

Argumentative Writing Aimed at Cultivating Critical Thinking Among Humanities Undergraduates

-- A Case Study of Political Science Majors

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Abstract

Critical thinking is regarded as one of the core competencies for students in the 21st century. However, previous research indicates that humanities undergraduates exhibit varying degrees of 'absence of critical thinking.' Argumentative writing training aimed at enhancing critical thinking focuses on fostering their critical understanding and creative expression. The training primarily takes the form of group-based research learning, with the mutual promotion of critical thinking and writing skills as its main goal. It emphasizes critical analysis as the core content and adopts diversified, process-oriented assessment methods. Surveys show that argumentative writing significantly improves comprehension, multi-dimensional analysis, and logical reasoning. To further promote argumentative writing, it is essential to carefully select topics with debate value and space, emphasize collaborative work in writing, and highlight evaluation and feedback centered on 'debate and dialogue.'

Keywords

Critical thinking; Argumentative writing; Humanities undergraduates.

1. Introduction

Critical thinking is one of the 4C competence models of the 21st century that reflect the core literacy of modern society [1]. In recent years, as China advances university program accreditation vigorously, emphasizing student-centered, outcome-oriented education, the importance of critical thinking as a core competency has been repeatedly highlighted. Against the backdrop of the rapid development of AI since 2024, the question of how to enhance the core competencies of university students—the most creative group in society—to meet the challenges of the AI era has sparked reflection and attention in academia.

As an active, reflective mode of thinking, critical thinking represents a complex, high-level cognitive activity that integrates analysis, reasoning, and judgment. It involves reflecting on a problem and its related evidence rationally to arrive at a judgment, i.e., 'reasonable, reflective thinking aimed at deciding what to believe or do.' This includes clarifying meaning, analyzing arguments, evaluating evidence, inferring conclusions, examining information, and synthesizing judgments. Its characteristics include questioning, independence, and innovation. Critical thinking is not synonymous with criticism; it is a personalized mode of thinking that seeks to reason independently rather than blindly follow authority. It habitually raises questions but is not superficial negation. Instead, it aims to discern truth and falsehood through careful inquiry before deciding whether to agree. 'Critique' manifests as a way of thinking and a means of problem-solving, reflecting an individual's core qualities and abilities.[2] Therefore,

cultivating students' critical thinking skills is a crucial educational objective, particularly in higher education—a consensus long established in educational circles worldwide.

Taking students majoring in political science at Hunan University of Arts and Sciences (HUAS), China as an example, the core competencies of humanities undergraduates are broadly summarized as writing and presentation skills, both of which rely on mature critical thinking abilities. As early as 2017, instructors in sociology and political science courses observed varying degrees of 'absence of critical thinking' among students across different grades. This phenomenon was evident in class performance and research-based assignments, where students often struggled to independently analyze, compare, and synthesize information to form unique, creative insights or solve problems. In class, they displayed varying levels of passive thinking, lacking deep, active deconstruction and reconstruction of knowledge. Additionally, they exhibited limitations in advanced thinking, such as conducting in-depth, layered analysis, multi-dimensional problem-solving, applying specific knowledge or theories to real-world issues, actively articulating their viewpoints, and integrating theoretical frameworks to address concrete problems.

Since 2017, the teaching team has been actively promoting research-based teaching methods to enhance students' critical thinking skills. This approach emphasizes a student-centered model, where students take the lead in their learning, and instructors act as facilitators, guiding them toward achieving core competencies. Over the years, the research-based learning activities in this program have included both 'writing' and 'speaking' components. The 'writing' component primarily involves critical writing tasks such as research reviews, debate scripts, literary critiques and thematic reports. The 'speaking' component includes delivering presentations, Q&A sessions, discussions, debates, speeches, and impromptu speeches. These activities require students to engage their higher-order thinking skills, transforming passive learning into active engagement with the course material. This paper focuses on the writing aspect of these practices due to space limitations.

2. Daily Argumentative Writing for Humanities Students

In today's information-driven and AI-advanced era, critical thinking skills encompass metacognition, the ability to logically evaluate information sources, problem-solving, and selecting appropriate strategies or solutions [3]. They also include retrieving, filtering, assessing information, judging the ethical foundations of content and making decisions and choices. Against the backdrop of China's push for university program accreditation and the rapid development of AI, argumentative writing, as a high-level productive skill for humanities students, serves as one of the ways to enhance their core competencies and respond to the challenges of the AI era [4]. However, in daily writing practices of humanities students often follow the patterns established in middle and high school, focusing more on experiential aspects such as topic selection, writing models, language expression, and word accuracy [5]. There is less emphasis on topic exploration, logical analysis of arguments, metacognitive analysis, and critical thinking-oriented reflection, application, and expansion. Some specialized writing practices may not even touch upon deeper levels of thinking. As Wen Qiufang pointed out, students' writing often involves listing facts without sufficient reasoning. [5] Similarly, the writing assignments collected from political science students' reveal that only one or two out of eight groups produce logically sound and well-supported work. Approximately half of the group submissions exhibit issues such as vague or overly broad content, rigid and unengaging expression, lack of coherence and logic, and insufficient depth of thought and analysis. These phenomena highlight the students' deficiencies in critical thinking. Currently, daily writing exercises of them focus on cultivating surface-level skills, neglecting the development of higher-order critical thinking abilities such as analysis and evaluation of materials.

