

English 0099 Critical Thinking Exercise Teaching Argumentation with a News Article

Assignment: News or features stories in online newspapers or magazines are excellent for introducing students to discussions of ideas in writing. I try to choose and provide links to articles (usually one to two pages long) that cover general interest topics so that they are not required to do research to respond to the article. For example, I found an article about a study that showed that owning pets could relieve stress for college students. Most students have either owned pets themselves or know someone who owns pets. If the class is very familiar with a particular pet, we sometimes refine our writing topic to the particular pet, such as a dog or cat.

First, the students print and read the article before class. Then, we discuss the article from beginning to end. I also teach annotation during this discussion. Choosing the main idea and the important points in the article exercises their analysis and classification skills. Also, many students bring relevant experience to the topic. I advise them to write down any questions they have about the statements in the article and any rebuttals they would make to the points in the article as if they were interviewing the experts who performed the study. Annotation teaches students to engage with the text in relevant ways and helps to develop a critical eye.

In this particular article about pets, the entire article extols the benefits pets offer college students. However, near the end of the article, one of the experts from the study says that he would not recommend that all college students go out and buy pets. I use this statement as a jumping off point to launch the rebuttals with the question: Why shouldn't we all go out and buy pets? And, if one pet is good for relieving stress, why don't we go out and buy three or four puppy dogs and five or six kitty cats? Students easily identify lots of reasons for not doing so. Because this is a familiar topic, students usually have little trouble identifying ways that pets can cause stress for college students, which is the thesis for their argumentative paper.

Rationale: Using a simple topic helps students to focus on the elements of argumentation that they can apply to research papers later in their college career. Also, this assignment introduces students to the written discussion in peer-reviewed journals of their chosen fields of study that will also come later in their academic and professional careers.

Adaptability: This assignment could be adapted to various disciplines, using articles that demonstrate discipline-specific concepts. Students could also research the topic to support their claims.

Link to online article:

<http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2008/12/081223091318.htm>

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