

Analytic Memos

This is CAT #12 from Thomas A. Angelo and K. Patricia Cross, *Classroom Assessment Techniques; A Handbook for College Teachers*, 2nd ed. Jossey-Bass, 1993.

Description

The analytic memo is basically a simulation exercise. It requires students to write a one or two page analysis of a specific problem or issue. The person for whom the memo is being written is usually identified as an employer, a client, or a stakeholder who needs the student's analysis to inform decision making.

Related Teaching Goals

- ◆ Develop analytic skills
- ◆ Development problem solving skills
- ◆ Improve writing skills
- ◆ Develop management skills
- ◆ Develop leadership skills
- ◆ Develop ability to perform skillfully

Purpose

Analytic Memos assess students' ability to analyze assigned problems by using the discipline specific approaches, methods, and techniques they are learning. This CAT also assesses students' skill at communicating their analyses in a clear and concise manner. This short, structured writing assignment provides high quality feedback on students' analytic and writing skills as a by-product of an intellectually challenging and realistic skill building exercise.

Suggestions for Use

Analytic memos are particularly useful in disciplines that clearly relate to public policy or management, such as political science, economics, criminal justice, social work, education, environmental studies, management, and public health. This CAT works best when used early in the term, as a means to help students prepare for later graded memo writing assignments. Because preparing and assessing the Analytic Memos takes time and effort, so this technique is best suited to seminars and small classes.

Step by Step Procedure

- 1) Determine which analytic methods or techniques you wish to assess.
- 2) Locate or invent an appropriate, well focused, and typical problem or situation for the students to analyze. Get background information on the problem or invent some plausible information.
- 3) Specify who is writing the memo and for whom it is being written, as well as its subject and purpose.
- 4) Write your own Analytic Memo on the subject. Keep track of any difficulties you have in writing the memo and note how long it takes you from start to finish. Ask yourself whether it really required the type of analysis you were hoping to assess and whether you found it an informative and instructive exercise.
- 5) Decide whether you want students to work alone, in pairs, or in small groups.
- 6) Develop an explicit, half page directions sheet for your students. Specify the students' role, the identity of the audience, the specific subject to be addressed, the basic analytic approach to be taken, the length limit (usually one or two pages), and the assignment deadline.
- 7) Explain to students how this assessment can help prepare them for subsequent course assignments and for their careers.

Turning the Data You Collect Into Useful Information

The basic challenge in analyzing Analytic Memos is to extract useful information while severely limiting the amount of time and energy you spend. Promise yourself to read each memo quickly, and only once, before assessing it. As an aid, devise a short checklist of three to five major points to look for in each memo read – and limit yourself to just those points. For example, you might want to evaluate your students' Analytic Memos for "content" (the breadth of the analysis and the quality of information), "skill" (the skill with which the relevant tools or methods were employed in the analysis), and "writing" (clarity, conciseness, appropriateness of format, and overall writing quality).

Make up a simple grid on which you can check off "Well done," "Acceptable," or "Needs work" for each of the major points you focus on as you read. If you must write comments, limit yourself to two or three very specific ones. After reading all the Analytic Memos quickly, or a sample of the memos in a large class, you can add up the number of "Needs work" check marks in each category and prepare your teaching response accordingly. For example, if you find that more memos need work on analytic "skill" than on writing "quality," you could focus your next lesson on the former.

Ideas for Adapting and Extending

- Before they rewrite their memos, have students read and evaluate each other's memos. Be sure to provide guidelines for this peer evaluation task.
- Use the Analytic Memo as the first draft of a graded assignment.
- Divide the class into policy analysts and policy makers; then have the policy makers respond, in memo format, to the analysts' memos.

RSQC2 (Recall, Summarize, Question, Connect, and Comment)

This is CAT #46 from Thomas A. Angelo and K. Patricia Cross, *Classroom Assessment Techniques; A Handbook for College Teachers*, 2nd ed. Jossey-Bass, 1993.

