

JOHN C. BEAN

ENGAGING IDEAS

The Professor's Guide to
Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking,
and Active Learning in the Classroom

SECOND EDITION



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Second Edition

John C. Bean

Foreword by Maryellen Weimer



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Foreword

I still remember the first incarnation of this book I saw. It was an in-house manual John had written to help faculty at his institution incorporate writing in their various courses. It was one of those proverbial diamonds in the rough. I remember constructing a list of reasons why Jossey-Bass should publish it as a book, which I presented with some passion to the then higher education editor, Gale Erlandson. I kept my fingers crossed, unsure whether the in-house manual would realize its potential as a full manuscript. When John submitted it, I couldn't believe how good it was. The years since its publication have confirmed that this book is better than good. It is one of the best books on teaching and learning published during the last twenty-five years. It has become the book that cemented the legacy of writing across the curriculum in countless classrooms. To write the Foreword for a new edition is indeed a privilege.

I was a bit surprised when I reread my Foreword in the first edition. The conditions described there are darker than I remember them. Could this be an even bleaker time? The lack of resources and devaluing of teaching described there are still realities today. Faculty continue to contend with large classes, students with pressing learning needs, and pressure to do lots of scholarship and service in addition to teaching. Higher education's days of wine and roses have yet to arrive.

Something positive can be said about the differences between those days and these. College teachers everywhere now understand that teaching students to write is a shared responsibility, not one to be relegated to those faculty assigned composition course instruction. Faculty have

incorporated writing in courses from introductory to capstone in a long list of disciplines. The results haven't always been pretty. Many faculty have struggled more than they anticipated with designing writing assignments, reading what students write, providing constructive feedback, and assessing its merit. Teaching writing in any field is a labor-intensive, time-consuming endeavor. This book has helped many faculty members accomplish those tasks more productively. There is no need to start working on student writing skills without knowing what to do or how to do it when a book like this offers a plethora of ideas, information, and resources that can dramatically increase the success of those who are teaching and learning to write.

The features that contributed to this book's enormous success remain in this edition. John sees writing as more than a necessary communication skill, more than the skillful management of grammar, spelling, and punctuation. He believes that writing promotes critical thinking, and he makes that case most convincingly. When students write, their writing and their thinking improve. As a writer struggles with word choice, sentence structure, and paragraph composition, thinking occurs. Writing forces the clarification of ideas, attention to details, and the logical assembly of reasons. You can write without thinking—students often do. But as this book so ably shows, writing activities and assignments can be designed so that they are very difficult to complete without mind engagement, and when that occurs, critical thinking skills are being developed.

As in the first edition, this one showcases the many different ways writing can be used in assignments and activities, all illustrated with concrete examples from a wide range of disciplines. Beyond writing, there are other classroom activities with potential to develop writing and thinking skills—things like reading, working in groups, essay exams, and course projects. This edition concludes with a section of pragmatic advice on ways of dealing with student writing, including how to provide feedback and develop grading criteria. This is a book that addresses all the issues faculty face when they incorporate writing in their courses. This book not only persuades you that you should incorporate writing; after having read it, you are convinced that you can.

Most faculty do not read a lot of pedagogical material. We are not expected to grow our pedagogical knowledge the same way we are expected to keep current in our fields. No special rewards come to those few faculty who are pedagogically well-read. Even so, most faculty are readers, and, if you give them a book on a topic they care about (or think they should care about) that is written with voice and style by an author who knows and believes in the material, faculty will read that book

and pass it on to others. I refer to this book when I need an example to support that claim.

If you have read the previous edition of this book, perhaps you even have a copy in your collection, there are lots of reasons to read the new edition. Every chapter has been updated with current references, and new chapters have been added. Those chapters address the need to get students thinking rhetorically, “sizing their audience and purpose,” as John describes the topic. Another new chapter explores genre—the various kinds of writing that can expand critical thinking and promote deep learning. Students benefit when they do different kinds of writing—not just the typical academic, thesis-driven structure that usually ends up as some form of a term paper.

