



## INSTRUCTOR'S GUIDE



Teaching Technique 49

# Briefing Paper

### ACTIVITY TYPE

- Active/Engaged Learning
- Writing

### TEACHING PROBLEM ADDRESSED

- Low Motivation/Engagement
- Surface Learning

### LEARNING TAXONOMIC LEVEL

- Application: Analysis and Critical Thinking
- Caring

# Briefing Paper

In a *Briefing Paper*, students research a current problem of their choice, summarize the main issues, and present solutions to a specific audience.

1

Clarify your teaching purpose and learning goals for the *Briefing Paper*

2

Determine what content students will use in their research

3

Set assignment parameters (such as guidelines and deadlines for the paper)

4

Develop a plan for learning assessment or grading

5

Communicate assignment instructions to students

6

Implement the technique

7

Reflect upon the activity and evaluate its effectiveness

# Step-By-Step Instructions

In this section we provide you with guidance on each of the seven steps involved as you consider this technique.

## **STEP 1: CLARIFY YOUR TEACHING PURPOSE AND LEARNING GOALS**

*Briefing Papers* allow students to explore problems that are interesting and relevant to them, identify and evaluate potential solutions to the problem, and write for a specific audience, such as a government agency, that needs information about the problem and that can potentially help to achieve resolution to it. A *Briefing Paper* provides rich information that allows teachers to see students' logic as well as their ability to communicate their logical processes.

## **STEP 2: IDENTIFY THE LEARNING TASK'S UNDERLYING PROBLEM AND PROMPT**

Determine what problem students will investigate (or determine that you will allow them to choose the problem), and consider what content students will use in researching their papers, specifically whether you will provide reading materials or whether students will engage in independent study.

## **STEP 3: SET ASSIGNMENT PARAMETERS**

Develop paper guidelines. Students typically will want to know how long the paper should be, how many solutions to the problem they should develop, whether they are required to cite sources and if so how many, and how they should evaluate possible solutions.

Determine deadlines. Consider whether you will want the following: a topic submitted to you for approval, drafts due along the way, or only the final paper.

## **STEP 4: DEVELOP A PLAN FOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT OR GRADING**

Consider whether you will develop a rubric to assess each student's briefing paper, or consider a narrative assessment in which you provide students with additional comments.

## **STEP 5: COMMUNICATE ASSIGNMENT PARAMETERS TO STUDENTS**

You can communicate the parameters to students either in person in class, possibly while providing a handout with specific instructions, or alternately through a learning management system.

# Step-By-Step Instructions (CON'T)

## STEP 6: IMPLEMENT THE TECHNIQUE

- Announce the assignment and the timeframe for completing it. Provide students with time to ask questions about it.
- Ask students to write their papers, identifying an important problem, creating potential solutions to it, and evaluating their suggested solutions.
- Consider having students report out their best solutions.

## STEP 7: REFLECT UPON THE ACTIVITY AND EVALUATE ITS EFFECTIVENESS

When reflecting on the activity and how effective it was, consider the following questions:

- Did the technique match the course learning goals and objectives?
- Did it meet my goals for this learning module?
- Was it appropriate for the students?
- Did the technique keep the students engaged?
- Did it promote student learning?
- Did it provide me with information about student understanding?

If you answer yes to all or most of these questions, next consider how you might improve the activity for the next use.

# Support Materials

The materials in this section are intended to help you with the process of implementing this technique. For *Briefing Paper*, we are providing you a template and ways to analyze and report student work.

## BRIEFING PAPER SAMPLE TEMPLATE

Course: \_\_\_\_\_

Student's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Email and Telephone: \_\_\_\_\_

### 1. PROBLEM

- The problem to be addressed in the briefing paper.

### 2. BACKGROUND

- Provide a summary of past and/or current events that provide a context for the topic or issue, including any policies or past practices.
- Provide information about existing literature that addresses this problem.

### 3. ANALYSIS

- Identify significant aspects of the problem.
- Identify the options or courses of action that should be considered, including details about the advantages and disadvantages of each.
- Identify actions currently taken or recommended to address the issue.

### 4. CAUTIONARY NOTES

- Identify potentially sensitive aspects of problem that could affect potential solutions.

### 5. RECOMMENDED ACTION

- Provide your recommended action that you wish the Department of Education would take.

# Support Materials (CON'T)

## ANALYSIS AND REPORTING

Beyond grading, this assignment can provide you with useful data about how well students are doing. To examine data in the aggregate, consider the following options:

- Determine the mean or median scores of the problems, potential solutions, and final decisions that students identified.
- Conduct a qualitative analysis of student papers based upon the outcomes you hope to see (see the rubric), analyzing key themes that emerged. For example, you could report that nearly all students were able to identify important problems, and you could provide examples of the various problems that they identified. You could report variation among ability to provide relevant information, perhaps describing the quality of sources used (for example, some of them may have used Wikipedia, while others may have gone to top-tier peer reviewed journals in your field).

To develop a report of your findings, use a numeric table to report rubric scoring by item. For narrative reports, consider a narrative table or a network to document any themes you have identified.

# Technique Template

Following are two templates to assist you as you think through how you might implement this technique in your own class. The first is a completed template, providing an example of how Claire Major adapted *Briefing Paper* in her course, *Issues of Higher Education*. The second is a blank template for you to fill out to tailor this technique for your course.

# Technique Template

Sample *Briefing Paper* Completed Technique Template:

Content from Claire Major

## *Issues in Higher Education*

Course Name

### **COURSE CHARACTERISTICS**

What are the situational factors that impact this course? For example, is it on campus or online? How many students? Is it lower division or graduate? Are there student attributes such as attitudes, prior knowledge, reasons for enrolling, and so forth that should be taken into account as you consider this technique?

