



# Time Travel in the Composition Classroom: A Critical Thinking Assignment

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## Abstract

The pedagogical challenge of any opinion essay is that students tend to think critically only about the past and present in connection to a problem. Their ideas about the problem concerning the future often contain no critical thinking: they focus on the simplistic notion that a problem will continue to be a problem and worsen. True, students cannot know the future, but they can speculate about it in a careful and responsible way. By guiding students with a series of questions to look more deeply at the future in relation to a particular problem, students will gain a deeper understanding of a problem. These questions have been developed over the course of five years of teaching an assignment I named “Opinion Essay from the Future.” This assignment fosters students’ critical thinking about the future and can illuminate a problem in the present and the near and distant future. Students need to use logic in their speculating, but speculating in and of itself is also a creative act. The paper concludes that writing about a problem in the future makes students, in many ways, similar to science fiction writers. When encouraged strategically, their imaginings about a problem recontextualize it, letting them see the problem through a wider lens that will show them that looking ahead makes the here and now clearer.

**Keywords:** learner-centered, empathy, future-sightedness, prospection, teacher reflections, research problem

## 1. Introduction

In most modern societies, we humans suffer from short-termism, an oft-used term to refer to consideration of only the immediate advantages of our actions in everything from eating to entertainment to public policy and bequests. As public philosopher and writer Roman Krznaric argues, we are trapped by the “tyranny of the now,” the need for instant gratification (Krznaric, 2021). We need opportunities to focus on the bigger picture of our lives and especially beyond our lifetimes. As Krznaric argues in his book *The Good Ancestor*, we need to flex our “acorn brain,” allowing us to plan for the future and think beyond our own lives (Krznaric, 2021). To become global citizens of the future, a mission of many universities, young people, especially, need opportunities to use their acorn brains; thus, combatting the tyranny of now should be an essential part of education.

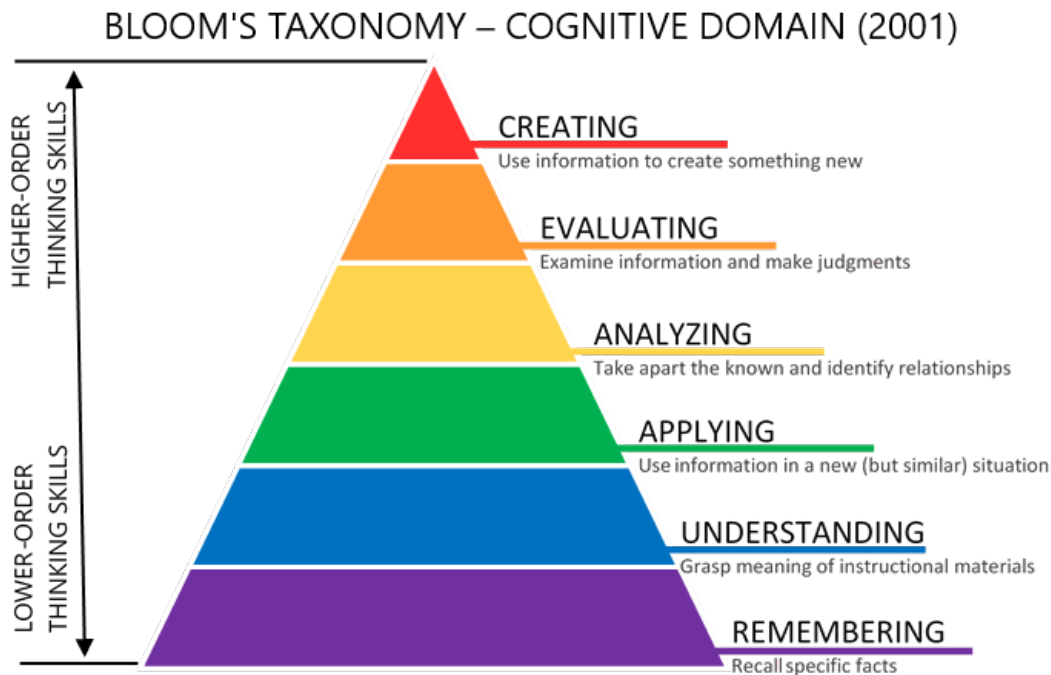
We do have amazing acorn brains, Krznaric explains, that can plan and think about the future; the problem is that a study in Chicago reveals that we only spend on average 6% of our time thinking about ten years or more in the future (Krznaric, 2021). Thus, our acorn brains are in the early stages of development, according to psychologist Daniel Gilbert (Krznaric, 2021). On the other hand, our short-term, addictive “marshmallow brains” are quite adept at focusing most of our thinking on instant gratification. Some of these thoughts are our “here and now instincts that are a part of our evolutionary heritage” of survival (Krznaric, 2021). However, most are not about survival; they are about addiction, insecurities, conveniences, and constant entertainment and pleasure.

