

Using a Graphic Syllabus with Second Language Learners

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The adage “A picture speaks a thousand words” is familiar to many, and perhaps especially to language teachers who use a variety of visual materials and media in their classrooms. Yet the insight this adage provides is rarely reflected in the very first document many of us give to our students: the course syllabus. For many teachers in secondary or higher education ESL courses, as in non-ESL courses, the syllabus is a required administrative document that is not considered actual course material to be enhanced for student interest or comprehension. Presented dutifully to each new group of students on the first day of class, these documents contain an ever-increasing amount of dense, contractual information about objectives, expectations, course structure, and so on, often in a format and tone that is quite different from the rest of our more attractive course materials.

As a language instructor in higher education, I had never questioned this routine syllabus format before reading Linda Nilson’s book *The Graphic Syllabus and the Outcomes Map: Communicating Your Course* (2007). Nilson’s argument, which is not targeted specifically to language teachers but to all academic instructors, is as follows: When key information about a course is presented through graphics, it will be more easily understood and retained by students. Text syllabi, she writes, are also necessary to provide to students, but do not have to be their first or only introduction to the course. In a graphic syllabus, spatial arrangements, colors, shapes, arrows, flow diagrams, and even drawings can allow students to literally *see* the relationships

among different components of the course, and thus more easily conceptualize how its content fits within an overall schema right from the beginning (see Appendices for examples). A supplemental text syllabus can then fill in details of the content. This paper touches on some of the arguments for using graphic syllabi, reports on the results of a preliminary evaluation in two of my own classes, and concludes with some possibilities and potential pitfalls graphic syllabi present for our language-focused classrooms.

Arguments for Using Graphic Syllabi

Nilson reviews research across disciplines to support her claim that graphics are distinctly useful in course syllabi. Note that Nilson distinguishes between a graphic syllabus and the equally useful outcomes map, which graphically represents a course’s learning objectives rather than its topical structure. Work on dual coding theory (Paivio, 1971; Vekiri, 2002; Moreno & Meyer, 1999), for example, posits that visual material and verbal material are processed and stored in separate cognitive systems in our minds. While text syllabi engage the semantic memory, graphic syllabi engage the episodic, or visual memory, allowing for both better retention of and easier access to the material presented (Nilson, 2007: 19).

Other research (e.g., Larkin & Simon, 1987) also shows that visuals are more efficiently processed “in that they require less working memory and fewer cognitive transformations

than text” (Nilson, 2007: 19). These advantages are true for all students, but perhaps most clearly for those with visual, global, and intuitive learning styles (Kolb, 1984). As Nilson observes, “These are the students least likely to gain and retain information from a standard text syllabus” (2007: 18).

These observations are likely to be even more valid for non-native speakers, who are faced with a higher cognitive load when reading and listening to verbal information on the first day of class in a second language. If typical course syllabi are occasionally opaque for L1 speakers of a language, as Nilson (2007) argues, how can we expect our L2 students to easily understand them?

Although no research on the use of graphic syllabi in L2 contexts appears to exist, some pedagogical sources do encourage using graphics to clarify course content and goals. Graves (2000), for example, in her textbook *Designing Language Courses: A Guide for Teachers*, strongly recommends language teachers use “mind maps” (Buzan, 1991; Ellis, 2000), flowcharts, or drawings to aid them in conceptualizing their courses. Her advice, however, is largely directed to instructors who are drafting or revising their courses, not to those who wish to clarify the course to students (although an indirect benefit to students is implied). Thus, research with L2 students is needed to confirm whether graphic syllabi indeed have advantages over their purely textual cousins.

In the fall of 2008, I had the opportunity to teach two sections of a higher-level writing course for matriculated non-native international students at the University of Oregon. In the two parallel sections I saw the chance to evaluate whether a graphic syllabus had a different impact on the students than the traditional text-based syllabus. Would students indeed retain graphically presented information more easily than the same information presented textually?

Here I describe and report my preliminary efforts to answer this question.