Description

RSQC2 is a modular Classroom Assessment Technique. Teachers can use the whole thing or select individual components to administer. When the whole RSQC2 is used, this five step protocol guides students quickly through simple recall, summary, analysis, evaluation, and synthesis exercises focusing on a previous class session.

Purpose

RSQC2 allows instructors to compare detailed information on the students' recall, understanding, and evaluations of a class session against their own. It also informs teachers of students' questions and comments that need timely responses. This technique provides students with a comprehensive framework for recalling and reviewing class sessions.

Related Teaching Goals

- ◆ Develop ability to synthesize and integrate information and ideas
- ◆ Improve skill at paying attention
- ◆ Improve memory skills
- ◆ Develop appropriate study skills, strategies, and habits
- ◆ Develop (self-) management skills

Suggestions for Use

RSQ2 is particularly useful to students who lack participation in the relevant discipline and to those who lack sophisticated learning and study skills. This technique is best used at regular intervals, at least at first. If classes meet only once or twice a week, it can profitably be used to begin each class. If classes meet every day, or three times a week, consider using it to end – or begin and end – the week. You need not go through all the steps in the procedure to benefit from the technique; many faculty omit the “Comment” step, and others work through only one or two different steps at a time.

Step by Step Procedure

- 1) Recall: At the beginning of class, ask students to make a list – in words or simple phrases – of what they recall as the most important, useful, or meaningful points from the previous class. Allow one or two minutes for them to write the list. Then ask each student to choose, from his or her list, three to five main points and rank them in order of importance. This step should take another one or two minutes at most.
- 2) Summarize: Direct them to summarize as many of the most important points as they can into one summary sentence that captures the essence of the previous class. Give them one or two minutes to write a summary sentence.

- 3) **Question:** Ask them to jot down one or two questions that remained unanswered after the previous class. Allow one or two minutes again.
- 4) **Connect:** Ask students to explain – in one or two sentences written in as many minutes – the connection(s) between the main points of the previous class and the major goal(s) of the entire course.
- 5) **Comment:** Invite the students to write an evaluation comment or two about the class. Here are a few possible comment stems you can suggest as starting points: “What I enjoyed most/least was...” or “What I found most/least useful was...” or “During most of the class, I felt...” This step requires a couple of minutes.
- 6) Collect the RSQC2 feedback, letting students know what kind of feedback they can expect to receive and when they will receive it.

Turning the Data You Collect Into Useful Information

Before you begin to analyze the data, decide which set of responses you are going to work with: questions, connections, summaries, or comments. Unless you have a very small class or a great deal of time to spare, don't try to analyze all of them. If you have already written your own RSQC2 responses, you can compare them with those of your students. Note whether or not you and they got the same basic points in your “Recall” lists. When you compare their responses with yours, note omissions, additions, and errors in the students’ “Recall” lists and summaries. Assess the degree of “fit” between your summary of the class and the students’: How close are they? Look for patterns in the questions and comments. Do several students mention the same topics or concerns? Share with students the information you obtained on one of the prompts.

Ideas for Adapting and Extending

- Encourage students to share the items on the “Recall” lists with each other. Elicit responses and create a class “Recall” list, and perhaps a class summary.
- After the process is clearly understood, let students take over the teacher’s role (a different student or pair each session).
- Use the technique at the end of very long classes, rather than at the beginning.
- If students have difficulty responding, let them work in pairs or small groups and submit group responses.

Pros

The technique gives the instructor immediate feedback. By stressing connections, it provides an explicit cognitive “bridge” between “old” and “new” information and ideas. It forces participants continually to review, recycle, reorganize, reconsider, and integrate the major points of the course.

Cons

It goes slowly the first few times. You may need to model your responses in order to help students see how you carry out the steps. Suggestion: You shouldn't have students write questions or comments unless you are willing to respond to them in a thoughtful manner.