

My regularly offered course on ancient women (CLAS 362, “Women and Gender in Antiquity”) meets distribution requirements in the University of Arizona General Education Program and also counts toward upper-division unit requirements for a major or minor in Classics. Furthermore, it is listed as a Writing-Intensive Course. Taking one such course is required of all Classics majors. In designing writing projects for CLAS 362, I wanted to provide opportunities for our majors to gain knowledge of history and literature by analyzing ancient materials in translation, but I also needed to give assignments that would interest non-majors and possibly help them develop abilities useful in later life.

My solution was to build both a group discussion and a critical thinking component into the writing assignment. After each of the four 750-word papers is assigned, students meet in groups of 30 to analyze related materials. Discussion sections are broken down into smaller groups of 5–7 students. Each team is given a specific question to answer, drawing upon primary and secondary sources previously read. The facilitator (either a TA or myself) then helps the whole section to pull the separate conclusions together and form the background picture needed to respond to the question. Not only does the collaborative learning process increase skill in communicating ideas, but I have found that information obtained in that way tends to “stick.”

Papers challenge the students to apply that information to an interpretive problem involving ancient materials—texts or, in one case, material artifacts. In my introduction to the assignments, I state:

Writing assignments in this course ask you to go beyond merely repeating what you have already learned. They are **problem-solving exercises** designed to give you practice in *transferable* critical thinking skills. (“Transferable” means that you will be able to use the same skills in the workplace or in other areas of daily life.) The information about antiquity you pick up from these exercises is really incidental to their main objective of helping you learn to think better. I use ancient texts as my materials, but I could as easily use business-school case studies or legal briefs. (“But,” I add in class, “ancient texts are much more interesting than legal briefs.”)

At my presentation, I will distribute sample writing assignments and explain how I use them to teach students to: a) extract general themes from an assemblage of miscellaneous and apparently contradictory information; b) understand a method of approach and apply it to new data; c) learn to think “outside the box” by imaginatively putting themselves into an alien mindset; d) decide what is crucial information and what is not; e) reason deductively; f) note significant absences as well as presences; g) observe points of correspondence between phenomena found in disparate contexts; and h) see how the same idea may be expressed in two different media (words and images).