



## Evaluating Course Goals to Achieve High-Order Assignments

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# Evaluating Course Goals to Achieve High-Order Assignments



## ABSTRACT

As the arts are integral to shaping our culture, rigorous education that will prepare art students to create compelling artworks is necessary. Employing a tool such as Bloom's Taxonomy aids instructors in creating assignments that fulfill high-order concerns in the art-writing classroom. Because writing is one way for would-be artists to shape ideas and create complex thoughts, the art-writing classroom, as a precursor to the art world, challenges students to perform at high cognitive levels. Pedagogy employed in art-writing classrooms across the curriculum allows for criticality that results in sophisticated reasoning.

Shantay Robinson

The old adage goes "A picture is worth a thousand words." The same could be said about a dance, a song, or a play. Art is important because it allows a message to be conveyed concisely without the amount of explanation that would be needed of a written text. Audiences gain insight into the human experience with less investment of their time when looking at art. In this respect, artists have the power to quickly change the world with compelling and thought-provoking artworks. The most celebrated artists challenge the norm. They push boundaries. And they usher society into new understandings. But all artists are not born that way. They are primarily made to be enthralling through education. If we want artists to continue to change the world with avant-garde views conveyed through their artwork, it is up to instructors to be sure they are receiving a rigorous education that challenges them to think critically.

To become complex thinkers, students need to encounter mental rigor during their art education. When students engage in varied types of writing, they learn not only their disciplines from varied perspectives but also high-order skills that are central to a college education. Bloom's Taxonomy was designed to help instructors develop a common barometer for engaging students with curricula that adheres to certain levels of comprehension. It designates verbs that help instructors design goals that increase rigor for the level of learning students can attain. Bloom's verbs allow instructors to write goals for the course while aiding students in achieving their goals of becoming professional artists. Being cognizant of Bloom's

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Taxonomy and using Bloom's verbs within the taxonomy could increase a higher level of thinking on the student's part and help them achieve their goals of becoming artists who convey and create complex ideas.

Although the arts have concerned rhetoricians since antiquity, there is a lack of scholarship about writing in the performing and visual arts classroom (Corbett & Cooper, 2015, p. 2). All students at George Mason University (GMU), regardless of their major, are required to take writing intensive courses within their major. The types of writing assignments found in the upper-level visual and performing arts writing courses are meant to achieve the goals of the course and prepare students for their lives as artists. Thus, the language used to create discourse between the teacher and the student, through the writing assignment prompt, is important in achieving the learning goals of the course.

## Literature Review

Bloom's Taxonomy, which was originally created in 1956 by Benjamin Bloom (Armstrong, n.d.) to measure the level of complexity of thinking, was revised in 2001 by Lorin Anderson and David Krathwol changing the nouns to verbs. It was designed "to provide a common scheme to facilitate communication among educators in the classification of educational goals, to organize development of curricula, and to assess learning outcomes" (Verenna, Noble, Pearson, & Miller, 2018, pp. 1-12). The taxonomy is devised of six levels (remember, understand, apply, analyze, evaluate, and create) in a hierarchy from the least rigorous at the bottom to the most rigorous at the top. Morton and Colbert-Getz (2017) noted that if a certain level of education is required, then course goals and course assignments align with the taxonomy appropriately (p. 171). The study conducted by Verenna et al. (2018) found that when students are proficient at the lower levels of the taxonomy, they are more successful in performing at the higher levels (pp. 1-12). Writing assignments in the upper-

level writing course builds on the writing experience students had in prior courses. Upper-level writing courses might find the assignments on the "apply" and "analyze" levels of Bloom's Taxonomy.

Writing assignments typically fall into one of three categories: transactional, expressive, or poetic. Transactional writing by definition is writing that gets things done. In academia, transactional writing typically occurs in the form of the research paper. Transactional writing is the most common type of writing in upper-level art-writing courses because it helps students demonstrate their knowledge of their discipline (Grauerholz, 1999, p. 313). But in some of the art-writing courses, transactional writing assignments such as grants, critiques, and proposals, which students will likely see in their future work as professional artists, are also assigned. Alisa Roost (2003) noted, "Adding either creative or real-world elements also increases students' interest" (p. 228), stating that "writing is one of the best tools we have to develop student centered, active learning courses that combine critical thinking, student passion, and specific content into well-structured, exciting courses" (p. 231). Associating the students' interest in their majors with writing raises the stakes of the writing assignment. Students want to know what their professions will ask of them, and the transactional writing in these disciplines give them insight to that. Professors can expect for students to better know their disciplines through the act of writing about it. Although traditional research papers that achieve high-order learning goals synthesize concepts and allow students to make judgments of value and apply concepts to knowledge do find their place in many art-writing courses, in which students are writing to learn, several of the courses do assign transactional assignments that mimic real-world activities in which students are learning to write.