Methods

Course and Student Profiles

The writing course in question is the highest of three levels offered by the English language program for matriculated undergraduate students at the University of Oregon. Students in this course have, upon entering the university, TOEFL scores that generally range from the high 400s to the high 500s, with most between 500 and 540. Both sections of the course that term had a roughly similar mix of national and language backgrounds, though the second section had a significantly larger percentage of

males. In Section One there were 14 students: one Thai, six Saudi, one Chinese, two Taiwanese, one Kuwaiti, one Korean, one Filipina, and one Chilean (9 male and 5 female). In Section Two

there were 19 students: one Japanese, six Saudi, four Chinese, two Taiwanese, four Korean, and two UAE students (14 male, 5 female).

Materials

I designed two graphic documents for the course, following Nilson (2007): a graphic syllabus and an outcomes map. In the graphic syllabus (Appendix A), I decided to highlight their major assignments and when they were scheduled because previous students had frequently asked questions about this aspect of the course. This information about assignments is also found in the text syllabus, which I did not revise from past terms (see Appendix B for the text syllabus). Note that instructors do not need to focus only on assignment information in a graphic syllabus; these were simply the elements I decided to highlight that term. In the outcomes map (Appendix D and in color on the ORTESOL website), I focused on the range of academic skills we would be strengthening in the course.

Would students indeed retain graphically presented information more easily...?

I then created a brief quiz that included questions testing a few facts common to both the graphic syllabus and text-only syllabus. These facts were represented visually in the graphic syllabus through the use of colored shapes representing different assignments, numbers of shapes representing numbers of pages of each assignment, and labels inside of shapes providing key facts about the assignments. The same facts were all communicated only in written form in the text syllabus.

The quiz questions were:

1. How many drafts of each paper will you write?
2. How many readings will you read before the first essay?
3. How many library sources will you need for your research paper?

Procedure

In Section One of the writing course, I first introduced the two-page text syllabus that had been traditionally used for this course. I read through the text syllabus word by word for roughly 5 minutes as they looked at their own copies. I then asked them to put away the syllabus before giving them the quiz on specific facts from the material.

In Section Two, I presented the two graphic documents first, explaining the separate focus of each graphic document, and pointing out each element within the documents. This also took roughly 5 minutes. I then asked them to put away the documents, and gave them the same short quiz as Section One.

Table 1: Students who answered correctly

	Section One (text syllabus)	Section Two (graphic syllabus)
Question 1 correct answers	13/14 (93%)	17/19 (95%)
Question 2 correct answers	9/14 (64%)	19/19 (100%)
Question 3 correct answers	4/14 (29%)	11/19 (73%)

In both cases, I tried not to embellish or paraphrase any of the documents as I might normally have done, in order to avoid changing the input they were getting from each type of document. After the quiz in both sections, I gave the students the text or graphic documents not provided to them initially, so that they would have access to all forms of the course information thereafter.

Results

Table 1 shows the overall results, with the number of students who answered the questions correctly. Each of the questions is addressed below in more detail.

Question 1: How many drafts of each paper will you write?

The number of drafts required for each essay was clear to almost all students in both sections (93% and 95% respectively). In the text syllabus this information is in bold as “**Two major essays**” at the beginning of a paragraph. In the graphic syllabus the two essays are visually presented as two different “piles” of rectangles (the piles represent the respective pages in each essay).

Question 2: How many readings will you read before the first essay?

Only 64% of students answered this question correctly in Section One, while 100% answered it correctly in Section Two. The information relevant to Question 2 was written as follows in the text syllabus in the middle of a paragraph: “The Critical Analysis essay will be based on one of four readings I provide you.” The same information was represented in the graphic syllabus document as four different circles. In each circle was written the number of the reading (Reading #1, #2, etc.).

Question 3: How many library sources will you need for your research paper?

Only 29% of students in Section One answered this question correctly, while 73% answered it correctly in Section Two. The information relevant to Question 3 was written as follows in the text syllabus in the middle of a paragraph: “The Library Research Paper will be based on a minimum of 6 reputable sources”. This same information was represented in the graphic syllabus as the written phrase “6 minimum reputable sources” inside a bold blue box labeled “LIBRARY RESEARCH.”

