

Arguing the CASE: Critical Thinking through Writing Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary and The College at Southeastern

Based in the beliefs that critical thinking and writing are essential yet inseparable skills for academic success and are best learned throughout an educational experience, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary and The College at Southeastern developed its Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) to improve critical thinking through writing arguments in the academic areas. This plan addresses Southeastern's fifth core competency: "Critical Thinking and Communication: Demonstrate the ability to think critically, argue persuasively, and communicate clearly." The QEP and core competency affirm that critical thinkers and writers have significant advantages as more competent and confident learners, expositors, researchers, and communicators toward fulfilling Southeastern's educational mission focused on the Great Commission. Recognition of the need for this plan arose over a span of years from an increasing array of anecdotal evidence voiced by many faculty members in different disciplines from perceptions of the need to improve students' critical thinking and writing abilities, perceptions in line with educational research nationally. From this campus-wide concern, Southeastern adopted the seeds for this plan in 2009 upon recommendation by representative faculty members and the Academic Council; thereafter, the plan was embraced by deans, directors, and faculty unanimously.

In plan, Southeastern aims "to improve critical thinking through writing arguments" in the College by means of three developed instruments. First, the QEP Committee designated three writing-intensive (WI) courses in the academic areas that are part of general education requirements: Hermeneutics (BTI 1100), focusing on critical analysis and exposition; Theology I (THE 3110), focusing on deductive synthesis and application; History of Ideas IV (HOI 2120), focusing on worldview analysis and Western thought. Second, the QEP Committee designed a WI-WC partnership, in which students in WI courses are required to visit a writing consultant in the Writing Center (WC) to receive formative feedback on written drafts, engage in critical dialogue about arguments, and develop a revision plan, thus lengthening students' research-writing processes for developing critical skills and metacognitive awareness. Third, the QEP Committee developed a program-level CASE Rubric for teaching and assessing features of critical thinking through writing arguments advancing a case for a critical audience. By this three-part plan, the QEP aims not only to integrate critical skills with disciplinary content but also to develop critical thinkers who can write cogent arguments across the curriculum.

In method, the QEP enhances and evaluates critical thinking through writing arguments by means of four levels of assessment. At the student level, course professors implement discourse-specific writing and argumentation structures into their communication of a critical thinking written product. Additionally, WC consultants offer formative feedback and critical dialogue to students in WI courses regarding agreed-upon critical thinking processes. At the class level, professors of WI courses use common CASE rubrics to score students' critical-thinking writing assignments according to four horizontal categories on the rubrics. At the course level, area deans score copies of class rubrics to assess how students performed on the seven learning outcomes expressed in the four rows of the common rubrics. At the program level, the QEP Committee conducts three tasks: correlates findings by scoring a sample of student papers, develops topics for professional development, and encourages implementing best practices for teaching critical thinking through writing to address identified deficiencies in students' critical processes.

In goal, Southeastern expects to achieve a significant general outcome at the end of five years: all college students will demonstrate the ability think critically through written argumentation. This general outcome is measured by seven specific student learning outcomes composing the CASE Rubric. Southeastern expects the QEP to provide a value-added educational experience for students. The QEP fosters an enriching educational environment that is consistent with Southeastern's mission and core competencies by integrating resources and structures that encourage critical thinking, written communication, and active learning.

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