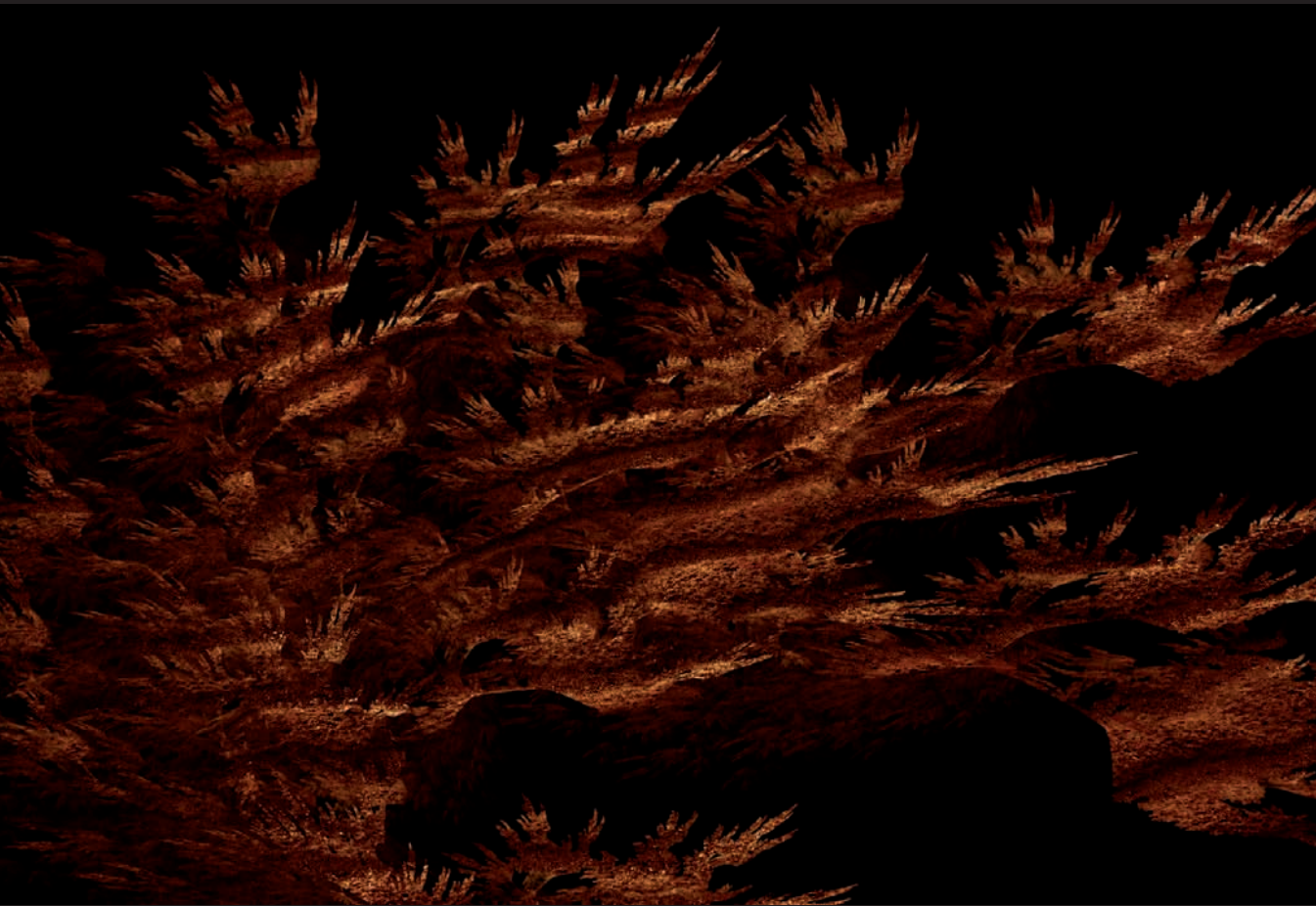


REASON TO WRITE



GINA L. VALLIS



REASON TO WRITE:
APPLYING CRITICAL THINKING
TO ACADEMIC WRITING



REASON TO WRITE: APPLYING CRITICAL THINKING TO ACADEMIC WRITING

This handbook is a practical guide designed to offer students the means to apply critical thinking to academic writing.

Critical thinking is a challenging term. Sometimes it is presented in relationship to formal logic, which is too rigid to use as a strategy for writing instruction. Sometimes critical thinking is made synonymous with analysis, although they can be clearly differentiated as separate cognitive activities. Sometimes critical thinking is reduced to writing prompts on selected readings, or exemplar asides.

Reason to Write introduces the critical question, a pre-writing strategy that both stipulates a working definition for critical thinking, and, in doing so, reorients the approach to academic writing as fundamentally inquiry-based.

Critical thinking provides specific strategies designed to help student writers to work through the relationship between thinking and writing. When given the opportunity to develop a line of inquiry based upon a question, students acquire not only critical thinking skills, but also the means to be self-corrective in their writing, and to transfer those skills into new contexts.