In her article about instructor-mediated journals, Seshachari (1994) identified that journal writing helps students "1) overcome the fear of writing, 2) enhance their critical thinking, and 3) raise the level of discourse within the discipline" (p. 7).

Cisero (2006) noted that through journal writing, “students are able to ask questions, admit confusion, make connections, and grow ideologically” (p. 231). Cisero went on to write that “journal writing involves synthesis of information which is a cognitive process necessary in constructing an essay” (p. 232). Haedicke (1996, para. 12) wrote that journals offer students “a low-risk place to explore ideas and styles, and it provides them with a space where their ideas can grow, where they can write and learn or understand, where they can play.” Ryan (2011) wrote, “Reflective skills are widely regarded as a means of improving student’s lifelong learning and professional practice in higher education” (p. 99).

Poetic writing is commonly referred to as creative writing. Grauderholz (1999) wrote,

*Thus, poetic writing may have even greater potential than the more commonly used expressive writing to develop and reinforce students’ sociological imaginations. It can also enhance role-taking skills, social and cultural awareness, empathy for others, and can reduce ethnocentrism. (pp. 313–314)*

Because these are art courses, there is some creative writing in courses that ask students to develop film screenplays. Given that there are screenwriting courses, the writing of screenplays found in those courses are inherently poetic. These could also be considered professional writing, as they are the types of writing students in film and video studies will write in their professional lives.

## Method

Although important, goals placed on syllabi do not essentially depict the learning received in a given course. But the goals of the course and the assignment might be aimed at readying students for their role as artists, in that goals explicitly state what students should achieve in the course. This might not be feasible if the assignments given to students are not reflective of the roles students will play in their lives as professional artists. Wall, Stahl, and Salam (2015) discussed Habermasian discourse

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analysis, describing it as the utterance between actors in a communicative exchange (p. 261). Both the instructor and the students are actors exchanging the goals and the assignments. It is up to the instructor to devise tangible goals and doable assignments. But the students’ role is to react to these prompts, with the end result of a better understanding of their discourse community.

For the purposes of this study, power relations are between instructor and student. Conveying course goals to students is a way to equalize power relations in the writing classroom. When the students know what they need to learn, the instructor can then help them meet their goals. The methodology—discourse analysis—aims to deconstruct power structures we take for granted (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 48). The role of both the goals typically stated on the syllabus and the assignment prompt is communicative, and this is one way to analyze texts, according to Adolphus (2018).

Understanding that critical discourse analysis “aims to contribute to social change along the lines of more equal power relations in communication processes and society in general” (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 63), whether the course goals and the assignment prompts are explicit and comprehensive may inform us of how the instructor positions him- or herself in the classroom. When the syllabi for art-writing courses include language that offers directions to students from someone in power to make the students interact with the discourse of their given community, the student is gaining equal footing with the instructor by engaging with the discipline based on the course goals.

Writing courses can be taken in every major offered at GMU, including the arts. Dr. Michelle LaFrance, director of Writing Across

the Curriculum at GMU, has collected syllabi and assignments from a variety of courses offered on campus from varied disciplines. From the RE/V pool of interviews, syllabi, and course assignments (the RE/V Project is a study and strategic review of the upper level writing intensive courses conducted by the writing across the curriculum program at George Mason University), I gathered data about eight art-writing courses and looked at 29 writing assignments that would bring me closer to understanding how instructors use course goals to inform writing assignments that will help students achieve their goals of becoming professional artists. First, I looked for the writing assignment type: transactional, expressive, poetic. And I coded for that. I then looked at the language of the course goals in relation to Bloom's Taxonomy. Although the main verbs were not evident on all of the syllabi and assignments, I evaluated for synonyms of those verbs. Once the objective or the course goal was found on Bloom's hierarchy, I placed the objective in a low, mid, or high level of comprehension.

## Results

Of the 29 writing assignments, five were poetic writing, four were expressive writing, and 20 were transactional writing. Sixteen of the courses required students to write research papers. Most of these courses are asking students to think deeply about the subject of their discipline and work with research to foster a greater understanding of the discipline. I chose to look closely at three courses for which there are both syllabi and assignments to effectively think about how course goals inform writing assignments. The three courses vary in the amount of course goals mentioned in the syllabi and the descriptiveness of the writing assignments: Writing for Artists (AVT 395), Dance History: Pre-Twentieth Century (DANC 390), and Music History in Society II: Classic and Romantic Eras (MUSI 332). I think it is important to look at both the course goals in comparison with the assignments for the course to make a better

assertion of how effective specific course goals are to assignments. By then comparing the verbiage of the course with Bloom's Taxonomy, I was able to assess how effective the writing of assignments is in fulfilling the course goals.

