Best Practices for Teaching Academic Literacy:  
A Resource Book for ACLT 052 and ACLT 053

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Overview

In light of current research on post-secondary literacy instruction, new federal and state legislation, and changes in our student population, CCBC has moved away from standalone developmental reading and writing courses that take a traditional, sub-skills and rhetorical modes based approach. Our developmental reading and writing instruction now takes place within an accelerated, integrated, academic literacy framework.

The new developmental reading and writing course sequence includes two integrated reading and writing courses, **ACLT 052: Academic Literacy** and **ACLT 053: Advanced Academic Literacy**.

- Students who place into the first level of the developmental ENGL/RDNG sequence will enroll in **ACLT 052 (5 hours)**

- Students who place into the second level of the developmental ENGL/RDNG sequence will enroll in an **ACLT 053 (3 hours) /ENGL 101 (3 hours) ALP = 6 hours** (this allows them to earn 3 credits for ENGL 101 while they are completing their developmental requirement)

- Students who place into the second level of the developmental ENGL/RDNG sequence but are part-time and/or unable to enroll in the 6-hour ALP can enroll in a **standalone section of ACLT 053 (3 hours)**

This resource book serves as a professional development tool for instructors of all CCBC courses that take an accelerated, integrated, academic literacy approach to reading and writing instruction. Using the research literature and insight garnered from experienced ACLT faculty, this resource book provides sound, theory-based curricular and instructional best practices for student success.
**Guiding Principles for Teaching Academic Literacy**

Instead of a prescribed curriculum, an academic literacy model of integrated reading and writing is guided by a common set of principles. These principles include: (1) skill-embedded curricular design, (2) thinking-focused pedagogical methods, and (3) growth-centered assessment practices. These principles serve as the foundation for all aspects of an academic literacy course and they serve as the basis for evaluating faculty who teach academic literacy courses.

**Skill-Embedded Curriculum**

- Not based on the outcomes for the existing courses; this is a new course, not simply reading/writing combined
- College-level tasks with an emphasis on English 101 and other 100-level credit courses
- Students “practice college” instead of working on pre-college skills
- Whole, complex readings instead of paragraphs
- Address affective issues through course assignments and activities
- Not a literature course

**Thinking-Focused Pedagogy**

- Turn our assumptions on their head or “before they can do this, they have to do this.” Start with the real academic stuff right away—not baby steps
- Use triage to deal with student areas that need support rather than lowering the entire curriculum to sub-skills—“just in time remediation”
- Capitalize on the heterogeneous class environment
- Address affective issues
- Do not be bound by the mental classifications of 051 and 052 levels
- Have a “growth mindset” towards students and their progress
- Help grow student sense of responsibility

**Growth-Centered Assessment**

- Holistic approach to assessing student work—look at content as well as grammar
- Progressive approach to grading: tolerance for less than perfect work early in the semester
- Provide a lot of “low-risk” opportunities to talk, think, and write before graded, higher-stakes assignments
- Embrace the 3 goals:
  - Independently read and understand complex academic texts
  - Critically respond to the ideas and information in those texts
  - Write essays integrating ideas and information from those texts
Selecting Course Materials

While there are no set textbooks for an academic literacy course, and the possibilities for course materials are vast, there are a few key considerations when selecting course materials. Most important is making sure the selected materials are in line with the guiding principles for the course. Specifically, the guiding principles emphasize the use of whole, complex readings that give students authentic exposure to and practice with college-level reading, thinking, and writing skills. Consequently, the selection of course materials should follow these guidelines:

- Traditional reading and writing textbooks that focus on explicit sub-skills or rhetorical modes do not support an integrated, critical thinking-focused course model.
- Workbook-style texts that feature vocabulary lists, grammar drills, and/or reading skill drills do not support an integrated, critical thinking-focused course model.
- Readings should be full-length, complex, college-level academic texts.
- Readings should be organized thematically and should present the theme from multiple perspectives.
- Literature, fiction and non-fiction, can be used when accompanied by shorter articles on themes stemming from those pieces.

Several publishers offer college composition readers that include complex academic texts that are thematically arranged, and that present the theme from multiple perspectives. While in no way exhaustive, the following list of texts have been recommended by experienced ACLT faculty:

- *Rereading America*, Colombo, Cullen, and Lisle
- *In Conversation*, Goehner and Azimi
- *Emerging: Contemporary Readings for Writers*, Barrios
- *American Voices: Culture and Community*, LaGuardia and Guth
- *Language Awareness: Readings for College Writers*, Eschholz, Rosa, and Clark
- *Signs of Life in the USA: Readings on Popular Culture for Writers*, Maasik and Solomon
- *Acting out Culture: Readings for Critical Inquiry*, Miller
- *Ways of Reading: An Anthology for Writers*, Bartholomae, Petrosky, and Waite
- The Bedford Spotlight Reader Series (single-themed readers)
- Oxford University Press “Reader for Writers” Series (single-themed readers)
Designing Cohesive Course Units