In three major sections, students are guided through steps that build upon foundational critical thinking skills, and that reinforce academic writing as a practice designed to answer a question, solve a problem, or resolve an issue.

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Kona Publishing and Media Group
Higher Education Division
Charlotte, North Carolina

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ISBN: 978-1-935987-09-3



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Firstly, I would like to say how grateful I am to Roy, both for building the fort, and also for holding it down.

Secondly, I would like to thank my students for their generosity in allowing me to use their writing in this text. All samples of student writing included in this text were drawn from undergraduate, lower-division writing, primarily in entry-level courses.

Finally, my thanks for the support of my colleagues.



PREFACE

One of the challenges facing writing instructors is that while students will tend to recognize quality academic writing, they often do not appear to translate that recognition into practice in relationship to their own prose.

Nor can an instructor assume that students will automatically adopt a habit of inquiry merely by being exposed to the questions of others. In addition, this form of instruction reinforces the idea that it is the student's function to provide answers, but it does not allow them to rehearse generating their own questions.

For as long as students are given tools for recognizing the elements that facilitate or inhibit academic inquiry, they can engage in critical thinking through the composing of a question-based essay, from an initial point of curiosity.

Reason to Write makes a clear distinction between critical thinking, rhetoric, informal and formal logic, and analysis, for the purpose of demonstrating various connections between ways of thinking, and stages of writing. Writing exercises are broken down into steps that engage with those relationships, from pre-writing to final draft, as well as conference presentations and publication guidelines.

This handbook would be appropriate for use by any instructor engaged in entry-level post-secondary education courses for the purpose of an introduction to critical thinking and academic writing.

It can also be used as a supplement to course material, across disciplines, for the purpose of writing instruction, provided that the course structure allows the student to generate independent questions, upon which to write, based upon the course topic.

HOW TO USE THIS TEXT

Reason to Write is a practical guide, and is designed as a map to guide students through steps to writing. Each chapter offers a clear explanation of a given way of thinking, and matches it to a stage in the writing process, culminating in a writing step that allows the student to put that relationship into practice.

Through these sequential stages, each step serves to advance the student toward the final paper that will be produced, using the strategies covered in that section. As such, while perfectly suitable for use in conjunction with other instructional material, all sections should be included, and taken in order.

SECTION I

CRITICAL QUESTION, CONTEXT, DEFINITION

A REASON TO WRITE

This section serves as an introduction to a basic reorientation of academic writing as inquiry-based, and opens by drawing attention to common difficulties students face with the thesis statement.

The demand to produce a thesis in the first stage of writing often generates confusion between the process of academic writing, which is inquiry-based, and the final presentation of the written product. This final presentation is often reorganized in a rewrite in order to forefront conclusions.

By putting the steps into their proper order, students come to understand that thinking and writing are related acts, the components of which can be subsequently redistributed in the final draft stage, based upon the conventions within a given discipline.

CRITICAL THINKING

After learning about the role of inquiry within academic writing, students are introduced to a clear definition for critical thinking, its relationship to academic writing, and common sources of cognitive bias that impede effective reasoning.

This section culminates in **Step 1**, the *Critical Question Guide*, in which the student formulates a critical question based upon a set of guidelines that explain how to formulate an area of inquiry upon which to write, providing the tools for students to begin the pre-writing stage of independent inquiry into a specific issue.

QUESTIONS IN CONTEXT

Because students have often been given contradictory or ambiguous directives in relationship to academic writing, this chapter explores the reasoning behind common writing rules. In doing so, it translates those rules into practical guides for understanding the role of academic writing.

Once a student has a critical question upon which to begin to write, the student then engages in **Step 2**, the *Argument Map Guide*, designed to refine the question to an appropriate level of specificity for the length of the writing, and to connect the question to a context from which to draw elements for analysis.

SAYING WHAT WE MEAN—MEANING WHAT WE SAY

Until students have the opportunity to gain a basic understanding of how language functions in written argumentation, they may not understand the need for precision in the transmission of ideas, linked, as it is, to the metaphorical quality of language.

In addition to providing a new way for students to evaluate the prose that they produce, this chapter offers the opportunity for students to explore the notion of stipulating the definition of a term, a practice that is common in writing drawn from critical thinking.

This chapter provides **Step 3** in the series, the *Ways to Define Guide*, in which the student advances the critical question upon which he or she is working. The student is given the opportunity to explore and engage in a controlled definition of the terms of that question.

Finally, the end of Section 1 offers “The Shortcut,” a condensed model for prewriting designed to initiate critical thinking in relationship to writing an essay. This model can be quickly implemented for future writing in which the student will engage, after the student has a working understanding of the tools necessary to generate ideas, how to avoid common traps that impede critical thinking, and has gained a sense of precision and control over academic prose.

SECTION II

ANALYSIS, ORGANIZING PRINCIPLE, ARRANGEMENT

PERFORMING ANALYSIS

In defining critical thinking as a strategy of informal logic designed to aid a writer in remaining conscious of those elements that facilitate or inhibit clear reasoning, analysis can be defined, for the student, in contradistinction.