Discussion

Some of the tendencies in these results support the claim that language teachers should consider using graphic syllabi. Information that was presented graphically to Section Two, especially when supported with numbers or text, did appear to be retained more readily than was the text information in Section One. For example, information about length of assigned papers, numbers of readings, and numbers of sources were all displayed as colored shapes in the graphic syllabus, and were reported more accurately by the students who saw these shapes. By contrast, none of the tested information common to both types of syllabi was reported more accurately by Section One.

Several limitations are important to note regarding this brief comparison. First, the two different groups of students were naturally formed, and thus not controlled for numbers of students, balance of nationalities, gender, listening or reading abilities, ages, motivation levels, learning styles, and so forth. Also, because I verbally presented both types of syllabi (as would be normal in a regular class), it is possible that I emphasized unintentionally some information in one type of syllabus over the other through use of pausing, eye contact, volume, and so forth, despite my efforts to neutrally describe their content.

The quiz design itself was also somewhat hastily done, as it was only shortly before the first day of classes that I decided to create the graphic syllabus and attempt a comparison study. Finally, it could be argued that if the text syllabus contained only the more limited set of facts shown in the graphic syllabus, it would also be more easily memorable, even without the visual support of shapes, arrows, colors, and so forth. Graphic syllabi, however, are not intended to replace text-only syllabi, but to complement them by highlighting certain aspects of the increasingly complex text syllabi we see today. Reducing the details in a supplementary document is one way of highlighting these elements; visually arranging and enhancing them is another. More research on the exact contributions of the visual elements is needed to tease these factors apart.

Despite these limitations, this preliminary

cultural differences in expectations about course content or objectives may be more easily communicated using the power of imagery

comparison suggests that graphic syllabi may indeed be helpful to L2 students in the same ways that Nilson (2007) argues they help L1 students. In

fact, it is not difficult to imagine in what ways they could be arguably even more helpful for L2 speakers. First, because the listening proficiency of L2 students may be lower than that of native speakers, the helpful redundancy of hearing an instructor discuss the syllabus as well as reading is likely to be reduced for L2 students.

Possibly even more important, cultural differences in expectations about course content or objectives may be more easily communicated using the power of imagery. In an academic writing class, for example, the emphasis on critical thinking and source documentation skills may not be anticipated by some L2 students. Likewise, the weighting of homework or papers relative to exams may be unexpected, and thus less likely to be noticed if only communicated through words. Although our first reaction as teachers may be that it is contradictory to rely

less on language in a language class, it is actually quite consistent with language teaching goals. For example, in foreign language classrooms where the instructor speaks the L1 of the students, teachers can more easily remain in the target language with the graphics as scaffolding, rather than revert to the L1 for the sake of clarity on such important administrative information.

Of course, not all students will be equally engaged by visual documents. Just as we know some students may be visual learners, we know others may not. As long as graphic documents are offered in conjunction with more detailed text syllabi, however, the graphics will only enhance student experience, rather than narrowing it.

In a similar vein, not all instructors may be interested in creating graphics or may not feel they are able to do so, due to limits in artistic ability. In the latter case, teachers can take heart. Even a simple flowchart, created for example through Word's SmartArt Graphics templates, can capture some crucial course elements in graphic form (see Appendix C for an example). Word's draw function allows users to easily paste various shapes and lines into a document, including arrows and text boxes for labels. Additional sample documents are on the ORTESOL website.

An important cautionary note when creating these syllabi is the importance of keeping them relatively simple, a task that is challenging for teachers who are keenly aware of the varied threads of a language curriculum. As Nilson writes, "Clutter and complexity only subvert the purpose of a syllabus" (54). Although graphic syllabi may necessarily be quite messy in the initial stages of design (Graves, 2000), they should take on a cleaner look when presented to students. As one student wrote when giving me feedback on a graphic I created to show the content and timeline of an MA program final project (see Appendix E and in color on the ORTESOL website), "there are so many colorful threads twisting together, I have to spend some time to understand it. If there is only one thread in each

color and some explanation with each label, that would be easier to see the graphic."