It’s hard to imagine college teachers in any field reading this book and not finding some kind of writing assignment or activity that could be used in the courses they teach. But most how-to books don’t make you think, and this book definitely does. Most how-to books don’t usefully blend theoretical and practical knowledge, and this book does. Most how-to books don’t develop a commitment to do what’s being proposed, and this book does. Most how-to books don’t end up being classics, that kind of timeless resource with dog-eared corners on the cover, turned-down pages, and a wide array of underlines, stars, and marginalia—all signs of hard use and high regard.

Those of us committed to writing across the curriculum have been after John to do a second edition for some time now. Yes, the content merits updating and enriching with new ideas and information that have emerged since the first edition, but more important than making the book current is the continuing need to work with students to develop their writing and thinking skills. Many now arrive at our colleges and universities deficient in both. And to graduate from college without good writing and thinking skills is to embark tenuously on a professional career. The need for faculty to teach writing and thinking in every course across the curriculum has never been more crucial. Fortunately, there is a book that can guide your efforts and contribute to your and your students’ success.

Maryellen Weimer

Preface

I have been both gratified and humbled by the success of the first edition of *Engaging Ideas*, which has proven helpful to teachers across a wide range of disciplines. My aim in the second edition, as in the first, is to help teachers design engaging writing and critical thinking activities and incorporate them smoothly into their disciplinary courses. The goal of these activities is to transform students from passive to active learners, deepening their understanding of subject matter while helping them learn how disciplinary experts ask questions, conduct inquiry, gather and analyze data, and make arguments.

What's New in the Second Edition?

Much has changed since 1996, when the first edition was published. Readers of the second edition will notice (and I hope appreciate) how the second edition responds to recent developments in scholarship, teaching practice, and campus cultures. Particularly, the second edition has been influenced by changes in and interest in:

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL)

Although scholars working in learning theory and pedagogy have long struggled to find a respected place in the research university, the impact of SoTL is increasingly felt throughout academia—in faculty development workshops, in training of graduate teaching assistants, in national teaching conferences, in the growing presence of centers for teaching and learning

on campuses, and in spectacular new research in teaching and learning published in recent books and scholarly journals. Nurtured by the Carnegie Foundation, the Professional and Organizational Development Network (POD), the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSOTL), the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), the National Science Foundation, major granting agencies, and many other organizations and forces, the scholarship of teaching and learning has provided theoretical foundations for pedagogical research along with empirical evidence for teaching practices that promote deep learning. A glance at my references list will reveal the number of recent SoTL publications that have helped shape the second edition.

Recent Scholarship in Rhetoric, Composition, and Writing in the Disciplines

The first edition of *Engaging Ideas* is rooted in the writing process paradigm that dominated composition theory in the 1980s and 1990s—the belief that most problems with student writing could be alleviated if teachers encouraged student writers to spend more time-on-task, going through the stages of the writing process, doing multiple drafts, and learning the principles of global revision. The second edition still emphasizes process but adapts a more broadly rhetorical view of writing based on novice/expert theory, which shows how experts in a field think rhetorically about genre, audience, and purpose. To write “expert insider prose” in their majors—a term I have adopted from Susan Peck MacDonald (1994)—students need to enter their field’s discourse community, especially learning how disciplinary genres embody disciplinary ways of thinking and making knowledge. In the second edition, these influences are particularly felt in an entirely new chapter, “Helping Writers Think Rhetorically” (Chapter Three), an extensively revised and newly named chapter, “Using a Range of Genres to Extend Critical Thinking and Deepen Learning” (Chapter Four), and a new approach to teaching undergraduate research, “Designing and Sequencing Assignments to Teach Undergraduate Research (Chapter Thirteen).

The Assessment Movement

In 2000, my institution received what we might euphemistically call a “bad mark” for assessment during its accreditation visit from the Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges. Our provost hired an outside consultant—Barbara Walvoord, one of the first proponents of writing across the curriculum and the coauthor of *Effective Grading: A Tool for Learning and Assessment* (now in its second edition, 2009), whose work on our campus