Using the acorn brain can potentially improve both the individual and humanity. Nervousness and restlessness occur when using the marshmallow brain that focuses only on the now in terms of rewards for the immediate future. The marshmallow brain blinds the thinker, blocking the experience of the actual now that should be calming and meaningful, as Eckhart Tolle explains in his *Power of Now*. The marshmallow brain is a treadmill that moves so quickly that it blurs the world. Focusing on the distant future with the acorn brain can provide a sense of peace that the marshmallow brain cannot afford with its instant gratification methods that foster impulsive and addictive actions. Collectively, using the acorn brain is also good for humanity and the world. According to Pope Francis, “Intergenerational solidarity,...a basic question of justice,” is fostered by future thinking (Krznaric, 2021). Intergenerational solidarity is the notion of the common good extended to future generations. Thinking with the marshmallow brain is thinking like a colonizer. Krznaric explains, “We treat the future like a distant colonial outpost devoid of people...which we can plunder as we please” (Krznaric, 2021). Thinking about the future using the acorn brain is thinking about the future as a place with people who deserve empathy, not as an unclaimed territory for the taking.

Thus, using the acorn brain to think about the future is, at its core, critical thinking, a discipline for all areas of education and one that few people would argue against in education or even to solve the world’s problems. We educators know what good critical thinking is, and we expect it from our students, but we don’t always teach it as a general skill. According to the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, “The savior of higher education is to teach students not what to think but how” (Paquette, 2021). Critical thinking requires not just empathy but also creativity and curiosity, according to J. Haber in his book *Critical Thinking*. Critical thinking assignments

require not just inquiry into a complex topic but a hand at creating, which sits at the top of Bloom's taxonomy, the 2001 update. John Dewey, the education godfather, encouraged educators to give students ill-defined problems without obvious solutions. This requires students to use the top of Bloom's taxonomy to create. It requires them to imagine possibilities that may not have been proposed before. We need assignments that do not allow them to use their heuristics to fall back on obvious answers and solutions. We need assignments that foster students' creativity, curiosity and empathy, and the acorn brain leads to all three of these.

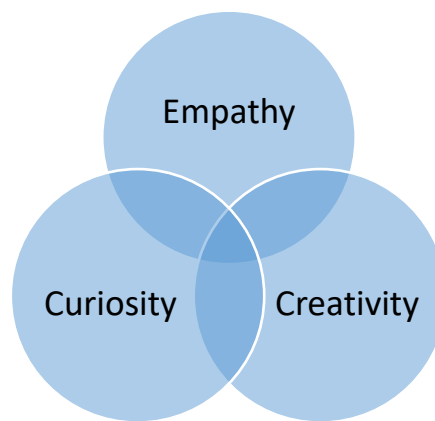
Figure 1: Bloom's Taxonomy



Source: [University of Florida](https://www.universityofflorida.edu/learningcenter/writingcenter/blooms-taxonomy)

Using the acorn brain to think about the future automatically encourages students to think with creativity, curiosity, and empathy. Specifically, thinking and writing about the future is writing speculative fiction. As Jenna Avery explains, taking up the voice of a science fiction writer makes perfect sense for student writers, as “science fiction...takes the problems and issues we face today and puts them into new situations and contexts, allowing us to see them more clearly” (Avery 2013). Thus, speculative writing is not just for creative writing courses. Speculative writing in the composition classroom can help students understand a philosophical, intellectual, or sociopolitical problem at a deeper level, while practicing empathetic thinking about the future as a real place with real people. In addition, future thinking and writing can serve as an important message, a wake-up call, for its current writer and readers.

Figure 2: Critical Thinking Components



Source: *Critical Thinking*, Jonathan Haber 2021

## 2. Future thinking

In general, young people are obsessed with their near future, imagining themselves there, in what is usually some better period of their life-- driving, living on their own, and making their own decisions. The future is where students see themselves, so contemplating the state of a current problem in the future is welcomed by them. To foster future thinking, I assigned an essay in first-year composition that I call "Opinion Essay of the Future," modeled after the *New York Times* "Op-Ed of the Future." This assignment required students to pick a problem and think/argue about it from to the future.

First Attempt at Future Writing in Freshman Composition:

Assignment: Write an opinion essay about the state of your chosen problem twenty years in the future.

