

Foundational courses in English emphasize critical thinking skills



Neal Kisor lectures to his English 1120 class in the physics building on November 15. Kisor graduated from our MS program in 2021 and now teaches in our department.

Critical thinking skills are essential to success in college, and many students need help in developing those skills beyond the high-school level. The foundational courses in English and technical communication (ETC) are designed to emphasize critical thinking skills. Foundational courses include English 1120 Exposition and Argumentation, English 1160 Writing and Research, and Speech and Media Studies 1185 Principles of Speech.

Definitions of Critical Thinking

According to Dr. Josselyn Gale Larson, director of ETC foundational courses, critical thinking involves in-depth examination of problems, serving as the foundation for creative thinking and innovation. Lecturer Neal Kisor points out that critical thinking goes beyond gathering

surface-level knowledge and requires specificity, precision, and the ability to seek insightful answers. Both Larson and Kisor stress the benefit that critical thinking can have on a student’s ability to communicate effectively.

Beth Reardon, a lecturer in ETC and an instructional designer at S&T’s CAFE, defines critical thinking in the context of crafting solutions that meet audience needs through diverse document formats.

Productive cooperation among ETC faculty and staff

Faculty collaboration is integral to coordinating critical thinking education across ETC foundational courses. As Larson explains, “We evaluate and revise curricula each semester based on faculty feedback and student analytics.”

This cooperative effort involves the exchange of course objectives, scaffolding strategies, and example assignments, fostering a dynamic teaching environment.

“Collaboration gives me access to other faculty members’ experiences and ideas and allows me to share mine,” says Reardon. “This collaboration can lead to much stronger ways to help our students.”

Challenges for students in ETC courses

Recognizing the diversity of ETC students, Larson emphasizes the need to meet students where they are and adapt to their individual challenges. “Each semester’s students are exposed to new things—new traumas, new technologies. The key is to stay flexible.”

Reardon identifies rhetorical analysis as a common struggle, as students often resist the idea of analysis and drafting, preferring quick, error-free answers. Successful

writing is usually an iterative process that begins with an analysis of the rhetorical situation and progresses through multiple drafts of a document.

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Kisor notes that students struggle with rhetorical invention, the process of generating ideas and arguments through critical thinking. He helps them develop strategies for approaching the writing process and builds their confidence by highlighting strengths in their writing.

Instructors in ETC foundational courses try to foster critical thinking skills by being adaptive to students’ needs and existing skills, helping students across all disciplines on campus transition successfully from high school to higher education.