The language used on the AVT 395 syllabus is accessible but does not include any action verbs listed on Bloom's Taxonomy. Instead, the instructor uses the words *improve*, *continue*, *strengthen*, *build*, *explore*, and *think more*. The assumption here is that students have already had some instruction in writing and are building on those skills. Because the upper-level writing courses at GMU typically occur after students have taken English 101, it is safe to assume that students enrolled in AVT 395 do have some college-level writing ability. Although the assumption of the instructor is sound, the majority of the goals fall within the "Apply" level of Bloom's Taxonomy, which falls at the middle of the hierarchal diagram. AVT 395 includes expressive, transactional, and poetic writing assignments. The poetic assignment is Ekphrasis that is verbally expressing a visual work of art. The expressive assignments include blog posts and written communication between students, both professional writing skills students can use to think about their roles as artists as they write to learn. The transactional writing assignments include writing short biographies and design critiques both writing genres which are necessary for students learning to write. The writing assignments are asking students to apply the knowledge they have of both writing and their discipline to create work that will allow them to both learn to write and write to learn.

DANC 390 examines historical traditions in Western dance history. For the course, students are required to write four one-page papers, two three-page papers, and a 10-page research paper. The syllabus goals of the course identify students as analyzing and interpreting dance "with reference to styles, skills, narrative content, and theatrical technology prevalent at different points in time." The action verbs *analyze* and *interpret* both fall at the midlevel of Bloom's Taxonomy. As this is an upper-level

art-writing course, the goals of the course align with the rigor expected of the course. Of interest, the prompt for the assignments asks the students to argue whether they agree or disagree with a previously stated position concerning the influence of one culture to another cultural dance style. This level of rigor is evaluation according to Bloom's Taxonomy and falls at the second highest level usurped only by creation.

Although there were several syllabi for MUSI 332, this course does not state explicit goals on its syllabus but does include a paragraph for course description and goals. Students are asked to write a substantial research paper of 3,500 words. MUSI 332 is a history course, but at the same time it is a writing course. The writing assignment prompt states the assignments working up to the final paper will "be a series of writing assignments in which we explore the criteria for evaluating this style of writing, developing a thesis and an argument, and using and citing sources correctly." The language used in the assignment prompt for MUSI 332 is asking students to perform at the level of an upper-level writing course because its objective is to have students evaluate, develop a thesis, and make an argument. These directives fall in the high-level on Bloom's Taxonomy. This course asks that students learn the material through writing about it.

## Findings

Course goals are not explicit on all syllabi inhibiting an understanding of the course. Although it is expected that course goals are designated for the beginning of the syllabi, not all of the syllabi included course goals, or the course goals were hidden in paragraphs describing the course. When course goals were explicitly stated, action verbs that best describe what students are intended to learn were not always present. There were more syllabi with course goals. But given that these upper-level art-writing courses are expected to have objectives that fall on the upper levels of Bloom's Taxonomy, I found that although some course goals fell toward

the lower levels of Bloom's Taxonomy, most of the course goals included objectives that were midlevel.

It has been proven that students use course goals to understand what they are supposed to learn from the course. Simon and Taylor (2009) discussed how research shows goals are valued by students to know what they need to know for a course (p. 55). Some of the ways students use goals are "focus," "guided me," "keeps me on track," "summarized," and "outlined the course" (p. 55). One student in their research stated, "Learning goals are 'useful in that they show me what the prof wants us to learn'" (p. 57).

Although some syllabi had many clearly stated goals using action verbs albeit not the action verbs on Bloom's Taxonomy, other syllabi lacked clearly stated goals to help students navigate the course. When the goal of the course is stated, students become aware of what they are going to learn in the course. Even when the course goals are stated on the syllabi, it is also important for instructors to write goals that will make it clear what the objectives of the course will be, leading instructors assigning work to meet those course goals. The course goals are not only for students but also serve to help instructors steer the course.

As most of the writing assignments are research papers, they are asking that students evaluate an argument. Research papers are transactional writing that tends to fall at the "evaluate" level of Bloom's Taxonomy, which is the second highest level there is. But the research paper comes in many forms. Research papers are intended to achieve high-order learning when it is asked of students to argue, appraise, defend, and judge. More than 50% of the assignments in this study are research papers; the language used signal to students the type of rigor that is expected in their papers. Instructors used action verbs like *analyze*, *interpret*, *evaluate*, *design*, *implement*, and *formulate*. These verbs fall on both the analyze and evaluate levels of Bloom's Taxonomy and describe a high level of rigor.

Research papers are the dominant writing assignment among the courses in this study, and they are asking students to perform

rigorous work in writing to learn in their disciplines. Some of the courses offer low-stakes research writing assignments to build up to the semester's final paper. This kind of work exercises the research writing skill.