As the primary act in which the student will engage in order to move from question to answer within academic writing, analysis is treated as an act involving the breaking down of an element into its constituent parts, for the purpose of producing knowledge.

This chapter offers **Step 4**, the *Steps to Analysis Guide*, in which the student completes four steps of analysis on the question that the student has posed,

in the process drawing conclusions that will eventually serve in the recursive strategy of writing the body of the essay.

FINDING COMMON GROUND

In performing analysis, students will encounter categories through which to produce an *organizing principle* for the essay. Bypassing common writing formulas, the organizing principle develops from the unique quality of the answers at which the student arrives, allowing a paper organization that follows from that reasoning.

Thus, the essay may follow a pattern of hierarchical, comparative, categorical, chronological, etc., organization, based upon the specific nature of the relationship between the questions and answers that the student produces within analysis.

Once the student has established an organizing principle, strategies for *exordium*—the paper’s opening—are reviewed, and the student begins the paper by writing the opening paragraph, which includes elements the student has acquired through previous exercises: the question at hand, context, and definition. The student then provides a plan for the organization of the paper. The execution of this plan comprises **Step 5**, the *Opening/Organizing Principle Guide*.

ARRANGEMENT

Once the student has all of the requisite elements, and has introduced the paper, the student is ready to produce a draft of the essay. In this chapter, students initiate the first step of their organizing principle, and proceed through that organization, returning each conclusion to the question at hand.

Students are also given information regarding typical elements found within the critical essay, which the student comes to understand not as formulaic in nature, but as specific functions that each serve a purpose within the communication of ideas within academic writing.

In previous exercises, students will already have worked on rhetorical elements such as *exordium*, *definitio*, *narratio*, *partitio*, and *amplificatio*, and come to understand those terms through the work they have already completed, in a way that does not result in the alienation often produced by those terms. Students are then exposed, in a straightforward manner, to *refutatio*, *stasis*, and *epilogus*

as additional functions of the academic essay, which students can then plan in the execution of their draft.

Because students will be engaged in the drafting stage of the paper, at this point in the writing process, this chapter gives a brief explanation of established rules that govern the citation of source material.

The resulting **Step 6**, the *Essay Draft Guide*, closes this section with the production of a provisional essay of requisite length upon which students could potentially receive feedback, and begin the process of revision and preparation for publication.

SECTION III

RHETORIC, REVISION, PUBLICATION

COMMUNICATION AND RHETORIC

In many instructional situations, the student will be waiting to receive feedback on a draft. In other situations, the student will be best served by combining Chapter 7 (Arrangement) and Chapter 9 (Feedback/Revision), as well as **Steps 6** and **7**, before submission of a final paper.

This chapter covers further issues of rhetoric and its relationship to critical thinking, by exploring those elements of rhetoric that provide information regarding common sources of cognitive bias, and elements of communication, including communication designed to produce suasion.

Students learn about the five elements of communication, rhetoric as a discipline, fallacies, and appeals. Although not directly applicable to the advancement of the production of the final essay, students are offered practice exercises that deepen their understanding of these rhetorical concepts. These exercises allow the student to engage with the notion of rhetoric as a discipline, provide more sophisticated general tools for analysis of real-world issues, and reinforce strategies for attending to the elements of communication situations.

FEEDBACK AND/OR REVISION

Either following the return of the first draft, or as rewrite strategy for the completion of a final essay, this chapter covers strategies for making use of feedback,

rewriting, editing, proofreading, and global revision for the purpose of crafting a fully developed final essay based upon critical thinking.

A careful distinction is made between those elements that pertain to all academic writing, across all disciplinary fields, and those elements that concern the final presentation of the paper according to standardized conventions within a discipline, and that may dictate rules concerning such things as format, tone of voice, positioning of elements, etc.

In addition to the information provided regarding rewriting, this chapter provides **Step 7**, the *Self-Diagnostic Guide*. This guide presents a comprehensive checklist of all information covered in this text, against which the student compares the final writing that he or she has produced. It serves as a review of important concepts of critical thinking, and a check for ways in which the student may have engaged in areas of cognitive bias that impede the full exploration of his or her question to produce a valid and true conclusion, or thesis.

JOINING THE CONVERSATION

In the final chapter of *Reason to Write*, students are offered a breakdown of different kinds of writing that occur in a variety of contexts, in order to emphasize the role of academic writing in facilitating a conversation related to the production of knowledge.

This is reinforced through discussion concerning conference presentation and academic publication. This serves to redirect the notion of academic writing as a classroom activity, instead of a scholarly dialogue in which students can, and do, participate. It offers information regarding submitting a paper for submission for conference presentation or publication.

Reason to Write concludes with **Step 8**, the *Submission Guidelines Page*. While this step does not require students to actually follow through in submitting papers for presentation or publication, it does include preliminary work that would be required to do so, including the acquisition of guidelines pertaining to submissions to the specific conference or journal.