Once course materials are selected, they should be organized into cohesive course units. According to the guiding principles for academic literacy courses, the emphasis is on supporting student success with the kinds of reading, thinking, and writing that they will be expected to complete in English 101 and other 100-level college courses. An essential aspect of supporting students’ success is to address their affective challenges along with their academic challenges. In light of this, each course unit should focus on ideas and information related to real-life issues that impact the students, while also embedding essential reading, thinking, and writing skills and strategies. A typical 15-week ACLT course can be organized into 3-4 units, each lasting about 3-4 weeks long. The basic unit format is as follows:

- Themes, Texts, and Essential Questions
- Reading/Writing Skills Mini-Lessons
- Pre-reading/Pre-writing Activities
- Independent Reading w/ Guide Questions
- In-class, Post-reading Activities
- Unit Essay

Themes, Texts, and Essential Questions

An academic literacy course is organized using thematic units that cover issues that are relevant to the students on a personal level as well as on a more global level. Guided by “essential questions” for each theme, students engage several texts that include college-level readings from a variety of genres, music, videos and other media. Essential questions provide the context for close reading, deep thinking, and critical response to the ideas and information presented in the assigned texts. To facilitate the critical thinking that this course emphasizes, the texts for each theme represent a variety of viewpoints related to the key issues and essential questions for each theme.

Reading/Writing Skills Mini-Lessons

For each unit, essential skills for critical reading, writing and thinking are emphasized. These skills are explicitly presented as mini-lessons (15 minutes or less) and then embedded in the actual reading/writing activities for each of the reading selections in the unit.

Pre-reading/Pre-writing Activities

Each unit includes activities for pre-reading and pre-writing such as discussions, free-writes, viewing relevant popular media, blogging, and discussion boards. These activities prepare students for the independent reading, writing, and thinking tasks for the unit by activating prior knowledge, building schema, establishing the purpose for reading/writing, and posing essential questions.
Independent Reading w/ Guide Questions

Students are required to independently read the major texts for each unit. To assist students in this task, guide questions that evoke critical reading and thinking are provided. These guide questions also serve as the basis for in-class, post-reading activities.

In-class, Post-reading Activities

Each unit includes in-class, post-reading activities such as discussions (small group and whole class), games, debates, writing, quizzes, and presentations (individual and small group). These activities provide opportunities for students to process, clarify, and further engage with the information and ideas in the course texts.

Unit Essay

The culmination of each unit is a full-length essay that requires students to integrate and synthesize the course texts (and in some cases, outside research) to construct cohesive, well-supported arguments.
Sample Unit Plan

**Theme:** “We Don’t Need No Education”: The Politics of Schooling

**Essential Questions:**
- Does education really empower us?
- What purpose does education serve in our society?
- Is education truly the “great equalizer”?

**Reading/Writing Skills:**

Academic Habits of Mind
- Thinking critically
- Being curious
- Considering new ideas
- Challenging existing beliefs
- Respecting other points of view
- Engaging in intellectual discussions

The Reading-Writing Process
- Activating and building schema
- Main ideas/theses and supporting details
- Summarizing ideas and information
- Basic essay structure
- Using appropriate vocabulary
- Using correct grammar, punctuation and spelling

**Texts:**
- “Living in Two Worlds” (Marcus Mabry)
- “Social Class and the Hidden Curriculum of Work” (Jean Anyon)
- “Against School” (John Gatto)

**Unit Essay:**

**Critical Analysis of Education**

Horace Mann, an advocate of American public education declared that, “education...beyond all other devices of human origin, is a great equalizer of conditions of men --the balance wheel of the social machinery...It does better than to disarm the poor of their hostility toward the rich; it prevents being poor.” Guided by this idea, most Americans still believe that education leads to self-improvement and can help us empower ourselves—and perhaps even transform our society.

The reading selections in this unit present several different perspectives on the “politics of schooling” and offer insight on the impact of education. Using these reading selections as a lens, discuss whether or not Horace Mann’s idea of education as the “great equalizer” is a myth or a reality.
Designing Effective Course Activities and Assignments

Unlike more traditional reading and writing courses, one of the hallmarks of an academic literacy course is that the onus is on the students. As emphasized in the guiding principles, an academic literacy model of integrated reading and writing uses active learning techniques where students are compelled to think critically about ideas and information in the assigned texts. The ultimate goal is for students to become responsible, confident, independent readers, thinkers, and writers.