Colleagues and even past students of the course in question can help adjust and clarify graphic documents. As Nilson (2007) and Graves (2000) further suggest, current students can also be asked to create graphic representations of the course, even if they did not receive one. These student creations may reveal discrepancies between student and instructor perceptions of the course, as well as provide new ideas and inspiration to the instructor.

A final note to consider is that as EAP teachers we have an obligation to help students understand the academic texts they will encounter in higher education, texts which may include course syllabi. Rather than shielding them from this reality, graphic syllabi can be used to show students how to read dense or difficult text syllabi critically and to encourage them to look for meaningful structure and content even when visual help is missing.

Conclusion

Although research on how effective and motivating graphic syllabi are for students is still in its infancy, the preliminary investigation reported here does suggest that graphic documents that supplement the traditional text syllabus may be useful in the second language classroom. In addition to helping students grasp key information about a course, as indicated here, it may also encourage students to engage in the course content right from the start, as well as serve as a helpful curriculum reflection tool for an instructor. In short, graphics can give shape to the "thousand words" that typically make up a traditional text syllabus.

References

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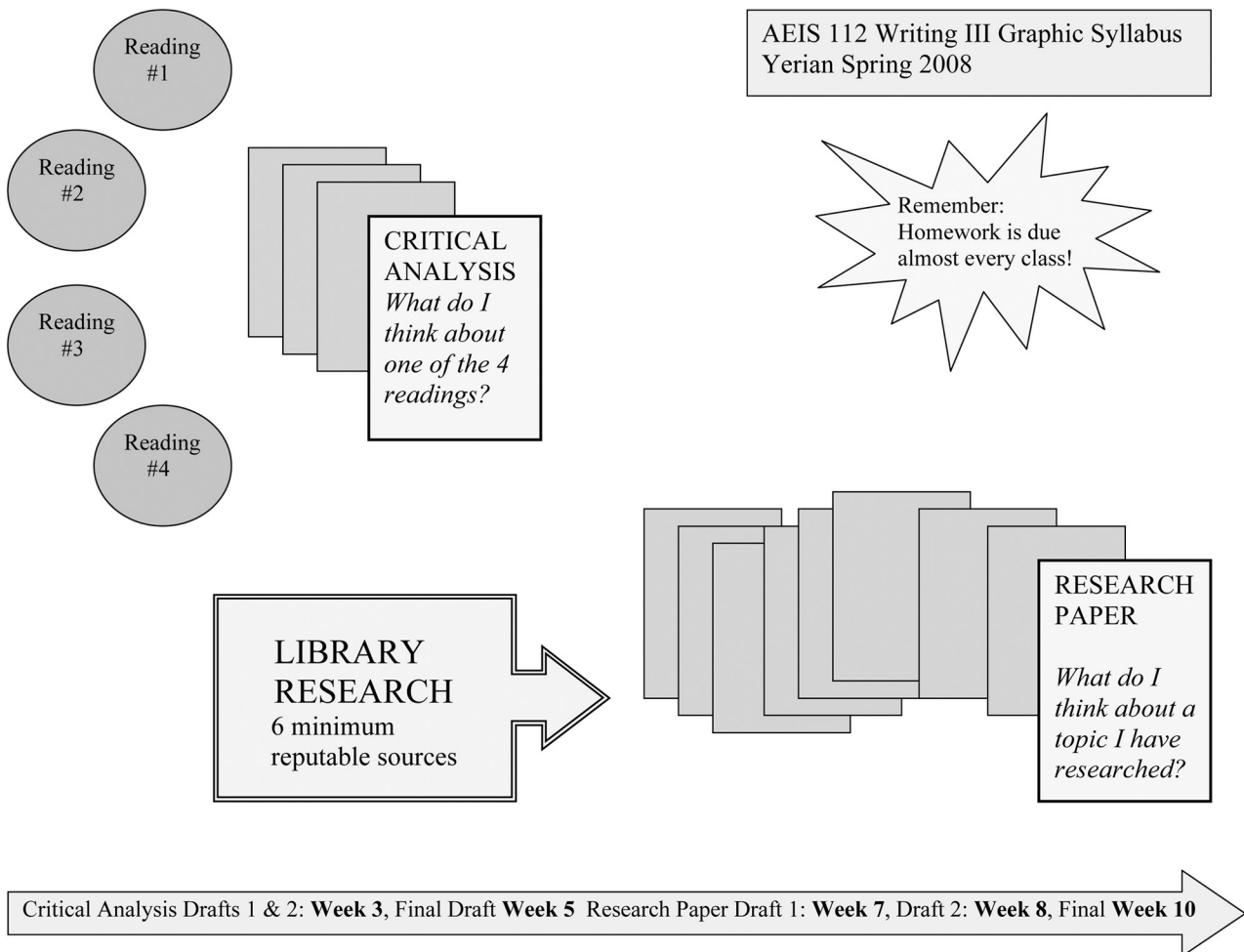
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Keli Yerian is an instructor in the American English Institute/Linguistics Department at the University of Oregon, where she teaches undergraduate and graduate academic writing classes for international students as well as linguistics and teaching methodology courses in the MA Language Teaching Specialization Program. Her current research focuses on gesture in communication.

