

**Some Well Crafted Tasks for Active Thinking and Learning  
(for informal, exploratory writing activities)**  
from John C. Bean, *Engaging Ideas* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996)

**1. Link course concepts to students' personal experience**

Think of examples out of your own personal experience to illustrate the uses of vector algebra. You might consider such experiences as swimming in a river with a steady current, walking across the deck of a moving boat, crossing the wake while water-skiing, cutting diagonally across a vacant lot while friends walk around the lot, or watching a car trying to beat a moving train to a railroad crossing. Use one or more of these experiences to explain to a friend what vector algebra is all about. [Mathematics]

Describe times in your life when you have experienced role strain and role conflict. What are the key differences between these terms, and why is the distinction useful? [Sociology]

**2. Have students explain course concepts to new learners**

Using layperson's language, explain to a new diabetic what is meant by the glycemic index of foods and why knowing about the glycemic index will help the diabetic maintain good blood sugar levels. [Nursing/nutrition science]

**3. Ask students to support a thesis**

After all of Hamlet's shilly-shallying, Fortinbras is just what Denmark needs. Support or attack. [Literature]

Read the accompanying handout on how historians evaluate the credibility and reliability of primary documents. Based on the criteria set forth in the handout, determine whether Percicles's Funeral Oration is/is not reliable evidence. [History]

**4. Pose problems for students to solve**

An hourglass is being weighed on a sensitive balance, first when sand is dropping in a steady stream from the upper to lower part and then again when the upper part is empty. Are the two weights the same or not? Write an explanation supporting your answer to this question. Write to a fellow student who is arguing for what you think is the wrong answer. [Physics]

**5. Provide data for students to interpret and use**

Examine the unsorted data about Mary Smith, a stroke patient who is soon to be transferred from an acute-care facility to a convalescent center. [The accompanying data include admitting information, history and physical data, progress notes, nursing notes, and a social service report.] Based on these data, write a discharge summary for Mary Smith. Your audience is the nursing supervisor of the convalescent facility, and your purpose is to help the convalescent center provide the patient with optimal continuity of care. [Nursing]

To what extent do the attached economic data support the hypothesis "Social service spending is inversely related to economic growth"? First, create a scattergram as a visual test of the hypothesis. Then formulate a verbal argument analyzing whether the data do or do not support the hypothesis. [Economics]

## **6. Create a frame in which students can insert arguments or data**

To solve the problem of homelessness in America, we must realize that not all homeless fit into the same category. In fact, we ought to specify X categories of homeless. First, [development] . . . Second, [development] . . . [Sociology]

Socrates and the Sophists differed in their beliefs about truth. On the one hand, Socrates argued that [development] . . . The Sophists, on the other hand, argued that [development] . . . [Philosophy]

## **7. Devise roles for students to play**

Look at this prehistoric cave painting [attached reproduction shows a speared deerlike animal]. Imagine that you are the Ice Age artist who created the animal painting on the cave wall. What would have motivated you to create such a painting? [Art history]

Assume that space scientists, working with sports clothing manufacturers, have developed a superthin and superflexible space suit that allows athletes to run and jump freely on extraterrestrial soil. As an all-world sports promoter, your uncle, Squeebly Ricketts, decides to schedule an exhibition baseball game on the moon. One of his first tasks is to provide instructions for laying out the baseball diamond and outfield fences. But then he begins to wonder, How will the lack of an atmosphere and the greatly reduced gravitational force affect the game? For help, he turns to you as an expert in physics. [Physics]

## **8. Ask students to abstract or summarize articles or course lectures**

Write a 200- to 250-word summary of Kenneth Galbraith's paper, "The Theory of Countervailing Power," which attempts to provide a theory that describes and accounts for the distribution of power. Your summary should accurately convey the content of the paper. It should be comprehensive and balanced with clear sentence structure and good transitions. [Political science]

## **9. Have students write dialogues or playscripts**

You fall suddenly into a weird time warp and find yourself in a tavern with Aristotle, Hegel, Arthur Miller, and literary critic Robert Heilman, all of whom have distinctive views on what constitutes a tragedy. They are arguing vociferously about Miller's *Death of a Salesman*: Is it a tragedy? Luckily, you have just studied Miller's play in your literature class and have strong feelings yourself on this matter. Write a mini-play in which you, Aristotle, Hegel, Miller, and Heilman express views on this question. [Literature]

## **10. Have students write from a case or simulation**

Mr. X, a patient at City Hospital, suffers from kidney failure and requires periodic and fairly frequent dialysis, which is funded by the government. He is one of a number of patients who use the dialysis machine, and there are many other similarly afflicted patients who are on a waiting list for the use of the machine. Mr. X finds dialysis quite painful and sometimes says that he would rather just forget the treatment and let the disease run its natural course. Lately he has begun to miss some of his treatments and has been failing to control his diet properly. He has even become abusive with the hospital staff who operate the dialysis machine. His wife is quite worried about him, especially since his behavior has changed toward her and their five children. Mr. X continues his erratic routine, sometimes taking his treatment quietly, sometimes taking it but abusing the staff, sometimes failing to take it at all. Suddenly, he begins to miss all his treatments. Two weeks later, he is rushed to the hospital in a coma. He must have immediate dialysis if he is to survive. Should

the hospital perform the dialysis, or should Mr. X be allowed to die?

*Initial roles.* An ethicist taking a utilitarian position; an ethicist taking a deontological position; Mr. X's wife; a staff member; a representative of the people on the waiting list for the dialysis machine; a member of the Hemlock Society; members of the hospital board that will decide the case.

*Conducting the simulation.* Students discuss the case, taking their assigned roles.

*Writing assignment.* After hearing all the arguments presented by the characters in the role-play, assume that you are a member of the hospital board that will decide the case, and write a three-to four-page argument supporting your position on the case. [Philosophy; health-care fields]