

Writing Assignments

Heuristics

Heuristics prompt thinking by means of questions and may be useful to guide your writing. A familiar example is the Who? What? When? Where? How? procedure. Another set of questions that often work well, adapted from W. Ross Winterrowd in *The Contemporary Writer: A Practical Rhetoric* (Harcourt, New York, 1975), is to view things:

- as an isolated static entity. What are its characteristic features?
- as one among many of a class. How does it differ from others in its class?
- as part of a larger system. How does it fit into larger systems of which it is a part?
- as a process, rather than as a static entity. How is it changing?
- as a system, rather than as an entity. What are the parts and how do they fit together?

Richard Larson's problem solving heuristic for issues-oriented subjects asks:

- What is the problem? Why is the problem indeed a problem?
- What goals are to be accomplished? Which goals have the highest priority?
- What procedures might attain the goals?
- What are the consequences of each possible action (including inaction)?
- How do potential actions compare as potential solutions to the problem?
- Which course of action is best?

Reading Reaction Papers

In this course you will often be asked to bring a 2-3 page typed reaction to the reading assigned for the day. The paper should demonstrate that you have done the readings and have thought about them carefully, and that you are prepared to discuss their contents. These papers should be your *response* to the reading, not a summary of the content. **They should have a topic that expands upon, responds to, and engages the material and gives a you a chance to practice using the heuristics above.** When the reading relates to a previous assignment or experiment, you might wish to include analysis of the various perspectives in your paper.

Your papers might also include comparisons of different parts of the readings, something with which you agree, something with which you disagree, how the reading relates to a personal experience you have had, how the reading relates to other reading in this or another course, or questions about things you don't understand.

Try to have a “conversation” with what you read. The reaction papers can be thought of as your contribution to the conversation –“talk back” to the author/s by documenting what you're “saying” in writing. You should also be prepared to speak about the ideas in your papers during class discussion.

Do remember your writing skills: Organized paragraphs with topic sentences, spell checked, and a concluding paragraph of your point at the end of your writing.