

2019 Syllabus Part 2

CONCEPTS | FACTS v1

(Jan 23)

The contents of this document are valid for all classes I am teaching Spring 2019

Instructor: John R Wallace

Last updated:

Wednesday, January 23, 2019

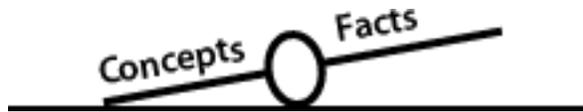


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Concepts | Facts



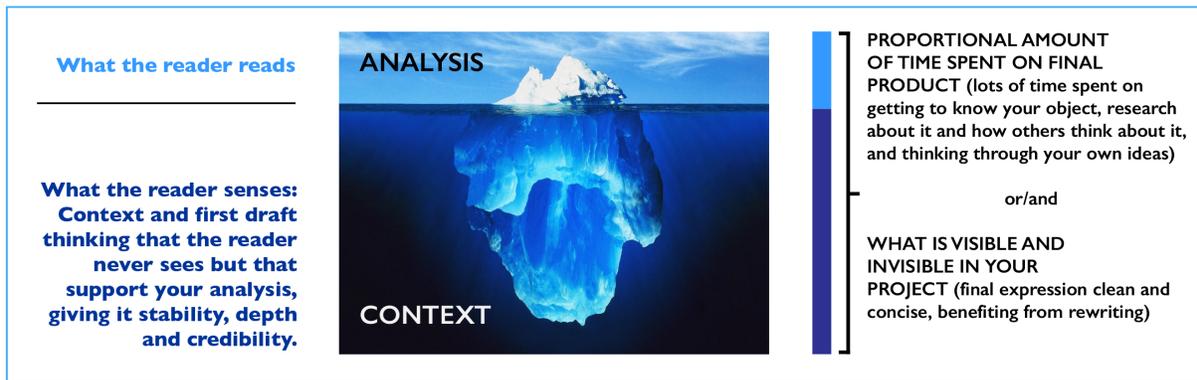
1. Informed knowledge (knowledge grounded in information) is our learning target

My courses place an emphasis on meta-questions such as understanding not just the content of the course knowledge but its significance of course content and identifying over-arching concepts. In the "DIKW Hierarchy" schema (Data is refashioned into information, information is the foundation of knowledge, knowledge is the basis of wisdom), classwork for my courses is in the information-knowledge band of the spectrum with knowledge the more important of the two, both in terms of learning goals and course grades. This emphasis shapes the requirements for course essays and other sorts of analytic responses (but not essay answers on tests unless specifically stated).

2. Knowledge \Leftrightarrow active learning (building contexts for understanding)

Discovery and development of knowledge is closely tied to the emphasis on active learning in my classes: students work with content that they have acquired and taken the time to understand that content in its implications and significance (gather and use "context" of the below graphic); contrasting with a memorize-and-repeat course model. This approach is more difficult, definitely, and that is to be expected—high-order understanding requires considerably more time and effort, but is part of the profile of a top-level university, or any university for that matter.

Academic articles fall across a spectrum: from report of experiments conducted, consolidation and organized delivery of the data results of others often called research papers, analysis (from conservative to extreme in conclusion) of that data (whether "data" means scientific information of the analysis/ideas of others) which are more likely to be called essays in the case of the humanities, to opinions loosely or not at all based on data. This might be generically termed a *report—analysis—opinion spectrum* where one's own point of view grows increasingly more central to the essay. The essays for my courses fall in the analysis band while some exercises work with the "considered" (not just casual) opinion band.



CONTEXT

From your object's code, you construct a text. To the extent that your text is accurate and interesting, your analysis also has the opportunity to be credible, interesting, and useful. The contexts you develop through research (both about the object and others talking about the object) establish the extent of your understanding and vision of the object you are studying, for YOU. This information might be, to some degree, actually explicitly in the essay but for the most part it works in the background to inform your comments. In any event, providing context is not analysis. It is the groundwork for analysis only. It is important, but it does not substitute for your observations, interpretations and conclusions.

ANALYSIS

Your observations, interpretations and tentative conclusions about how to understand your object of analysis. Through these, you bring to your readers' attention something you think has gone unnoticed or under-noticed or invite your readers to think of something in a particular way.

NOTE: Analysis should have a narrowly defined topic and might have a thesis but should avoid a thesis with a strong conclusion that creates a framework requiring "proof with evidence" and leads to a polemic, strongly rhetorical, or highly assertive argument. Offer the reader new ways of thinking but avoid trying to "close" the text by arguing that yours is the only way to think about it. Instead the reader should feel "After having read your essay, the text you discuss is more interesting to me either because I understand it better in its nuances and complexities and textures, or because I am thinking about it in ways I haven't done before."

This graphic was developed to describe an approach for analyzing a premodern Japanese text, but the ratio of analysis that appears in an essay versus the amount of time and quantity of contextual information that provides hidden support for the analysis is applicable to most of my courses. In general, analysis requires broad and deep understanding (context) first.

3. Cultural differences

Overseas students proficient in a different style of learning where the authoritative instructor (or secondary source) is the source of information, opinion, and analysis to be respected and accepted (at least for the purposes of the class) might find my interest in the student's application of concepts to course material to be secondary, difficult, unnecessary, wrong, frustrating, or all of the above. Students who work in a culture of sciences and who have been exposed primarily to scientific writing might be uneasy with the ambiguities of this type of concept-based analysis that does not use research to support a thesis but rather uses research as a platform, a start point, for careful, creative thinking. This does not change what needs to be done. Please consider meeting with me to discuss this style of learning through the process of analysis.

4. Why concepts are so important in my courses

Life is details and so it is not that I do not value "information" although by nature I am more of a "big picture" thinker than a details-person. My grading expectation that your submissions be "content-rich" reflects the high esteem I have for facts and details. But:

- you cannot read meaningfully across cultures (East-West / premodern-modern) without interpretive expertise, which operates on a conceptual level;
- proper knowledge of details cannot be separated from a critical approach to details;
- one must sort out the reliable from that which isn't—a decision made by the sometimes complex application of one or many concepts;
- details that lack conceptual hierarchies of what is important and what is less so or lack membership in (conceptual) categories are just a meaningless mess of data—a mess that means not much to anyone, and certainly is not a shape that can be retained beyond the short time window of a cram for a test.

Concepts without facts are often un-grounded, and can quickly digress into clever or stylish intellectual maneuvers. Facts without concepts lack meaning value (significance). Yet, given how enabled the obtaining of information has become through digital searches, I see myself less and less as a source of facts and more and more as in the role of teaching challenging concepts intended to manage information meaningfully.