



Section I: The Case for Theory

CYC assignments often encourage students to think about the relationship between theory and practice. Course content and assigned readings cover numerous concepts and approaches (e.g. strength-based approach, ecological approach, etc.) that will, ideally, help students in their roles as CYC practitioners.

There is a joke that “you either do theory, or theory does you,” the implication being that students and academics who are allegedly “anti-theory” do not actually escape theory (for there is no “outside” of theory), but rather theory is latent in everything they do, whether they realize it or not.

Engaging with theory can help students see the world around them differently; it can help illuminate the hidden dimensions of a situation, expose systemic injustices that have passed largely unnoticed, challenge norms that have become naturalized, reveal a previously unconsidered approach to a problem, and more.

However, there are many theories out there—and not all of them are equally helpful. Whereas some theories might change students’ outlooks for the better (improving their critical thinking skills), others might seem contentious (leaving students questioning their usefulness and applicability).

This spectrum of theories—with all of “the good” and “the bad”—is actually useful when it comes time to write your assignments. As section II will discuss (see below), a thoughtful analysis of the relationship between theory and practice includes reflecting on places in which theories converge with—and diverge from—your practical experiences.

Section II: Tips & Ideas for Writing about Theory & Practice



★ *Considering the Parts (not just the Whole)*

When you are discussing a theory from your readings, you do not necessarily need to argue that you find the *entire* theory either helpful or unhelpful. It is possible to find *a piece* of the theory useful while contesting another aspect. Talking about the parts of the theory that work for you and the parts that do not (and thoughtfully explaining *why*) can give you more options to write about.

★ *Engaging in Critique*

Critique is a mode of scholarship that allows authors to challenge dominant norms and assumptions, consider political contexts and power relations, and make that which has become familiar seem suddenly strange (thus allowing readers to see the world differently). Importantly, critiquing a theory or practice does not necessarily mean that you are “against it;” overall, you can support a theory or practice while *at the same time* calling attention to its troubling aspects.

★ *Focusing on Omissions*

If you are having trouble discussing a theory, another option is to focus on something that the theory *does not* talk about (i.e. omits from the conversation). Thinking about a consideration, aspect, or detail that falls *outside* the scope of the theory might offer an opening for your analysis, allowing you either to critique the theory or to offer a valuable contribution by building on the existing framework.

★ *Making Interesting Connections*

A final general point to remember when discussing theory and practice is to strive for interesting *connections*. Try to consider the ways in which these theories relate to, or interact with, your personal and practical experiences—as well as other theories. Perhaps you might not have anything novel to say about a particular theory, but you can draw attention to a noteworthy connection between theories.

