



Ten Strategies for Designing Critical Thinking Tasks

From *Engaging Ideas* by John C. Bean

1. Link course concepts to students' personal experience or background knowledge.
 - Think of examples that illustrate a concept before it is introduced in class; then ask students for some of theirs
 - The more that unfamiliar material can be linked to new, the easier it is to learn
2. Explain course concepts to new learners
 - Students prepare a short explanation of a concept to "teach" to another
 - Students may explain to a different audience ("explain to a patient what is meant by the glycemic index of foods and why knowing this will help them maintain good blood sugar levels")
3. Thesis support assignments
 - Give students a controversial thesis that they must defend or attack, using course materials or ideas from a reading
 - These are good "practice exams" if you use essay questions
4. Problem-posing assignments
 - Instead of giving students the thesis (as above), you give them the question which they try to answer.
 - You can use exploratory writing or group writing if you don't want this to be a formal assignment.
5. Data-provided assignments
 - This is sort of the opposite of thesis supported assignments. This time you give students the information, and the students must figure out what thesis or hypothesis the data might support.
 - This is a good technique to use in sciences for teaching students how to write the "findings" and "discussion" sections of scientific reports.
6. Frame assignments
 - You provide a topic sentence and the major transition words to guide students toward a particular way of organizing their ideas. They must use course materials to figure out what goes inside that frame.
 - An example: "To solve the problem of homelessness in America, we must realize that not all homeless fit into the same category. In fact, we ought to specify X categories of homeless. First,...[development]...Second [development]..."
7. Role playing or imaging "what if" situations
 - Helping students get outside of themselves and their own perspectives can be an excellent way for them to become more critical thinkers.



8. Summaries or abstracts of articles or course lectures.
 - Make sure you teach students the principles of summary writing (do NOT assume they know this!).
 - Students must determine the structure, or organization, of the article or lecture.
 - Then they retain the logical sequence of the original points or arguments, but eliminate the specific details.
 - They must not inject their own interpretation of the ideas!
 - Try very short summaries: 1 or 2 sentences.
9. Dialogues or argumentative scripts
 - These are shorter than writing a thesis-governed essay, and they do not require closure
 - This allows students to explore alternate points of view, but does not force them to conclude
 - Example: “Write a short dialogue between a democrat and a republican on the issue of oil drilling in Alaska. The democrat is trying to explain why the environmental issues are most critical. The republican is trying to explain why the dependence on foreign oil is the important factor in the decision.”
10. Cases and simulations
 - Although there are lots of case studies available, you can try writing your own small scenarios to illustrate building block concepts.
 - Make sure your scenario does not have a clear cut answer, but requires deeper analysis and multiple points of view.
 - Students can even take one of the roles in the case study and play it out further either in a role play or in a written dialogue.

Bean, John (2011). *Engaging Ideas: The Professor’s Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*, 2nd Edition. San Francisco: Jossey Bass: A Wiley Imprint.