An effective academic literacy course is one where the instructor is merely a facilitator who coaches the students as they engage in a “productive struggle” to understand key ideas and information in the assigned readings, to think deeply about these ideas and information, and to respond critically to these ideas and information. To accomplish this, the instructor must design activities and assignments that require close reading, higher-order thinking, and critical response. Furthermore, these assignment and activities should include reasonable “deliverables” to hold students accountable for their participation and academic development. These deliverables also allow the instructor to gauge students’ progress throughout the unit.

The following are some general tips for designing activities and assignments:

- Begin with the end in mind
- Think of ways to make the unit essay/exam more accessible
- No random assignments—everything should be leading to the end goal
- Embed the skills within the activities and assignments
- Keep the activities “thinking-focused”
- Put the onus on the students—“who is doing the work?”
- Don’t be afraid to really challenge the students—keep them engaged in the “productive struggle”
- Always require a deliverable

While in no way exhaustive, the following are examples of assignments and activities that have been used by experienced academic literacy instructors:

- Quick-writes
  - Get students thinking and writing related to a reading or theme
- Pop presentations
  - Assign students part of a reading and have them work through it and present to the rest of the class
- Digital collages
  - Have students compile pictures that relate to a specific reading or theme, and have them present why they selected each picture and how it relates to the reading or theme.
• Discussion boards
  ▪ Have students respond to a prompt—they have to post their thoughts and also comment on the thoughts of 2 or more classmates
• Blogs
  ▪ Have students respond to various prompts related to a reading/theme over the course of a few weeks.
• Writing prompts
  ▪ Pull a quote from the readings and have students write a multi-paragraph response
• TED talks with listening guides
  ▪ Have students view a talk that is paired with a reading/theme. Provide some questions that the students must answer while watching the talk. Discuss the talk in relation to the reading/theme.
• Video Analyses
  ▪ Have students view television shows, movie clips, or commercials, then discuss them in relation to the readings/theme.
• Short projects
  ▪ Debates
  ▪ Role Playing
  ▪ Action Research
  ▪ Community Service
# Executing a Unit

Even the most carefully crafted unit can fall short of the course standards if it is not properly executed. In fact, many experienced faculty will attest that the most important and the most challenging aspect of teaching an academic literacy course is the day-to-day execution of the course. While there is no one way to approach course execution, the following represents best practices garnered by experienced academic literacy faculty.

A typical day in an academic literacy course includes all or some of the following activities, depending on how far the class is into the unit. It is important to note that while these activities are typical, there is no “auto-pilot” in an academic literacy course. Every day is different!

- Quiz on homework
- Small group comprehension-based activity
- Quick-write on theme-related critical thinking question
- Mini lesson on a timely reading/writing skill
- Exam preparation
- Essay planning and drafting
- Peer editing
- Instructor-student conferencing

To effectively navigate the intricacies of a course unit, and to ensure that students are receiving adequate support in reading and writing, it can be useful to divide the execution of each unit into two parts: (1) Working the Readings and (2) Workshopping the Essays.

## Working the Readings

The first two weeks of classroom instruction for the unit is dedicated to dissecting and grappling with the assigned readings. To support students in this process, the instructor employs the following:

- Mini lectures on reading skills and strategies followed by contextualized practice using the assigned readings
- Handouts on pertinent reading skills and strategies—Basiccomposition.com
- Modeling effective reading through Read/Think Alouds
- Providing additional structure and support through organizational tools such as guide questions and graphic organizers
- Various activities and assignments that facilitate close reading, deep thinking, and critical response
Writers’ Workshops

The second two weeks of classroom instruction for the unit is dedicated to parsing and completing the unit essay. These workshops provide the students with several benefits including: (1) in-class time to complete essays, (2) access to immediate feedback from peers and the instructor, and (3) in-class time to have one-on-one writing conferences with the instructor. To support students in this process, the instructor employs the following:

- Mini lectures on writing skills and strategies followed by contextualized practice using the students’ own writing
- Handouts on pertinent writing skills and strategies—Basiccomposition.com
- Modeling the elements of writing by showing real-life, student-written examples of the essay
- Providing structure and support through organizational tools such as bubble cluster worksheets, cubing worksheets, and basic outline templates
- Various activities and assignments that facilitate students’ critical response to the essay prompt, using the assigned readings as substantiation
- Structured peer review opportunities
- One-on-one student/instructor writing conferences
Assessing Students’ Growth and Development

Perhaps one of the most complex tasks when teaching an academic literacy course is assessing students’ growth and development as college-level readers, thinkers, and writers. According to the guiding principles, the assessment practices of an academic literacy course should be growth-centered. This means that assessment of students’ work takes a progressive approach where there is a tolerance for less than perfect work early in the semester. However, as the semester progresses the students are held to increasingly more stringent standards. Another key aspect of assessment in an academic literacy course is that it be holistic—meaning that quality of thought and clarity of ideas are considered along with grammar and mechanics. While there is no exact science to student assessment, experienced academic literacy instructors have identified several practices for more effective assessment—each of which is described below.