In 2017, 90% of the students in my four composition courses of 23 imagined a future in which the problem worsened for the same reasons as it had worsened in the past. Students did not think creatively about the future; they just changed the date in their minds and nothing else. This is unfortunate as the real critical thinking insights come from the curiosity to imagine the future, the speculative fiction. Thus, it was my mistake to simply ask students to argue about the future using their acorn brains that had not been exercised. Student writers need guidance.

They need practice because they are used to thinking about problems in connection to the present and past. What has been and what is now form the basis of how students think about a problem. Student writers all over the world right now are writing opinion essays this way. This assignment is still valuable when students argue for a change in a current situation or belief, make a point, and feel heard. However, those of us who assign these opinion essays can do better in terms of critical thinking, and so could I in my assignment of the "Opinion Essay of the Future."

### 3. Preparing for the “Opinion Essay of the Future”

To prevent simplistic thinking about the future, I needed to improve my assignment on many levels. First, instead of twenty years, in a later attempt in 2019, I asked students in my four freshmen composition courses of 23 students each to imagine a world one hundred years from now. I wanted them to imagine a future in which they will already be gone, but a future in which other humans like themselves will exist. This is difficult for students who, like most of us, don’t think beyond our death; in fact, a 2006 survey shows that the future goes dark for most after fifteen to twenty years (Krzmaric, 2021). In an earlier attempt in 2018, I asked students to think fifty years in the future, but in 2070s, they still imagined themselves in the world and their thinking naturally turned to their individual lives, instead of to the nature of the problem. Thinking from one hundred years in the future let them practice thinking about the world without their individual presence.

I began the assignment with class discussions in which students explored their ideas, feelings, and responsibilities to future generations. It was uncomfortable for them to talk about a world in which they would be dead, and many wondered why they should even think about that with the problems of the world today. I explained to them that thinking about the future was an intellectual and moral exercise beneficial to the present and the future. At this point, we read and discussed the Editor’s mission statement of the *New York Times*’ “Op-Eds of the Future” series:

*Editors’ note: This is part of the [Op-Eds From the Future](#) series, in which science fiction authors, futurists, philosophers and scientists write Op-Eds that they imagine we might read 10, 20 or even 100 years from now. The challenges they predict are imaginary — for now — but their arguments illuminate the urgent questions of today and prepare us for tomorrow. The opinion piece below is a work of fiction.*

Embedded in this note is the argument that thinking about the future is good for the present, as it will “illuminate the urgent questions of today and prepare us for tomorrow.” Thus, I assured students that the urgent questions of today matter and that thinking about the future was helpful for the present. However, I also wanted them to care about the future whether it helps the present or not. I wanted them to practice empathetic thinking. “Future thinking helps the present,” I said, “but don’t you think it is important to care about future generations and think about them even if doing so does nothing for your individual life now?”

These discussions were an important first step in justifying the worth of the assignment and letting students think about the future, many of them for the first time empathetically.

The next step was reading examples from the *New York Times*’ *Op-Eds of the Future*. One example specifically references “kids” in its title: “It’s 2059, and the Rich Kids are Still Winning” (Chiang, 2019). In this Op-Ed of the Future, a fictional “Gene Equality Project” was used for 500 low-income parents to produce children with cognitive enhancements. These enhancements had long been available for affluent parents. The project was not a success for low-income kids because it was opportunities and not smarts that ultimately led to success. Once my freshman composition students understood the essay, they teased out the 2019 problem that this essay confronted and the responsibility that it presented about the future.

Students concluded that it was not the Gene Equality Project that was illuminating for the present; it was the project's failure which illuminated the present. The project failed because the project participants, the kids, lacked opportunities that are also lacking in the present. Students understood that to give students equality today means giving opportunities today. As for the future, students understood that the problems of future generations would not completely be solved with science or technology. Science and technology will benefit future people, but successfully providing opportunities for all social class levels now will create a future in which opportunities and success are linked.

#### **4. The "Opinion Essay of the Future:" The intervening years**

Once students understood the "Opinion Essay of the Future" through discussions and examples, they were ready to pick a current problem by picking a current Guest Essay from the *New York Times* or a current opinion essay from another publication. A current opinion essay gives students solid ground from which to jump into the future. Students, however, should not immediately jump 100 years ahead. They need to imagine what might have happened in the intervening years to create the future situation. The imaging is challenging work for it must stay in the realm of the possible, but as writer Xuan Son argues, "future thinking...allows us to pull ourselves to new possibilities and opportunities in a way that brainstorming and visioning processes grounded in the present cannot achieve" (Son 2017). Students should not make decisions about the intervening years randomly. They need to be able to explain and justify why the speculative future is what it is. Thus, this assignment requires that students write as science fiction writers. Arthur Clarke, author of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, argues, "Science fiction is often very far from escapism, in fact you might say that science fiction is escape into reality... It's a fiction which does concern itself with real issues: the origin of man; our future. In fact I can't think of any form of literature which is more concerned with real issues, reality" (Avery 2013). My students needed to join the science fiction writers of the past and present to examine a problem using their acorn brains.