Argumentative writing tries to be oriented toward cultivating students' critical thinking skills. In the context of specialized teaching, reforms in writing instruction content, organizational methods, teaching approaches, and evaluation systems are implemented through group-based research learning. So, argumentative writing should not only focus on linguistic accuracy and fluency but also emphasize critical understanding and creative expression of language. By doing so, it aims to bridge the gap between traditional writing practices and the advanced cognitive demands of the 21st century.

3. Characteristics of Argumentative Writing Training

Taking the teaching of sociology and Political Science as an example, argumentative writing is guided by critical thinking, carried out through research-based learning group discussions, and employs reflective evaluation combining peer review and teachers' review as a comprehensive assessment method. Its overarching goal is to enhance both thinking and language abilities. Argumentative writing training has the following characteristics:

3.1. Research-Based Group Learning as the Primary Format

Argumentative writing relies on the discussions and exchanges within research-based learning groups. Students develop their own viewpoints based on their understanding of relevant topics, and then engage in debates around these arguments. Through interactions with group members, they respond to peers' questions and challenges, continuously refining and improving their perspectives. Ultimately, a relatively consistent discussion is formed. This approach requires extensive extracurricular reading. Before class, instructors provide representative literature, and during class, approximately 10 minutes are allocated for group discussions. Instructors also address students' questions and assist them in completing debate and writing tasks more effectively.

3.2. Mutual Promotion of Critical Thinking and Writing Skills as the Main Objective

Argumentative writing aims to simultaneously enhance critical thinking and core professional competencies. During group discussions, students identify logical flaws in their arguments through statements, questioning, reasoning, and debating, gradually refining their viewpoints until they become fully convincing. Writing tends to be more professional and in-depth, as it is built on a foundation of debate. Instead of providing formulaic or superficial responses to social issues, students' analyses often reflect intellectual brilliance.

3.3. Critical Analysis as the Core Content

Argumentative writing requires students to abandon the formulaic expressions often used in standardized exams, such as habitual opening, fixed frame, as well as stereotyped style. [4] While these formatted expressions may feature rich language, clear organization, and seemingly 'advanced' sentences, they often lack substantive content with repeated sentences, or suffer from logical inconsistencies. [4] Before engaging in argumentative writing, instructors provide comprehensive guidance on topic exploration, evidence selection and arrangement, and logical rigor. Through debates, writing, and peer reviews, students learn to summarize, reflect, rebut, and make decisions. The quality of writing is no longer judged solely by traditional standards like coherence or structural completeness but by the presence of 'sparks of thought' and 'depth of insight' in the content.

3.4. Diversified and Process-Oriented Assessment as the Primary Evaluation Method

Since the emphasis is on the 'sparks of thought' reflected in students' critical writing, the evaluation of writing outcomes no longer adheres to so-called standard or correct answers. As

long as the analysis is fact-based, divergent, constructive, and professionally—even if it diverges from mainstream views—it is recognized, provided it does not violate academic ethics. Given the limitations and potential biases of instructors' perspectives, the evaluation of critical writing works is conducted by three parties: peers within the group, members of other groups, and the instructor. Specifically, after a group submits their writing to the learning platform, it is opened for intra-group peer review, inter-group peer review, and instructor evaluation. The final score is calculated based on weights of 30%, 30%, and 40%, respectively. This diversified and process-oriented assessment method aims to mitigate the shortcomings of single or traditional evaluation approaches.

4. The Effectiveness of Argumentative Writing in Enhancing Critical Thinking

The discussion of the effectiveness of argumentative writing is based on post-course surveys. The survey is named 'Regarding the Overall Impact of Argumentative Writing' and targeted 142 students in 2023 and 125 students in 2024, totaling 267 participants. A total of 261 questionnaires were collected, yielding a response rate of 97.7%. The questionnaire consists of six questions covering six dimensions, namely: overall impression, reflective ability, logical thinking, divergent thinking, deductive reasoning ability, and decision-making ability.