has influenced me profoundly. Walvoord showed us how embedded writing assignments anywhere in the curriculum can be used for systematic outcomes assessment—not just for assessing writing but for assessing disciplinary outcomes connected to inquiry, research, problem solving, critical thinking, or subject matter knowledge. We soon discovered that if assessments of senior papers revealed patterns of weaknesses, disciplinary faculty could use the principle of backward design to make pedagogical changes earlier in the curriculum to improve student performance—particularly short “scaffolding” assignments in lower level courses to teach targeted disciplinary thinking skills. Walvoord’s visits led to a renaissance in writing across the curriculum at Seattle University—a story my colleagues and I have told in Bean, Carrithers, and Earenfight (2005) and in a number of subsequent articles and conference presentations. Ways to use embedded writing assignments for outcomes assessment are suggested in numerous places in the second edition, particularly in Chapter Thirteen, “Designing and Sequencing Assignments to Teach Undergraduate Research.”

Quantitative and Scientific Literacy Across the Curriculum

Modeled partially on the writing-across-the-curriculum movement, new programs in quantitative and scientific literacy are having an impact on general education. Among the pioneers are the Quantitative Methods for Public Policy program at Macalester College, the Quantitative Inquiry, Reasoning, and Knowledge program (QUIRK) at Carleton College, and our own work with rhetorical mathematics at Seattle University. These programs generally do not focus on higher mathematics but on what the Mathematical Association of America defines as the “quantitative reasoning capabilities required of citizens in today’s information age” (<http://www.maa.org/features/QL.html>). One of the best ways to promote quantitative literacy is to design disciplinary writing assignments that ask students to make arguments using numbers. This second edition has numerous examples of quantitative writing assignments, many of which ask writers to design their own graphs and tables that serve as visual arguments reinforcing the text’s verbal argument.

Use of Classroom Technology

The first edition of *Engaging Ideas* appeared during the early age of e-mail, long before the advent of classroom management software, drop boxes, class discussion boards, social networking sites, text messaging, Twitter, PowerPoint, or YouTube. The second edition is updated to reflect this new

technological universe—including online and blended learning—although I must confess that I have depended on my wired, linked, and gadget-loving younger colleagues to guide me into this new age.

Teaching Undergraduate Research

Although the “research paper” has long been a traditional college assignment, faculty across the curriculum increasingly realize that learning to write a research paper in first-year composition does not teach students the kinds of disciplinary thinking, genre knowledge, and specialized research skills needed for actual undergraduate research in the major. Programs that require a senior thesis, a capstone project, or some other kind of “expert insider prose” in their discipline need to develop a curriculum in which research skills are taught intentionally within the undergraduate major. In this second edition, I propose a new approach to teaching undergraduate research. (See Chapter Thirteen, “Designing and Sequencing Assignments to Teach Undergraduate Research,” which is a complete revision of the first edition’s chapter on research papers.)

What Hasn’t Changed?

Throughout I have tried to retain the strengths of the first edition, which aims to integrate two important movements in higher education—the writing-across-the-curriculum movement and the critical thinking movement. A basic premise of both editions, growing out of the educational philosophy of John Dewey, is that critical thinking—and indeed all significant learning—originates in the learner’s engagement with problems. Consequently, the design of interesting problems to think about is one of the teacher’s chief behind-the-scenes tasks. Equally important are strategies for giving critical thinking problems to students and for creating a course atmosphere that encourages inquiry, exploration, discussion, and debate while valuing the dignity and worth of each student. Teachers of critical thinking also need to be mentors and coaches, developing a range of strategies for modeling critical thinking, critiquing student performances, and otherwise guiding students toward the habits of inquiry and argument valued in their disciplines.

Unique Features of This Book

In keeping with these premises, therefore, this book has the following unique features:

