements emphasize argumentation, though most of them apply to essays that purport to be purely descriptive or analytical as well, and they are modified here so as to realize that potential. As stated, these elements probably do not apply to fiction-writing or poetry.

NOTE: If you find any or all of these elements helpful, you should feel free to use them in your classes and modify them for your own purposes, but please be cognizant that they are copyrighted, and do not reproduce them, except on your class websites and syllabi.