Appendix A: Graphical Syllabus



Appendix B: Text Syllabus

Note: The text is reduced in size for publication.

Course Description Written Discourse III, AEIS 112, MW

Instructor: Dr. Keli Yerian
Office: Pacific 117
E-mail: yerian@uoregon.edu
Office Hours: MW 1-2pm and by appointment

Materials

Textbook: *The Bedford Handbook, Seventh Edition*, by Diane Hacker, available in the bookstore. You should also have a standard-size American English learner's dictionary available for use with reading and writing assignments. There will be an emphasis on the use of Blackboard for the posting of assignments, handouts, and readings. It is important that you have easy and consistent access to the Internet either on or off campus, and print materials as requested in preparation for class.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this course is to prepare students for academic writing at the university level. The course will include the following: discussions of writing principles and academic discourse patterns; analysis and discussion of assigned readings. Research, writing and revision will be done both in class and outside of class.

Requirements

Assignments:

1. Reading and writing assignments from Blackboard.
2. **Two major essays** (all versions, first draft through final draft, must be typed): **Critical Analysis Essay** and **Library Research Paper**. The Critical Analysis essay will be based on one of four readings I provide you and that we discuss in class together. The Library Research Paper will be based on a minimum of 6 reputable sources that you find through a library search. These assignments include multiple drafts and revisions, and will be evaluated for content, organization, and development. Because the schedule of writing assignments is intense, it is very important that papers be turned in on time to keep up with the course. Do not attempt to take this class at a time when you have a very demanding academic schedule.

All essay drafts, including the first draft, should be written double-spaced to allow room for comments. There will be 2 essays with approximately 2-3 revisions of each as well as reading and journal-writing assignments given. *No single drafts of essays will be accepted.* All new drafts must be turned in both electronically and in folders with earlier drafts and relevant prewriting; it is important for the instructor to be able to evaluate your writing process, which will be 50% of your grade on both essays.

Policies:

Attendance and class participation are very important. More than three absences from in-class meetings may result in a lowering of your final grade, or even failure. You are responsible for making up missed work by checking Blackboard and completing assignments accordingly.

Late work will be accepted only at the discretion of the instructor; a grade penalty for lateness may be imposed.

Grading

The final grade will be determined as follows:

- 10% Class participation (includes attendance and being on time)
- 10% Homework assignments
- 30% Essay #1: Critical Analysis (A completed assignment includes all drafts)
- 40% Essay #2: Library Research (A completed assignment includes all drafts)
- 10% Final Writing Assessment

The University of Oregon expects academic honesty. This means you **cannot copy** from a book, article, the Internet, previous work, or another student. If you do, there are severe penalties. Please check with me if you are unsure about plagiarism.