*This is a graduate level course that my institution offers as part of Masters in Higher Education Administration. The course has approximately 15 students enrolled each term. This course serves as an elective. The class typically meets once per week.*

### **STEP 1: CLARIFY YOUR TEACHING PURPOSE AND LEARNING GOALS**

Why are you choosing this technique? What do you hope to accomplish?

*I often choose this technique because I want students who graduate from our program to be able to identify problems on the job and generate solutions to them based on current research and theory. To do this, they need practice.*



## STEP 2: IDENTIFY THE LEARNING TASK'S UNDERLYING PROBLEM AND PROMPT

What is the question you want learners to address, or problem you want them to solve?

*I often let students choose a problem in higher education to investigate. Sometimes, however, I specify a problem for students to investigate, such as student debt.*

## STEP 3: SET ASSIGNMENT PARAMETERS

What are the assignment logistics? For example, will this be assigned individually or is it group work? How long will the assignment take? Will students be submitting a product? What materials, resources, or additional information do you anticipate needing?

*Because the activity can be fairly complicated and students need time to write and think, I provide time in class for students to think about a topic and generate some initial ideas. They complete the writing portion of the activity outside of class, as homework.*

## STEP 4: DEVELOP A PLAN FOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT OR GRADING

If you decide to assess learning, how will you determine that learning has occurred? For example, will you use a simple +/check/- grading system? If you use a rubric, will you use an existing one or create one? What will be your criteria and standards?

*Because students invest a good bit of time and energy on this activity, I typically grade it and assign it a percentage of the final course grade, typically 10-20% of the final grade.*

## STEP 5: COMMUNICATE ASSIGNMENT PARAMETERS TO STUDENTS

How will you communicate assignment parameters to students? For example, through a handout? A prompt on a presentation slide? Assignment instructions in your online course?

*I typically announce the activity in class, and I describe the process. I give students time to brainstorm. I tell them the parameters of the assignment, including paper length and number of solutions they should evaluate. I often give them a template for the paper as a handout.*

## STEP 6: IMPLEMENT THE TECHNIQUE

How will you adapt steps/procedures for your students? Are there any additional logistical aspects to consider?

*I often score the papers with a rubric. I typically involve students in creating the final rubric, starting with these basic criteria, which they expand on and identify cases that would be characterized "emerging," "proficient," and "outstanding":*

- *Importance of the issue*
- *Connections made between the discipline and the problem at hand*
- *Relevance of the sources used*
- *Viability of the proposed action*
- *Effective communication of the problem to external constituents*

*To rate, I use a scale of 4-0, with four being the highest and zero being the lowest. I find that including students in rubric development helps them think through the assignment prior to turning it in.*

## STEP 7: REFLECT UPON THE ACTIVITY AND EVALUATE ITS EFFECTIVENESS

Note: This step will be completed after you have implemented the technique.

Did this technique help you accomplish your goals? What worked well? What could have been improved? What might you change if you decide to implement the activity again?

*To reflect on the technique, I consider the process and the products the students submitted. I try to determine whether the activity met the goals that I had for it and if so how I might improve the activity going forward.*

# Technique Template

This template is intended for use when planning to implement **Briefing Paper** in your class. Fill in the blanks below, and use the information provided elsewhere in the Instructor's Guide to assist you in your thinking.

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**Course Name**

## **COURSE CHARACTERISTICS**

What are the situational factors that impact this course? For example, is it on campus or online? How many students? Is it lower division or graduate? Are there student attributes such as attitudes, prior knowledge, reasons for enrolling, and so forth that should be taken into account as you consider this technique?

## **STEP 1: CLARIFY YOUR TEACHING PURPOSE AND LEARNING GOALS**

Why are you choosing this technique? What do you hope to accomplish?

## **STEP 2: IDENTIFY THE LEARNING TASK'S UNDERLYING PROBLEM AND PROMPT**

What is the question you want learners to address, or problem you want them to solve?

## **STEP 3: SET ASSIGNMENT PARAMETERS**

What are the assignment logistics? For example, will this be assigned individually or is it group work? How long will the assignment take? Will students be submitting a product? What materials, resources, or additional information do you anticipate needing?

#### **STEP 4: DEVELOP A PLAN FOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT OR GRADING**

If you decide to assess learning, how will you determine that learning has occurred? For example, will you use a simple +/check/- grading system? If you use a rubric, will you use an existing one or create one? What will be your criteria and standards?

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How will you adapt steps/procedures for your students? Are there any additional logistical aspects to consider?

## **STEP 7: REFLECT UPON THE ACTIVITY AND EVALUATE ITS EFFECTIVENESS**

*Note: This step will be completed after you have implemented the technique.*

Did this technique help you accomplish your goals? What worked well? What could have been improved? What might you change if you decide to implement the activity again?

# References and Resources

## PRIMARY SOURCE

Content for this download was drawn primarily from “Learning Assessment Technique 43: Briefing Paper” in *Learning Assessment Techniques: A Handbook for College Faculty* (Barkley & Major, 2016), pp. 353–357. It includes material that was adapted or reproduced with permission. For further information about this technique, including examples in both on campus and online courses, see the primary source:

Barkley, E. F., Major, C. H., & Cross, K. P. (2016). *Learning Assessment Techniques: A Handbook for College Faculty*. San Francisco, CA: Wiley/Jossey-Bass.

## CITATIONS AND ADDITIONAL SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

- Angelo, T.A. & Cross, K.P., (1993). Analytic Memos. *Classroom Assessment Techniques: A Handbook for College Faculty*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Davis, J. (2012). Briefing paper.  
<http://www.cs.grinnell.edu/~davisjan/tut/100/2012F/assignments/briefing-paper.html>

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