THE LEARNWELL PROJECTS

THE ABCs of ACADEMIC WORK

The ABC acronym represents the start of learning and can even save lives. Literacy begins with learning the alphabet. Just saying those first three letters—A, B, and C—assures us that we are off to a great start.

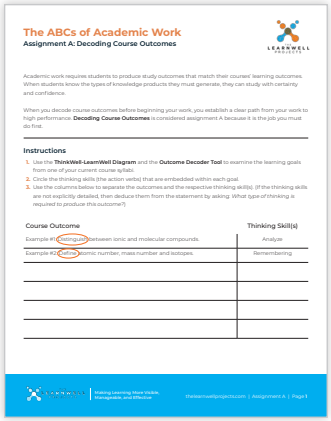
Likewise, in the medical field, first responders are taught to follow their own version of the ABCs. They learn that before they can properly assist people in distress, they must first check for the ABCs: airway, breathing, and circulation. This acronym serves as a life-saving tool that informs them precisely how to start diagnosing people in their care, regardless of illness or injury. The patient may need additional work, but following the ABC sequence gets them off to a great start.

Students need a universal way to start their academic work. **The ABCs of Academic Work** ensures students are poised for success in any course they take. This sequence of activities helps students stay focused on what matters most and avoid getting sidetracked by "pseudowork," work that seems and feels good in the moment but is ultimately futile.

Have you ever wondered why students who claim to study so much learn so little of what they should know? William L. Kelemen notes that students who have weak self-regulation skills may shift their efforts in the wrong direction, studying the wrong material or studying for the wrong outcome.[1] When students underperform, it's tempting for educators to question their capabilities or work ethic. However, in my observations with students across several institutions, many students are suffering from ineffective academic work. They are doing lots of things that don't matter.

The ABCs of Academic Work shows students how to adjust their thinking and align their work to produce the essential outcomes of their courses.

1 Kelemen, W.L. (2000). "Metamemory Cues and Monitoring Accuracy: Judging What You Know and What You Will Know." Journal of Educational Psychology 98(4) pp. 800 - 810.



The ABCs of Academic Work
Assignment A: Decoding Course Outcomes

Academic work requires students to produce study outcomes that match their courses' learning outcomes. When students know the types of knowledge products they must generate, they can study with certainty and confidence.

When you decode course outcomes before beginning your work, you establish a clear path from your work to high performance. **Decoding Course Outcomes** is considered assignment A because it is the job you must do first.

Instructions

1. Use the **ThinkWell-LearnWell Diagram** and the **Outcome Decoder Tool** to examine the learning goals from one of your current course syllabi.
2. Circle the thinking skills (the action verbs) that are embedded within each goal.
3. Use the columns below to separate the outcomes and the respective thinking skill(s). (If the thinking skills are not explicitly detailed, then deduce them from the statement by asking *What type of thinking is required to produce this outcome?*)

Course Outcome	Thinking Skill(s)
Example #1: Distinguish between ionic and molecular compounds.	Analyze
Example #2: Define atomic number, mass number and isotopes.	Remembering

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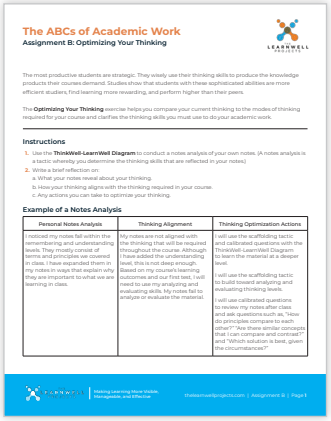
Assignment A: If students are to do effective academic work, they must meet two fundamental prerequisites:

1. Understand the differences between studying content and producing outcomes.
2. Work deliberately toward achieving outcomes.

Assignment A equips learners to use their courses' learning outcomes as conceptual guides to shape their academic work.



The ABCs of Academic Work
Assignment B: Optimizing Your Thinking

The most productive students are strategic. They wisely use their thinking skills to produce the knowledge products their courses demand. Studies show that students with these sophisticated abilities are more efficient studiers, find learning more rewarding, and perform higher than their peers.

The **Optimizing Your Thinking** exercise helps you compare your current thinking to the modes of thinking required for your course and clarifies the thinking skills you must use to do your academic work.

Instructions

1. Use the **ThinkWell-LearnWell Diagram** to conduct a notes analysis of your own notes. (A notes analysis is a tactic whereby you determine the thinking skills that are reflected in your notes.)
2. Write a brief reflection on:
   a. What your notes reveal about your thinking.
   b. How your thinking aligns with the thinking required in your course.
   c. Any actions you can take to optimize your thinking.

Example of a Notes Analysis

Personal Notes Analysis	Thinking Alignment	Thinking Optimization Actions
I noticed my notes fall within the remembering and understanding levels. They mostly consist of terms and principles we covered in class. I have expanded them in my notes in ways that explain why they are important to what we are learning in class.	My notes are not aligned with the thinking that will be required throughout the course. Although I have added the understanding level, this is not deep enough. Based on my course's learning outcomes and our first test, I will need to use my analyzing and evaluating skills. My notes fail to analyze or evaluate the material.	I will use the scaffolding tactic and calibrated questions with the ThinkWell-LearnWell Diagram to learn the material at a deeper level. I will use the scaffolding tactic to build toward analyzing and evaluating thinking levels. I will use calibrated questions as review my notes after class and ask questions such as, "How do principles compare to each other?" "Are there similar concepts that I can compare and contrast?" and "Which solution is best, given the circumstances?"