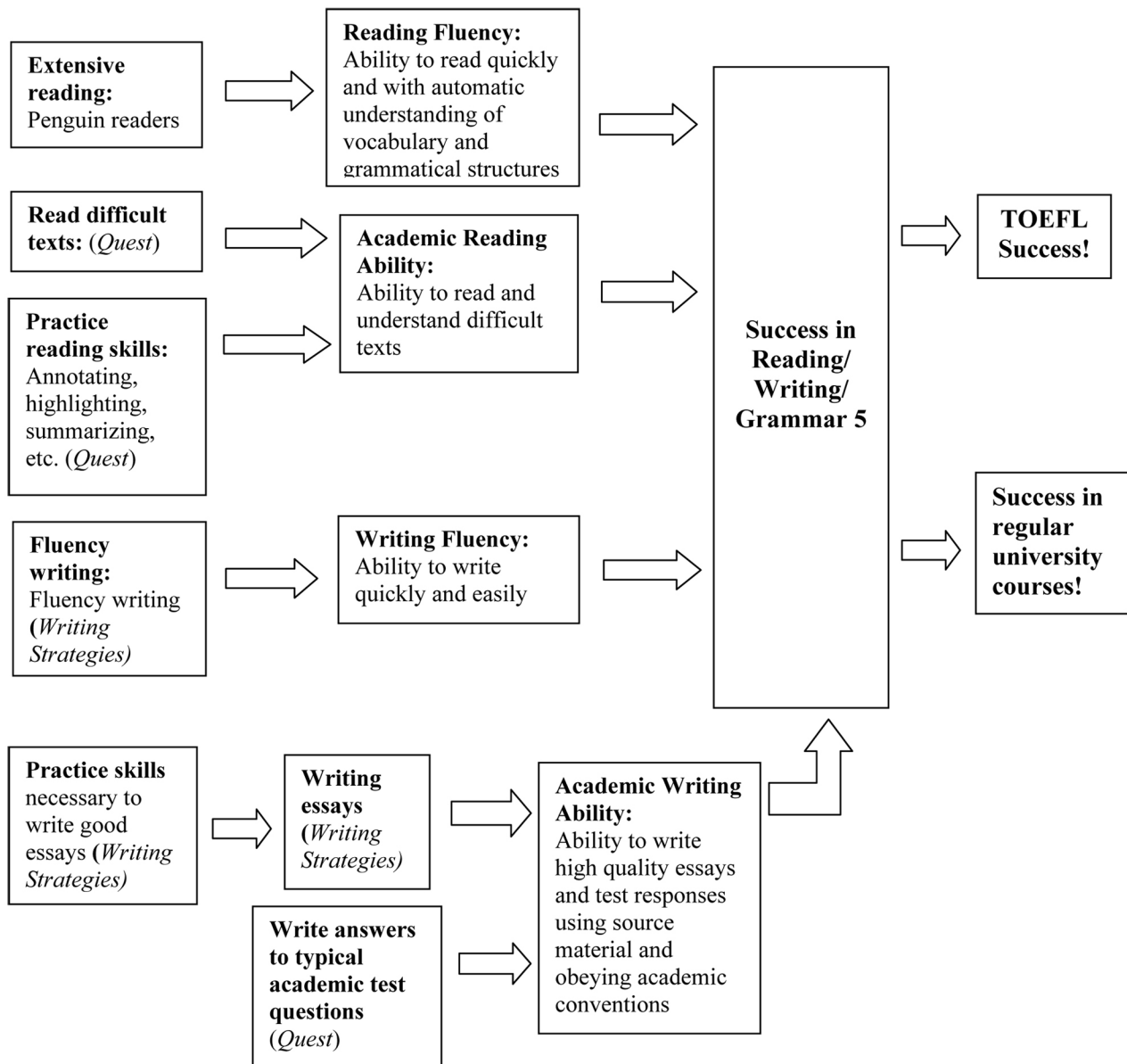
Major deadlines for Spring quarter:

- 4/14: First draft of critical analysis due in class
- 4/16: Second draft of critical analysis due in class
- 4/25: Third (final) draft of critical analysis due noon Friday at my office
- 5/14: First draft of research paper due
- 5/21: Second draft of research paper due
- 6/2: Final draft of research paper due

Remember that these are only the major assignments; other homework is usually daily.

The final writing assessment will take place on the last day of class. Attendance is mandatory. There is no final exam during exam week for this class.