Conferencing

One of the most useful aspects of an academic literacy course is one-on-one conferencing with students. These writing conferences allow the instructor to get to know the students more intimately, and vice versa. During these conferences, the instructor should provide individualized feedback and guidance to the students regarding their reading, thinking, and writing development. The following are best practices for conferencing:

- Focus on big ideas—quality of thought and incorporation of textual evidence
- Discuss organization and flow
- Make students aware of grammatical and mechanical errors
- Use the essay rubric to provide feedback
- Focus on specific, qualitative comments
- Give suggestions for Writing Center visits
- Discuss the essay grade and give suggestions for improvement during a post-essay conference

Rubrics and Checklists

Clear, specific instructions and criteria are essential to effectively supporting students through the reading, thinking, and writing process. A common and useful practice is to design grading rubrics or checklists. Effective rubrics and checklists meet the following criteria:

- Focus on course objectives
- Should include criteria to assess reading comprehension and textual support
- Should be holistic—ideas, textual evidence, and organization are most important
• Grammar, spelling, punctuation, and MLA are included, but not the primary focus
• Revise rubric with each essay to include new skills—require more with each essay
• Do not have to be quantitative!

Holistic Grading

Unlike many traditional approaches to developmental reading and writing instruction, an academic literacy course employs a holistic approach to grading where the content of students’ work (quality of thought and clarity of ideas) is just as important as grammar and mechanics. This by no means diminishes the importance of the latter. However, academic literacy instructors acknowledge that grammar and mechanics are a means to an end. In other words, proper grammar and mechanics are merely vehicles for conveying the students’ response to the larger ideas and information in a unit. Proper grammar and mechanics without a solid argument, demonstrating critical thought, and appropriate textual evidence is of little to no value in an academic literacy course. In light of this, effective grading of students’ work in an academic literacy course takes the following into consideration.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>While grading, the focus is on:</th>
<th>While also being mindful of:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Engaging with ideas</td>
<td>• Audience and tone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Assessing comprehension</td>
<td>• Sentence complexity and structure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Identifying emergent skills</td>
<td>• major grammar and mechanical errors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Targeting areas for improvement</td>
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</tbody>
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Feedback to students should address:

• What stands out about the writing?
• With what ideas is the student engaging?
• What are the essay’s strengths?

Feedback should also:

• What 1-2 areas would most improve the essay?

• Encourage appropriately
• Give specific suggestions

In terms of grammar and mechanics, it is best to:

• Use Triage / Just-in-time Remediation
• Address the most urgent needs first
• Determine whole group needs and the needs of individual students
• Use one-on-one conferences for individual needs and brief lectures for whole group needs
• Always practice grammar with the context of the students’ actual writing

Incremental Skill Building

As previously outlined, assessment in an academic literacy course is progressive. Students should not be expected to be at mastery at the start of the semester. Instead, the focus is on building students’ capacity for college-level reading, thinking and writing incrementally over the course of the semester. An effective model for incremental skill building is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Essay #1</th>
<th>Assessment Focus: Building Awareness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>▪ Basic essay structure (thesis, main points), basic attribution, introductions and conclusions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Basic grammar, spelling, punctuation</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Essay #2 and #3</th>
<th>Assessment Focus: Looking for Improvement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>▪ Focus organization--Add in transitional words and phrases</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Increased emphasis on proper structure, attribution, and grammar, spelling, punctuation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Essay #4</th>
<th>Assessment Focus: Looking for Mastery</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>▪ Add in opposing viewpoints, rebuttals, research and outside sources, and basic MLA format</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Proper structure, attribution, grammar, spelling, transitions, etc. are non-negotiable</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Final Portfolios

Every academic literacy course culminates in a final portfolio, based on the course objectives. The final portfolio is an opportunity for students to demonstrate their growth and development over the course of the semester. For the portfolio, students are expected to review and revise previous essays as well as critically reflect on their progress as a college-level reader, thinker, and writer. The portfolio also allows the instructor to holistically assess the students’ progress over time. The following are best practices for grading final portfolios:

• Focus your assessment on the rubric/criteria
  ▪ Do the students demonstrate some level of mastery? If not, they are not ready to move on!
• Assess the portfolios holistically
• You are not "re-grading" all the papers. You are looking for the progress toward the course objectives.
• Have the students grown over the essays? Do their revisions demonstrate mastery?
• Is essay #4 reflective of a student who is ready to move forward? This should technically be their best essay.

- Collect portfolios on the last day of class
- Devote class time as “portfolio workshops”
- There are no “re-do’s” of portfolios
- Portfolios should be assessed and final grades calculated in time for your conferences during the scheduled final exam period