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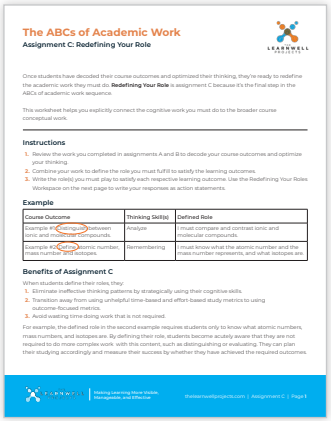
Assignment B: Students must be strategic thinkers to avoid wasting time doing the wrong type of work or doing work in the wrong ways. They use their thinking skills to achieve specific outcomes for their courses.

Assignment B provides a three-step framework for students to assess the thinking requirements for their courses and optimize their thinking as needed.



The ABCs of Academic Work
Assignment C: Redefining Your Role

Once students have decoded their course outcomes and optimized their thinking, they're ready to redefine the academic work they must do. **Redefining Your Role** is assignment C because it's the final step in the ABCs of academic work sequence.

This worksheet helps you explicitly connect the cognitive work you must do to the broader course conceptual work.

Instructions

1. Review the work you completed in assignments A and B to decode your course outcomes and optimize your thinking.
2. Combine your work to define the role you must fulfill to satisfy the learning outcomes.
3. Write the role(s) you must play to satisfy each respective learning outcome. Use the Redefining Your Roles Workspace on the next page to write your responses as action statements.

Example

Course Outcome	Thinking Skill(s)	Defined Role
Example #1: Distinguish between ionic and molecular compounds.	Analyze	I must compare and contrast ionic and molecular compounds.
Example #2: Define atomic number, mass number and isotopes.	Remembering	I must know what the atomic number and the mass number represents, and what isotopes are.

Benefits of Assignment C

When students define their roles, they:

1. Eliminate ineffective thinking patterns by strategically using their cognitive skills.
2. Transition away from using unhelpful time-based and effort-based study metrics to using outcome-focused metrics.
3. Avoid wasting time doing work that is not required.

For example, the defined role in the second example requires students only to know what atomic numbers, mass numbers, and isotopes are. By defining their role, students become acutely aware that they are not required to do more complex work with this content, such as distinguishing or evaluating. They can plan their studying accordingly and measure their success by whether they have achieved the required outcomes.

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Assignment C: Students must set clear, feasible goals for themselves. Assignment C encourages students to summarize the work that lays before them. This simple, powerful step focuses students' efforts and establishes accurate metrics for measuring their learning.

By following **The ABCs of Academic Work**, students are empowered to think well, learn well, and perform well.

The ABCs of Academic Work

Assignment A: Decoding Course Outcomes

Academic work requires students to produce study outcomes that match their courses' learning outcomes. When students know the types of knowledge products they must generate, they can study with certainty and confidence.

When you decode course outcomes before beginning your work, you establish a clear path from your work to high performance. **Decoding Course Outcomes** is considered assignment A because it is the job you must do first.

Instructions

1. Use the **ThinkWell-LearnWell Diagram** and the **Outcome Decoder Tool** to examine the learning goals from one of your current course syllabi.
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Course Outcome	Thinking Skill(s)

Visual Thinking Space

If needed, use the space below to visually convert your course learning outcomes to thinking skills.

The ABCs of Academic Work

Assignment B: Optimizing Your Thinking

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Thinking Optimization Exercise

Use the spaces below to complete the thinking optimization sequence for each of your learning outcomes. (You may need to reprint this page.)

Personal Notes Analysis	Thinking Alignment	Thinking Optimization Actions

The ABCs of Academic Work

Assignment C: Redefining Your Role

Once students have decoded their course outcomes and optimized their thinking, they're ready to redefine the academic work they must do. **Redefining Your Role** is assignment C because it's the final step in the ABCs of academic work sequence.

This worksheet helps you explicitly connect the cognitive work you must do to the broader course conceptual work.

Instructions

1. Review the work you completed in assignments A and B to decode your course outcomes and optimize your thinking.
2. Combine your work to define the role you must fulfill to satisfy the learning outcomes.
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Redefining Your Roles Workspace

Use the space below to define your role for each of your respective learning outcomes.

Testimonials

"Following **The ABCs of Academic Work** helped me stop thinking shallowly and start using my study time to think deeper. This process helped me adjust to harder courses seamlessly and achieve fearlessly."

(COLLEGE SENIOR, MOUNT MARTY COLLEGE)

"Helping students use my learning outcomes to control their own learning has helped taking tests feel less like a guessing game to them."

(PROFESSOR, DENISON UNIVERSITY)

"These assignments have been a great way to start my peer learning strategists' sessions. They keep students focuses on doing the right kind of work and not wasting their time on other stuff."

(COLLEGE SOPHOMORE, WESLEYAN COLLEGE)

Useful Links

30-Minute Thinking Strategy
https://bit.ly/3utOotz

Go-for-Green Method for Constructive Learning
https://bit.ly/358goKx

Differentiating Thinking Skills
https://bit.ly/36JQaOF

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