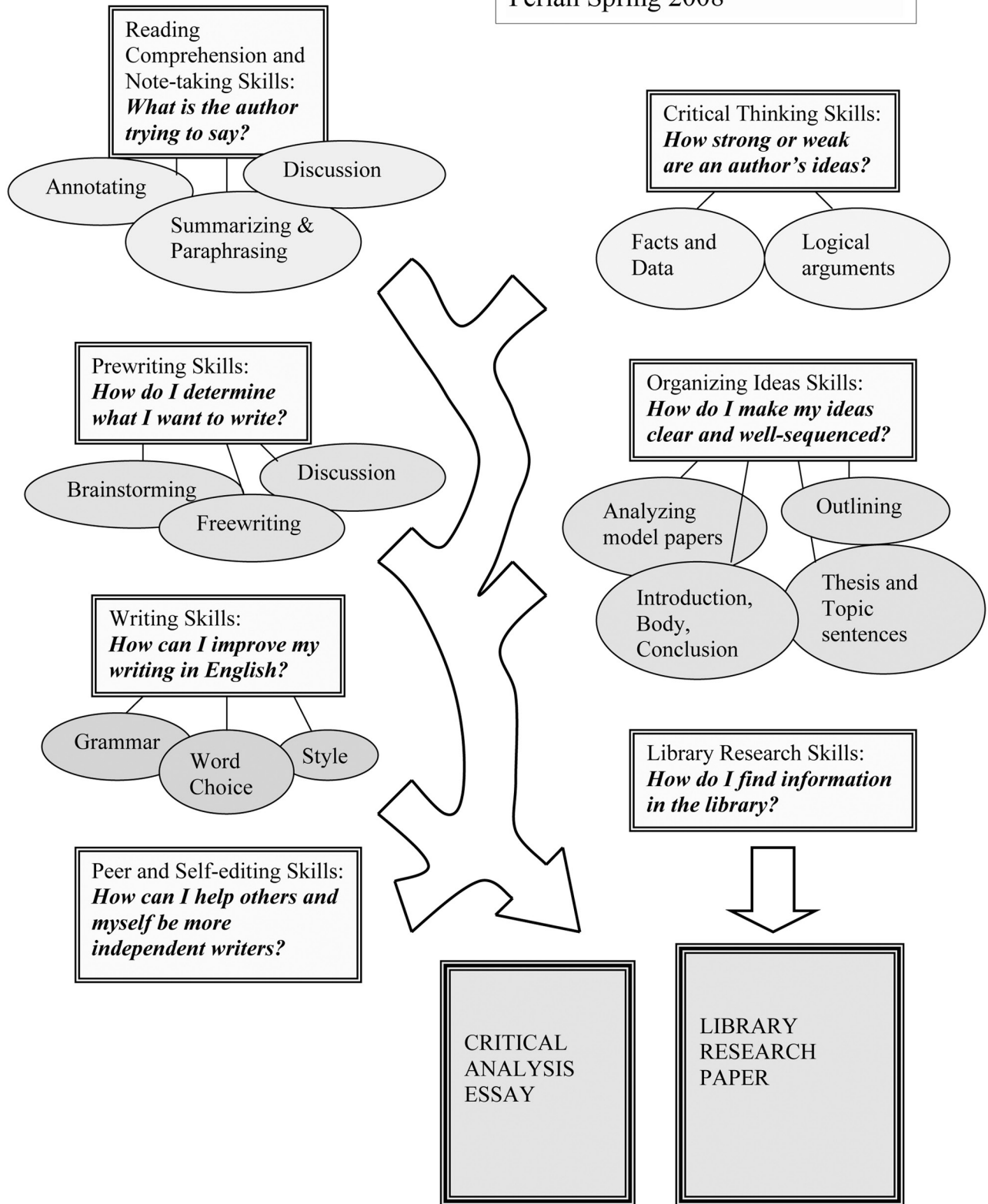
Appendix C: Graphical Syllabus



From Tom Delaney, University of Oregon

Appendix D: Outcomes Map

Map of skills practiced in AEIS 112
Yerian Spring 2008



Appendix E: Terminal Project

Terminal Project Graphic

