Writing Assignments for Introduction to Psychology

Writing Assignment #1
Do we only use 10% of our brains?
1) What arguments are made to support that claim?
2) Given what you know about the human brain, what is some evidence that might lead you to suspect this claim is not true?

Students viewed the trailer for the upcoming movie Lucy as a lead-in for this assignment. The objectives of this assignment were threefold: first, to link course content to popular culture to reinforce the relevance of course-content to students' lives; second, to give students practice with evaluating psychology-related claims; and third, to encourage students to start thinking about the next course topic – the brain.

Writing Assignment #2
Effects of Sleep Deprivation: Find one journal article that explores sleep deprivation.

Cite the journal article in APA format:
1. What was the purpose of the study (general topic/problem/overview)?
2. What was the hypothesis?
3. What method did the researchers use to test their hypothesis?
4. What were the major findings and conclusions?
5. Are there any major limitations to the study?
6. Is there any advice you might give someone based off of the findings?

Students were provided with this list of 5 potential articles to choose from, and were also encouraged to search for relevant articles on their own. This assignment had two main objectives. The first was to provide students with guided practice locating, summarizing, and analyzing key components scientific journal articles. The suggested articles were fairly short and straightforward, and the topics were of interest to the undergraduates. The second objective was to demonstrate the wide range of negative effects that are associated with sleep deprivation. In my class of 14 students, after the assignment was completed, each student briefly summarized the findings of their article for the class. This led a more in-depth discussion of some of the topics. For a larger class, I would have students generate a list of all of their main findings on the board, and then choose several to discuss more in-depth.

Writing Assignment #3
Eyewitness testimony is notoriously unreliable. Why is this? Does the confidence of the eyewitness regarding what they remember play a role in how accurate their memory is of the event? What are two things that can be done to help improve the validity of eyewitness reporting?

This assignment was used in-class as a check to see whether students were keeping up with the readings (and to serve as a reminder for why they are important), to stress the point that there is no clear link between confidence and memory, and to have students draw on their new-found understanding of human memory and relate it to an applied situation.

Writing Assignment #4

What do you think about the relationship between knowing syntax and being intelligent? (Do you think that learning syntax makes you smart? Or being smart makes it possible to learn syntax? Both? Neither?). Take a position and defend it with evidence from the Pinker video and reading.

This assignment was given after students viewed Steven Pinker's lecture Linguistics as a Window to Understanding the Brain: http://www.floatinguniversity.com/lectures-pinker *The writing assignment was adopted from one Paul Bloom used in his 2006 Introduction to Psychology course.*

Writing Assignment #5

How does emotion affect cognition? It almost certainly increases the strength of a memory (for example, compare your memories of September 10, 2001 with your memories of September 11, 2001). But what about the influence of particular emotions when you're making decisions? This is a topic of great importance to many professionals, from teachers (who foster environments that enable students to learn) to pilots (who train to make emergency landings in stressful situations).

Imagine a typical decision you make on a daily basis: whether to save or spend your money. Imagine yourself making that decision under three difference conditions: when you're angry, when you're happy, and when you're afraid. In each case, what do you decide to do with your money?

Now imagine you enter your psychology class and you're angry, or happy, or afraid. Your teaching assistant hands you your test with a big, red D- written on it. In each case, how do you respond?

You can continue this thought experiment as it applies to different areas of your life. Overall, how would you characterize the effects of different emotions on decision-making?

This assignment was adopted from John Gabrieli's 2011 Introduction to Psychology independent study course available through MIT OpenCourseWare. This assignment served as a precursor to an effective class discussion on emotions and cognition. The personal nature of the questions allowed all students to formulate responses, which led to a high level of participation in the subsequent discussion.

Writing Assignment #6

1. How does the IAT purport to measure implicit attitudes (i.e., what is the logic behind the methodology)?

2. At the beginning of the IAT you were asked to select the statement that most closely matches your explicit (publicly-expressed) attitudes about race. What do you think it means if the answer choice you selected and your actual attitudes do not match?

3. Do you think it is possible for a person to have a preference for a group they do not belong to (i.e. the elderly prefer youth, African American's have a preference for Caucasian)? If so, why?

4. If we're autonomous and can choose how we act, why would having implicit biases matter?

For this assignment, students were directed to the website for Project Implicit, the multi-institutional research collaboration that focuses on implicit social attitudes: https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/

Students were invited to take an Implicit Association Task (IAT) through the site if they were interested (with a reminder to students about ethics and informed consent in research). Students were also directed to the educational materials on the website to assist in answering the assignment questions. A discussion about the general logic of IATs and interpretation of results followed; I was careful not to ask students questions pertaining to their personal results, though some volunteered that information.

Writing Assignment #7

There are many ***fictional*** portrayals of people with psychological disorders in popular movies and television shows. For this assignment:

A) Choose 3 **fictional** movie or television characters, and for each describe the symptoms that you think might be indicative of a disorder.

B) Do you think this character's symptoms would meet the DSM criteria for being a diagnosable illness? To be diagnosable, you must have **distress** (either to the person or others), **dysfunction** (prevents functioning in daily life), <u>AND</u> **deviance** (highly unusual behaviors or feelings); see page 620 in your text for more information. Briefly explain.

1. Movie or TV Show:
Character:
Symptoms:
Meets general criteria of a diagnosable illness?:

2. Movie or TV Show:
Character:
Symptoms:
Meets general criteria of a diagnosable illness?:

3. Movie or TV Show:
Character:
Symptoms:
Meets general criteria of a diagnosable illness?:

There were two main objectives of this assignment. The first was to encourage students to think about how to apply the criteria for a diagnosable illness, and how that differs from diagnosing a specific illness. The second was to foster a discussion about how psychological disorders are portrayed in popular media (i.e., generally in a very stereotypical manner; how some disorders – such as psychopathy – are overrepresented in media relative to the population, and others – such as depression – are underrepresented).