- It takes a pragmatic nuts-and-bolts approach to teaching critical thinking, giving teachers hundreds of suggestions for integrating writing and other critical thinking activities into a disciplinary course.
- It integrates theory and research from the writing-in-the-disciplines literature with the broader scholarship-of-teaching-and-learning literature on critical thinking, intellectual development, active learning, and modes of teaching.
- It gives detailed practical assistance in the design of formal and informal writing assignments and suggests time-saving ways to coach the writing process and handle the paper load.
- It treats writing assignments as only one of many ways to present critical thinking problems to students; it shows how writing assignments can easily be integrated with other critical thinking activities such as use of small groups, inquiry discussions, classroom debates, and interactive lectures.
- It has a separate chapter devoted to academic reading, exploring the causes of students' reading difficulties and offering suggestions for promoting more engaged and deeper reading.
- It has separate chapters devoted to small groups, to increasing critical thinking in discussion or lecture courses, and to evoking more learning from essay exams.
- It devotes a separate chapter to teaching undergraduate research and proposes alternatives to the traditional term paper.
- It assumes that there is no one right way to integrate writing and critical thinking into a course; it therefore provides numerous options to fit each teacher's particular personality and goals and to allow flexibility for meeting the needs of different kinds of learners.
- It emphasizes writing and critical thinking tasks that focus on the instructor's subject matter goals for the course, thus reducing, and in some cases perhaps even eliminating, the conflict between coverage and process.
- It offers a wide array of ways to use writing in courses, ranging from short write-to-learn "microthemes" to major research projects and from formal academic writing to personal narratives; it also offers numerous ways to work exploratory writing into a course, including in-class freewrites, blogs, practice exams, and thinking pieces posted on class discussion boards.

- It devotes a separate chapter to the creation of rubrics for grading student writing, discussing both the upside and downside of rubrics. It also devotes a chapter to the art of commenting on student papers to minimize teacher time while maximizing helpfulness and care.
- Throughout it suggests ways that embedded writing assignments can be used for assessment.

Link Between Writing and Critical Thinking

Although this book examines a wide range of strategies for promoting critical thinking in the classroom, it assumes that the most intensive and demanding tool for eliciting sustained critical thought is a well-designed writing assignment on a subject matter problem. The underlying premise is that writing is closely linked with thinking and that in presenting students with significant problems to write about—and in creating an environment that demands their best writing—we can promote their general cognitive and intellectual growth. When we make students struggle with their writing, we are making them struggle with thought itself. Emphasizing writing and critical thinking, therefore, generally increases the academic rigor of a course. Often the struggle of writing, linked as it is to the struggle of thinking and to the growth of a person's intellectual powers, awakens students to the real nature of learning.

Intended Audience

Engaging Ideas is intended for busy college professors from any academic discipline. Many readers may already emphasize writing, critical thinking, and active learning in their classrooms and will find in this book ways to fine-tune their work, such as additional approaches or strategies, more effective or efficient methods for coaching students as writers and thinkers, and tips on managing the paper load. Other readers may be attracted to the ideas in this book yet be held back by nagging doubts or fears that they will be buried in paper grading, that the use of writing assignments does not fit their disciplines, or that they will have to reduce their coverage of content. This book tries to allay these fears and help all professors find an approach to using writing and critical thinking activities that help each student meet course goals while fitting their own teaching philosophies and individual personalities.

It may be helpful to realize that this book is aimed primarily at improving students' engagement with disciplinary subject matter and *not* at improving student writing. Whenever I conduct writing-across-the-

curriculum workshops, I always stress that a teacher's purpose in adding writing components to a course is *not* to help English departments teach writing. In fact, improvement of student writing is a happy side effect. Rather teachers should see writing assignments and other critical thinking activities as useful tools to help students achieve the instructor's content and process goals for a course. The reward of this book is watching students come to class better prepared, more vested in and motivated by the problems or questions the course investigates, more apt to study rigorously, and more likely to submit high-quality work. A serendipitous benefit for teachers may be that their own writing gets easier when they develop strategies for helping students. Many of the ideas in this book—about posing problems, generating and exploring ideas, focusing and organizing, giving and receiving peer reviews of drafts, and revising for readers—can be applied to one's own scholarly and professional writing as well as to the writing of students.

Structure of the Book

Chapter One, designed for the busy professor, gives the reader a nutshell compendium of the whole book and provides handy cross-references enabling readers to turn to specific parts of the book that concern their immediate needs. It also addresses four misconceptions that tend to discourage professors from integrating writing and critical thinking assignments into their courses.

