

Connecting Arguments to Theory in Academic Writing

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Introduction

Academic writing requires students to make careful observations in order to make arguments based on evidence (Cottrell, 2017). These observations must be critically analyzed, and the criteria for analysis is usually based theories in the field being studied. In other words, students must become members of a community of practice by connecting their observations and arguments to the ideas of others in the field, or as Bean (2011) puts it, “. . . writing means joining a conversation of persons who are . . . jointly seeking answers to shared questions that puzzle them” (p. 22). This act of connecting arguments to theory requires training and practice, especially for students who lack experience in doing this.

Challenges Students Face

There are three challenges that first-time academic writers face:

1. They have a lack of academic writing experience. Therefore, they are unfamiliar with the style and format of the genre.
2. They have difficulty distinguish between reporting on sources and using sources to support their own observations and ideas.
3. They find it difficult to make observations on textual sources.

Classroom Approach

In order to address the challenges that students face when doing academic writing, the following classroom approach was developed for a 3rd year seminar course. Students who take this course are required to write a 3000-word graduation thesis in English in their 4th year seminar.

1. A short lecture that introduces several theoretical concepts in the topic being studied.
2. Controlled activities to confirm students’ understanding of the theoretical concepts. This stage includes classroom discussion.
3. An individual analysis of a piece of visual media. Students make observations using the theoretical concepts introduced.
4. A short acedemic writing assignment in which students connect their observations of the visual media to a particular source referred to in the lecture.

Resources for Students

In this course, there are two types of resources that are provided to students: the sources used in the lecture (see Figure 1.) and a bank of visual media that students can use (this will be shown during the presentation). There are two reasons for providing these. First, students often mistake the finding of sources as research. By providing these, more emphasis can be placed on making observations of visual sources and thinking about those observations. Visual sources are used to encourage students to write in their own words more. Second, students with little academic writing experience often have trouble finding good sources. Students need to understand how to use sources before they can find their own sources.

Sources	Week 6 References
McCloud (1988) says, “Because costume colors remained exactly the same panel after panel, they came to symbolize characters in the minds of the reader” (p. 188).	Kandinsky, W. (1946). <i>On the Spiritual in Art</i> . (H. Rebay, Trans.). New York, NY: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation. Retrieved from https://archive.org/details/onspiritualinat00kand
McCloud (1988) says, “Colors could express a dominant mood” (p. 190).	Kaya, N., & Epps, H. H. (2004). Color-emotion associations: Past experience and personal preference. In J. L. Calvano (Ed.), <i>Proceedings from AIG2004: Interim Meeting of the International Color Association</i> (31-34). Porto Allegre, Brazil: International Color Association.
Kaya and Epps (2004) say, “Color symbolism can be apparent in how individuals associate colors with things, objects or physical space” (p. 33).	McCloud, S. (1995). <i>Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art</i> . New York, NY: William Morrow.
Kaya and Epps (2004) say, “Moreover, color conventions differ from one society to another. A well-known example is with the two achromatic colors: black and white. Death and mourning are associated with the color black in Western traditions, whereas in China the color of death is white” (p. 33).	
Kandinsky (1946) says, “As the soul generally is tightly bound to the body, it is possible that the psychic emotion may be aroused by means of association. For example, red may cause a spiritual vibration, analogous to that caused by a flame, because red is the colour of flame. Warm red may prove exciting, or painful, even disgusting, through possible association with blood; as this colour recalls a physical agent which undoubtedly has a displeasing effect on the soul” (p. 41).	
Kandinsky (1946) says, “In the case of the eye, some colours can look sharp or piercing, while others appear smooth like velvet, so that one feels inclined to stroke them (dark ultramarine, chrome oxide green and rose madder); even the distinction between the warmth and coldness of a shade is based on such feelings. Some colours appear soft (rose madder) and others seem to be cold and hard (cobalt green, blue-green oxide) . . .” (p. 42).	

Figure 1. An example of sources provided for students.

Teacher Model

This approach emphasizes the importance of models in learning academic writing. This is because modeling is effective in promoting learning (Hattie & Yates, 2014). Additionally, it is a way to make the thinking processes in academic writing more visible to students (Ritchhart, Church & Morrison, 2011).

There are two levels of modeling in this approach. First, the sources that are provided to students are the same ones that are used in the short lecture. In the lecture itself, these sources receive citation. This provides a model of giving citations and references, which is an important part of the academic writing process.

Second, a model of each week’s academic writing assignment is provided to the students (see Figure 2.). This provides a visual reference for formatting (how to give citations and write references). Also, it shows how to connect observations to ideas introduced in the lecture.

Citation (Source)

Kandinsky (1946) says, “As the soul generally is tightly bound to the body, it is possible that the psychic emotion may be aroused by means of association. For example, red may cause a spiritual vibration, analogous to that caused by a flame, because red is the colour of flame.” (p. 41).

Explanation and Example

This can be seen in *Archie's Summer Splash #1* (Parent, 2010). In one panel, the character Veronica Lodge is angry with her rival, Cheryl Blossom. To symbolize her anger, her entire body is colored red. This associates the heat of fire with the heat of her anger. From this association, readers can understand that Veronica is extremely angry. This connection to fire is emphasized by the use of black clouds of smoke coming from her head.

Reference

Kandinsky, W. (1946). *On the Spiritual in Art*. (H. Rebay, Trans.). New York, NY: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation. Retrieved from <https://archive.org/details/onspiritualinat00kand>
Parent, D. (writer & penciller) (2010, May 1). *Archie's Summer Splash #1*. Pelham, NY: Archie Comics.

Figure 2. An example of a teacher model text.

Areas of Focus

In this approach, the following aspects of academic writing highlighted :

Paraphrasing. Some of the sources are challenging and require students to explain what they mean by paraphrasing. They are reminded that the reader may not know well about the topics being discussed.

Making careful observations of visual media. Focusing on observations and the students’ thoughts about those observations helps them understand what the main content of their academic writing should be.

Choosing a suitable source. The sources that students select to include in their writings should have a strong connection to the observations they have made of the visual media.

Learning academic style and formatting (APA). Students see many models during their 3rd year of studies and receive feedback on this for the entire 3rd year. This helps prepare them for writing their graduation thesis in English in the 4th year.

<Examples of student work will be shown during the presentation to highlight these points.>

Further Challenges

While this approach addresses the three challenges that it is designed to overcome, there are other challenges that provide opportunities for further development.

1. Students are not able to find sources efficiently. Currently, students are required to find their own sources in the 4th year. To make this easier, experience in finding sources needs to be introduced in the 3rd year.

2. Students require more academic writing experience in their L1. Coordination with other courses could provide students with experience in academic writing prior to attempting it in English.

Conclusions

With this approach to academic writing, students have been able to develop their skills in connecting their observations and thoughts to the ideas and theories presented by experts in the fields they are writing about.

As shown in the examples of student work, they were able to gain enough experience in academic writing to show improvement in the style and format of their writing. They were able to distinguish between reporting on sources and using sources to support their observations, and they were able to demonstrate their ability to make observations from visual media.

References

- Bean, J. C. (2011). *Engaging Ideas: The Professor’s Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking and Active Learning in the Classroom* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Cotrell, S. (2017). *Critical Thinking Skills: Effective Analysis, Argument and Reflection* (3rd ed.). London, UK: Palgrave.
- Hattie, J., & Yates, G. (2014). *Visible Learning and the Science of How We Learn*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Ritchhart, R., Church, M., & Morrison, K. (2011). *Making Thinking Visible*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

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