It was challenging for my 2019 students to think about the future realistically. Their minds immediately went to flying cars and robots. Students continually had to be reigned back to the problem. They also had to take on the persona of a person living 100 years in the future who would have the motivation to write an opinion essay on the problem. Some questions that helped focus them follow:

- 1) What person in 100 years would be compelled to write an opinion essay on this problem? (age, sex, career, social situation, etc.) What might have happened to this writer? You will write as this person in your essay.
- 2) The opinion essay you chose as a starting point included a suggestion or solution to the problem. In 100 years, looking back, what has been the status of this suggestion/solution over the last 100 years? Did humans listen to or ignore the opinion writer of the present? If they listened, how did it play out? Was it successful or unsuccessful? If humans didn't listen, why? Were other solutions attempted instead? How successful were they?

- 3) In 100 years, looking back, what happened that affected your problem 20, 40, 60, 80 years ago? (laws, social movements, pandemics, environmental changes, economic changes, changes in the family, political changes, etc.).
- 4) Draw a timeline that includes improvements made to the problem. Draw a timeline that includes incidents that negatively affected the problem. Examine these. In reality, there will probably be a timeline with improvements and setbacks to the problem. Draw a final timeline that includes a mix of the two.
- 5) In addition to considering your persona's story from question one, consider the stories of other everyday people in the last 100 years. Looking back in 100 years, tell the story of someone 30 years ago affected by the problem. Tell the story of someone 80 years ago affected by the problem.

These questions require a lot of brainstorming, and students will go back and forth with ideas about a realistic future. At this point, I conferenced with my students to fine-tune their persona and timeline.

## 5. Writing the opinion essay

Once students had a solid idea about their future persona, the intervening years, and the status of their problem in 100 years, they were ready to write. They were told that an Opinion Essay of the Future is to be written like any opinion essay today. We made the assumption that the opinion essay format had not radically changed. In an earlier assignment, students did a rhetorical analysis of their current problem's Guest Essay from the *New York Times*. This allowed them to understand the opinion essay genre and delve into how the problem was presented and discussed.

In the course of the rhetorical analysis, we discussed the many ethos, pathos, and logos strategies used by opinion writers. It was now time for students to use these strategies. To get them writing, I asked all students to start their Opinion Essay of the Future with a personal story from their persona's point of view that would motivate him or her to write this opinion essay, or to write about a current event from the pretend present that had brought the problem to the forefront of the time.

It was important to examine the draft of these beginnings that students had made. This was a chance to catch any students writing from the present and talking about the future. They had to change to writing as if they were actually living and writing an opinion essay 100 years in the future. Tenses were challenging for all the writers, but especially for ESL writers. Overall, it was important that the beginning of their essays revealed the status quo for their pretend present. Once revised, students were ready to continue their Opinion Essay of the Future.

In the previous rhetorical analysis assignment, students discovered that these opinion essays were about fifteen small paragraphs each. Their Opinion Essay of the Future also had to be approximately fifteen paragraphs. We had previously outlined multiple Guest Essays to get an idea what happened in each paragraph. There is no standard pattern to the Guest Essay, but some strategies were more prevalent.

Some of the most popular strategies are the personal story, some logos in the form of numbers or facts, and a few philosophy paragraphs (paragraphs in which the author argues the importance of resolving the problem by speaking of its connection to a broad idea that is unarguably important to readers: friendship, love, freedom, integrity, honesty, etc.).

All the examined Guest Essays ended with a paragraph or two that were clearly the most important paragraphs of the essay. In these endings, writers always spoke of how to move toward resolution of the problem, in terms of strategies such as call to action, plea, or suggestion.

In addition to a personal story, stories of others affected by the problem, philosophy paragraphs, logos paragraphs, and ending paragraphs, students also had to hyperlink to the present Guest Essay and discuss the problem's progress (timeline). Fifteen paragraphs did not seem like so many after they understood the assignment. Students also had the option to arrange those paragraphs as they saw fit; they could even move the previously written and conferenced beginning to later in the essay. Once students had at least ten paragraphs, I asked them to submit a second draft. I marked these quickly for issues with the timeline, tense, and critical thinking. I ended by suggesting strategies (paragraphs) that would make their Opinion Essay of the Future more successful.