Part One (Chapters Two through Five) presents the general theoretical background and pedagogical principles on which the book is based. Chapter Two examines the principles that relate writing to critical thinking and argues that good writing is both a process and a product of critical thought. Chapter Three suggests ways that teachers can help students think rhetorically about writing, particularly about purpose, audience, and genre. Doing so helps students develop transferable skills related to titles, introductions, tone, and reader expectations based on genre. Chapter Four introduces readers to the debate in the writing-across-the-curriculum literature between professional writing and personal or experimental writing and argues that students benefit from practicing both kinds. In Chapter Five, I focus on the problem of error in student writing, examine the debate among linguists and others over the role of grammar in writing instruction, and offer concrete suggestions about ways to reduce the incidence of error in students' writing.

Part Two (Chapters Six and Seven) focuses on the design of problem-based writing assignments. Chapter Six focuses on the design of formal

writing assignments and Chapter Seven on ways to use informal, exploratory writing both inside and outside of class to enhance learning and promote critical thinking.

Part Three (Chapters Eight through Thirteen) examines a wide variety of strategies for stimulating active learning and for coaching students as writers and critical thinkers. Chapter Eight provides a heuristic for designing critical thinking problems and illustrates them with examples from across the disciplines. These problems can then be used in a wide variety of ways—as formal or informal writing assignments, as problems for small groups, as topics for class debates, and so forth. Chapter Nine, which focuses on teaching academic reading, explores the causes of students' difficulty with academic texts and suggests coaching strategies to help students improve their skills in comprehending and responding to difficult readings. Chapters Ten and Eleven together discuss ways to use class time for active inquiry and critical thinking. Chapter Ten focuses on the use of small groups in the classroom, and Chapter Eleven suggests ways to make lectures more interactive and whole-class discussions more productive. Chapter Twelve examines the strengths and weaknesses of essay exams as writing assignments and suggests ways to promote more student learning from essay exam settings. Chapter Thirteen, on teaching undergraduate research, opens with a discussion of students' alienation from research writing—an alienation that often results in uninspired cut-and-paste writing or even plagiarism—and offers suggestions for engaging students in undergraduate research that is truly productive and inquiry-based. Particularly, it explains the principle of backward design so that skills needed for advanced research writing at the end of the major are taught through strategically designed scaffolding assignments earlier in the curriculum.

The final section of the book, Part Four (Chapters Fourteen through Sixteen), concerns strategies for coaching the writing process and for marking and grading student papers. Chapter Fourteen offers advice on creating and using rubrics, which can clarify an instructor's grading criteria and, in many cases, decrease an instructor's time spent grading and commenting on papers. Chapter Fifteen offers ten time-saving strategies for coaching the writing process while avoiding burnout. Finally, Chapter Sixteen focuses on ways to write revision-oriented comments that guide students toward significant revision of their work.

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John C. Bean
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About the Author

John C. Bean is a professor of English at Seattle University, where he holds the title of Consulting Professor of Writing and Assessment. He has an undergraduate degree in English from Stanford University (1965) and a Ph.D. in Renaissance literature from the University of Washington (1972). He has been active in the writing-across-the-curriculum movement since 1976—first at the College of Great Falls (Montana), then at Montana State University (Bozeman), and, since 1986, at Seattle University. Besides *Engaging Ideas*, the first edition of which has been translated into both Dutch and Chinese, he is the coauthor of four composition textbooks with varying focuses on writing, argumentation, critical thinking, and rhetorical reading. He has also published numerous articles on writing and writing across the curriculum as well as on literary subjects including Shakespeare and Spenser. He has done extensive consulting across the United States and Canada on writing across the curriculum, critical thinking, and university outcomes assessment. In 2001, he presented a keynote workshop at the first annual conference of the European Association of Teachers of Academic Writing (EATAW) at the University of Groningen in The Netherlands. More recently, he and his wife Kit (who is also a college teacher of writing) spent three weeks in Dhaka, Bangladesh, facilitating workshops on critical thinking for Bangladeshi educators at BRAC University. His current research interests focus on problems of transfer of learning as students move through and across a curriculum and on the development of institutional assessment strategies that promote productive faculty conversations about teaching and learning. In 2010 his article “Messy Problems and Lay Audiences: Teaching Critical Thinking within the Finance Curriculum” (coauthored with colleagues from finance and economics) won the 2008 McGraw-Hill-Magna Publications Award for the year’s best scholarly work on teaching and learning.