Table 1. The Percentage of Responses to the Six Statements

Description	Yes (%)	Not very clear (%)	No (%)
1. Writing teach me about critical thinking	82.4%	16.9%	0.8%
2. Let me reflect on my thinking ability and level	53.3%	36.4%	10.3%
3. Let me learn to draw conclusions after logical analysis	59.4%	30.3%	10.3%
4. Let me learn to analyze problems in multiple dimensions and divergence	62.5%	28.0%	9.6%
5. Let me learn to draw conclusions based on evidence or test hypotheses	35.6%	55.9%	8.4%
6. Let me learn to evaluate and make decisions	34.1%	45.2%	20.7%

The majority of participants acknowledged the significant role of argumentative writing in enhancing their understanding of critical thinking (82.4%), multi-dimensional analysis (62.5%), and logical reasoning (59.4%). Writing proved most effective in helping them grasp the essence of critical thinking (Description 1) and conduct multi-dimensional problem analysis (Description 4). However, limitations were also observed: a notable proportion of respondents expressed uncertainty (35.6%) or disagreement (34.1%) regarding writing's effectiveness in judging viewpoints based on evidence, indicating its constrained utility in this area.

Additionally, differences in participants' perceptions were evident. For example, while 82.4% affirmed writing's role in improving their understanding of critical thinking (Description 1), many respondents reported uncertainty about its impact on evidence-based judgment (55.9%, Description 5) and evaluation/decision-making (45.2%, Description 6), suggesting that these abilities might lack intuitive or explicit development through writing. The observed shortcomings in writing's effectiveness may stem from the fact that skills like evidence evaluation and decision-making require more targeted practice and training, which writing

alone may not fully address. Nonetheless, there remains considerable potential to further promote and refine critical thinking-oriented writing practices.

5. Reflections on Further Promoting Argumentative Writing

5.1. Selecting Topics with Debating Potential Carefully

To implement argumentative writing training effectively, significant effort must be devoted to topic selection. The chosen topics should be cutting-edge and controversial, offering ample room for debate and relevance to real-world or advanced issues. This approach can stimulate students' interest in learning. For example, in sociology and political science, debates often revolve around unresolved or contentious topics in academia. This allows students to engage meaningfully in group discussions, access relevant materials, and form their own summaries, evaluations, and viewpoints by synthesizing opposing perspectives. This places higher demands on the teaching team: instructors must not only be familiar with the textbook framework and content but also engage in extensive literature review and stay updated on relevant theoretical developments. Only then can they select topics that truly enhance students' critical thinking skills.

5.2. Emphasizing Collaborative Work in writing

A key goal of argumentative writing is to encourage students to reflect on the boundaries of their thinking and strive to break through them. Therefore, argumentative writing should not be a solitary endeavor for individual students. Instead, it should leverage team collaboration through discussions and debates to overcome the cognitive limitations of individual group members and seek broader perspectives and deeper insights. For instance, in sociology and political science courses, approximately 10 research-based learning group activities were designed during the 2023-2024 academic year, each requiring students to form teams of five. After thorough discussions and collaboration, the teams completed and submitted an assignment, primarily in the form of debate-style or argumentative writing. This approach fosters collective effort and shared intellectual growth.

5.3. Highlighting 'Debate and Dialogue' in Evaluation and Feedback

The challenge of argumentative writing lies in balancing detailed instruction and group discussions within limited class time. Therefore, maximizing the value of argumentative writing requires fully leveraging the interactions within research-based learning groups.

5.3.1. Submission and Peer Review of Writing Outcomes

Members of each research-based learning group collaborate to draft debate scripts or short essays based on their discussions, which are then submitted as group assignments to the learning platform. After submission, the work undergoes three evaluation stages: intra-group peer review, inter-group peer review, and instructor assessment. [6] Over two years of practice, it was observed that intra-group and inter-group peer reviews often resulted in uniformly high scores due to familiarity among students. To address this, the evaluation process should be refined. For example, reviews could be conducted anonymously, focusing not on scoring but on providing questions, dialogue, suggestions, or critiques. This approach encourages students to reflect on their arguments and synthesize, organize, and summarize differing viewpoints.

6. Conclusion

6.1. Sharing and Critiquing Writing Outcomes

After each argumentative writing task, the instructor selects and shares representative arguments or paragraphs in class to inspire critical analysis and evaluation. Students are

encouraged to critique the strengths and weaknesses of the presented work in terms of viewpoints, logic, and writing structure. This method prompts students to reflect on their own and others' work during the process of understanding and critiquing, enabling them to improve through feedback and even rewrite their pieces.

Of course, argumentative writing is just one approach to enhancing critical thinking. Other methods, such as case studies, debates, and practical exercises, can complement writing by addressing its limitations in fostering evidence-based judgment and decision-making skills. These combined efforts can further elevate students' core competencies.

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