## **6. Ending**

The last paragraph of their "Opinion Essay of the Future" was the culmination of all their hard work. In their chosen Guest Essay of the present, there was a suggested solution; however, what they suggested, whether it was radically different or somewhat similar to the original solution, was proof that they had put effort into critically thinking and writing about the future. Those last paragraphs were the most mature thing they had ever written, or as students said, the hardest thing they ever wrote. They had learned a new way to approach problem-solving that did not involve suggesting the most common solution, the first one that came to mind. Overall, the endings of their "Opinion Essay of the Future" showed maturity. The solutions were not in absolutes, and students seemed to understand the significance of context, that circumstances made a difference. At the very least, students understood that most problems do not have a singular or simplistic solution.

## **7. Results**

I continued to successfully assign the "Opinion Essay of the Future" to students in 2020, 2021, and 2022. To quantify the critical thinking success in the assignment, I started with a survey in fall of 2021 and spring of 2022 that asked students if they understood critical thinking. Ninety percent said they understood it and had experienced it in the assignment. The survey also asked them to define critical thinking in terms of the assignment.

- 1) "The first idea in the original Op-Ed, or what comes to mind first, may or may not be the most productive one."
- 2) "You have to think about things differently in order to go beyond the usual answers."
- 3) "Those hurt by the problem must be seen as real individuals."

- 4) “I can’t shut down an idea without considering it.”
- 5) “Critical thinking does not happen immediately. It takes as the name implies a lot of thinking.”
- 6) “It doesn’t mean that you come up with the 100% right answer, but that your ideas show you have thought about the issue a lot and thought about it from many angles.”
- 7) “Don’t repeat the research. Readers don’t need that from you.”
- 8) “It will show in your writing if you really don’t care.”
- 9) “You have to figure out why the problem is really a problem and how it is really hurting people.”
- 10) “Critical thinking is temporarily forgetting what you know so that you can see things fresh.”

Such comments implied that students participated in critical thinking. Furthermore, many of the comments directly related to the way I had previously explained critical thinking, as thinking that includes creativity, empathy and curiosity.

To get more specific, I asked students to write down a solution for their chosen problem in 2021. Then, they completed the “Opinion Essay of the Future” on the same problem, comparing and contrasting their idea from 2021 with their idea for the future. They reported on the difference and explained why their future ideas had higher critical thinking in terms of creativity, empathy, and curiosity.

Table 1: Future Idea Table

PROBLEM	FIRST IDEA	FUTURE
Discrimination for Disabled	Raise Awareness	Being Seen as normal though social media
Dealing with grief	Books about grief	Societal Acceptance of Death as normal
Disinformation	Public Service Announcement	Law of Disinformation Literacy Training
Facing Fears	Therapy	Keeping some fears is ok.

Source: Kristin Rozzell Murray

According to a study by Gaesser, Keeler and Young, “How we imagine and subjectively experience the future can inform how we make decisions in the present” (Gaesser, 2018). Thus, the training they received by writing an “Opinion Essay of the Future,” might affect their decision making overall. As a bonus, because students imagined the importance of humans like themselves in the future, they may be more likely to see the importance of other humans in their lifetime.

## 8. Style

I asked students to consider style issues in their “Opinion Essays of the Future.” Guest Essays are endlessly readable with conversational language and quite often a beautiful turn of phrase. In addition, essays are literature; the Guest Essays in the *New York Times* use many literary techniques. In addition, the students were writing speculative fiction for most of their essay. I suggested that students try two of the following techniques:

- 1) One-sentence paragraphs
- 2) Repetition
- 3) Listing
- 4) Metaphor
- 5) Simile
- 6) Rhetorical questions

## 9. Conclusion

The Opinion Essay of the Future is a challenging essay to write. It is an essay that is more concerned with the process than the final product. The final products, however, revealed the highest level of critical thinking I had ever gotten from my students. Students agonized over the future. The power of prospection makes us wise, argues *Science* writer Summer Allen (Allen, 2019). This assignment made students wiser about the present and aware of the future in a way they had never considered. Assignments like these should be plentiful in education. The world does not begin and end with our individual lives. We already teach our students to look in the past for counsel; we should have them look to the future as well. Most importantly, thinking about the future as made up of real people like us, makes us better human beings now, the original humanistic goal of a liberal arts education.

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