Although all instructors have the right to assign research papers they deem worthy to meet the needs of the course goals, the upper-level designation of the courses encourage instructors to strive for the kind of research paper that will be more rigorous and challenging for students at this level of their college careers. A research paper described at the level of those assigned at GMU are achieving the goals of the courses where they exist. The instructors have used definitive language to instruct students of the critical thinking skills they will use when composing drafts of their papers. The skills developed through these papers enhance the critical-thinking skills that students will use throughout their professional lives.

When the goals of the course are clear, as they are in AVT 395, instructors offer more diverse writing assignments and students access a variety of abilities. During a single semester, AVT 395 assigns five distinct assignments, which are either transactional, expressive, or poetic writing assignments. By using varied writing types in the course, students are gaining insight not only to their discipline but also to themselves as critical thinkers. They are writing in more than one form with varied stakes for each assignment, whereas the other courses use low-stakes research assignments to build up to the research paper, which is primarily having students think in one way throughout the course.

In one semester of AVT 395, students are engaging in five varied types of writing. Although the other courses in the pool of assignments collected do ask students to engage in high-order assignments, there is little variety in the assignments assigned. In AVT 395, students have five distinct writing projects to complete. Students in this course are using varied abilities to write to learn about their discipline from creatively writing about an artwork to writing professional curatorial proposals.

Because "different kinds of writing have different functions" (Grauerholz, 1999,

p. 312), using varied assignment types aid students in developing more diverse skills. In a class such as AVT 395, in which transactional, expressive, and poetic writing assignments exists, students are not only learning about their discipline by writing professional documents but also getting to know themselves and their classmates as critical thinking artists.

## Discussion

More than 50% of the assignments in this study were research papers. The structure that we have here as the art-writing course is one in which writing research papers has become the norm. Although research papers do communicate student learning and help students write to learn their disciplines, if the research papers are not explicitly asking students to defend an argument or make an original thesis, then they may in fact just use the research paper to recite facts. If the recitation of facts is the objective of the assignment, then students in upper-level art-writing courses are not performing with the level of rigor designated for these courses. If the structure is assigning research papers with the objective of having students write to learn history and its effects on their chosen discipline, and this is all they are required to do, then they are also not fully working toward their mission to become artists. This study found that students at GMU are being asked to perform at a rigorous level and that the research papers are high-order assignments.

Because we know, through the study of writing pedagogy, that writing is improved only with consistent practice (Werry & Walseth, 2011, p. 185), the writing courses in the arts offer time for more practice, and more is at stake in the practice of writing in the discipline. Essentially in the upper-level art-writing course, students pursue their artistic studies by writing about and for their artistic disciplines (Werry & Walseth, 2011, p. 185), which is meant to hone criticality toward their artistic disciplines needed in their professional lives. Kolb, Longest, and Jensen (2013) argued that students who are

learning about a subject relevant to their interests learn how to write better in those disciplines (p. 20).

*Students claimed not all writing-intensive courses are effective. However, courses that provided students with opportunities to immerse themselves into a writing-rich environment while learning effective ways to portray thoughts, acquire the diction of the discipline, overlook superfluous and be specific were effective. (Leggette & Homeyer, 2015, p. 116)*

In a study conducted by Jani and Mellinger (2013) to understand factors influencing student writing, the authors came to the understanding that students do not write to learn. This outcome was in relation to “the type of support, feedback and direction students wanted to help them with their writing” (p. 148). Students wanted to be trained on how to provide a service instead of being educated on how to think critically on how to provide that service (Jani & Mellinger, 2013, p. 148).

## Conclusion

According to Briggs (2016), articulating complex thoughts and reasoning skills are real-world skills artists need that begin with art education. The Jani and Mellinger (2013) study found that students did not write to

learn; their goal is to be trained on how to provide a service (p. 148). Understanding that instructors of art-writing courses prepare students for the art world in which they will need to use their critical-thinking skills, this study indicates that rigorous learning goals implemented to prepare students for the identities, relations, and knowledge they need in their careers as professional artists are being realized in some of the GMU art-writing courses.

Using transactional writing assignments as real-world experience and as a way for students to write to learn is effective in so far as the students are using their critical-thinking skills to develop their ability to express complex thoughts and reasoning. Using Bloom’s Taxonomy as a guide to creating course goals and objectives leads to assignments that ask students to perform more rigorous critical thinking and reasoning. With attention paid to the directives written on assignment prompts, assignments can achieve high-order objectives. Because the writing courses I looked at for this study fulfill upper-level writing requirements, it is essential to best use the courses to achieve upper-level objectives like applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating to fulfill the requirements of the class as well as achieve student learning and professional goals.

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