Introduction to ACT #268

Imagine yourself as an impressive speaker and a competent writer, if it’s not the case already. Think of yourself as an excellent critical thinker as well, adept at analyses and strategies. This course will help you to become that person in the business world. Make a big commitment to ACT #268 and you will...

- think more efficiently and critically;
- become a competent speaker in front of groups;
- write well, at a level expected of an MBA graduate.

This class is meant to be practical, and it is. Working professional MBA students can immediately apply what they are learning in the workplace. Full-time MBA students find ACT #268 immediately useful to secure and excel at internships. All graduates can use what they learn here throughout their careers. The skills you are acquiring should stay with you for life.

Let’s delve into the three subject areas raised above.

Critical Thinking

In a 2010 survey conducted by the GSM, employers said they wanted to see better critical thinking skills in today's MBA graduates. The goal of #268 is to teach how to think rather than what to think. You’ll be noticing how you think—building arguments, identifying biases, and much more. You’ll face challenges that force you to distinguish your thinking from your feelings. You’ll also acquire tools to enable you to bring critical thinking to bear on problems where you have little or no background.
Writing
English writing skills vary greatly among the students entering the GSM. During the quarter, six self-editing techniques will enable you to quickly enhance your business writing, whatever your skill level at the start of class. You’ll also learn to evaluate C-level business writing from leading companies in technology, finance, and other fields. What’s good about this corporate announcement, supervisor’s memo, or e-mail from a manager? What isn’t? Your discerning eye will help you shape good business communications of your own.

Presentations
A competent public speaker displays eight basic skills. Students begin ACT 268 with strength in some of these skills, but need to learn others. For instance, some students speak too quickly (and know it) because they’re nervous. That can readily be undone. You’ll acquire all eight skills, with opportunities to develop a commanding presence, incorporate PowerPoint effectively, and learn other more advanced skills.

Required Materials
A downloadable TEXTPAK contains cases for group discussion; Harvard Business School readings; and excerpts from Blink by Malcolm Gladwell and Thinking Fast And Slow by Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman.

The Thinker’s Guide to Analytic Thinking, a booklet by Dr. Linda Elder and Dr. Richard Paul, Foundation for Critical Thinking Press.

Choose a Book to Read
While it isn’t a class requirement, reading all of Blink and/or Thinking Fast and Slow would enhance your critical thinking skills. The latter is particularly profound.

The following books are also on point. Most are readily available in paperback. Try to read at least one: Predictably Irrational (Dan Ariely); The Paradox of Choice (Barry Schwartz); Freakonomics (Steven Levitt and Stephen Dubner); Outliers or Blink (Malcolm Gladwell); Everyday Bias (Howard Ross).

The Purdue Owl is an excellent reference tool on grammar to have on your toolbar.
Before you arrive at the first class, be sure these things have occurred:

- You've established ready access to the Textpak.
- You have read and fulfilled the requirements of the assignment for Class 1, which will be posted by mid-September.
- You have a name card for display in the classroom.

Your owner's manual for #268

- Questions about assignments should go to the TA, who can readily answer most.
- Attendance issues should be directed to the TA via email. All absences should be briefly explained beforehand. (See Grading at the end of the syllabus regarding absences.)
- Discussion Groups: Students will participate in ongoing student discussion groups to analyze cases and other materials. The instructor will post the student discussion groups by the first class. Participation in the group discussions and in class will factor into a “participation” element of the grading. (See Grading.)
- Grades will be posted and available to you in an ongoing manner. Final grades are curved. (Again, see Grading.)

1st Class—We’ll introduce the necessary writing skills for a business leader. Also, critical thinking will be reviewed. What is it, and why is it important?

2nd Class—To establish baseline presentation skills, half the class will give 90-second talks without notes from a lectern. More writing skills will be introduced. We’ll also apply critical thinking in a case study: “How Much Is Sweat Equity Worth?”

3rd Class—Yahoo CEO Marissa Mayer created a controversy several years ago when she disallowed working remote for all employees. Similarly, in the classic case “McGregor Ltd. Department Store,” a CEO will cause disruption by changing the employee discount plan. The class will critically analyze the options in McGregor and write a tactful announcement. Also, the remainder of the students will present baseline talks.

4th Class—Everyone will deliver a three-minute talk, building an argument about an important national or international business issue. Further skills in critical thinking and writing will also be developed.

5th Class—Everyone will give a third talk, one that incorporates a personal anecdote to build credibility with the audience. The topic will be a healthcare policy or medical practice that you would like to see changed. We will also debate a real-world ethical dilemma of a type that often faces front-line managers.
6th Class—We will apply our critical acumen to The Friedman Doctrine. This is an influential op-ed column by the Nobel prize-winning economic theorist Milton Friedman, written in 1970 but still very influential. He places profits above corporate social responsibility. Do you agree? We’ll also delve into logical fallacies.

7th Class—Student pairs will give engaging presentations of several minutes, using a minimum of six PowerPoints. The subject matter, chosen by the students, must fall under the broad umbrella topic of “Money.”

8th Class—Students will individually respond to a high-stakes challenge in a single-player simulation called “Judgment in a Crisis.” The company, Matterhorn Health, has high expectations for its new product, a blood glucose monitor, but the launch goes awry. You are the product manager being bombarded with emails, surprising data and the need for quick decisions. The class will also analyze another case, “In Search of a Second Act.”

9th Class—Half the students will give their final oral presentations of the quarter. It calls for a business development or sales presentation, requiring confidence and enthusiasm. A related assignment regarding disruptive new business ventures will set the stage for the student talks.

10th Class—Those who did not present last week will do so. Also, the class will tackle “Thomas Green: Power and Office Politics.” Green, a bit of a renegade, must write a very diplomatic self-assessment for his superiors to save his job.

Final Exam

**Grading**

Only half the students in ACT #268 will receive an A- or higher, in accordance with GSM guidelines for core classes. **Important:** grades will be curved as needed at the end of the quarter to achieve this outcome. Thus the running sum of your numerical grades on SmartSite may not directly convert in the traditional manner to your letter grade. In addition, a 200-point basis will be used for grading to allow the instructor a greater range of discretion with the individual assignments. Critical thinking, speaking and writing will figure equally into your grade, with a participation component as well.

**Critical thinking** is a grading factor for the speaking assignments and especially for the writing assignments, which usually come after your discussion group has met.

**Speaking**
The first two presentations are not graded.

Third presentation (healthcare): 20 points
Fourth presentation (PowerPoint talk with partner): 20 points  
Fifth presentation (persuasive): 20 points

**Writing**  
Only the assignments below are graded.  
McGregor: 20 points  
Friedman Doctrine: 20 points  
Second Act: 20 points  
Thomas Green: 20 points

**Participation**  
20 points, based primarily on individual participation in class, the quality of your group discussions, and peer reviews by your group members.

In-class participation requires you to be active and participate in class. Further, such participation should be value-added. *Please display your name cards in the early going so that the TA and the instructor can note participation and come to know everyone more quickly.*

Please use your laptop or other electronics only if needed for class material/activities, and always only have course-relevant material open (no email or web checking, please). Laptops should remain closed when students are giving talks, out of courtesy.

**Final Exam**  
40 points

**On Attendance**

This class is an interactive experience. Attendance is vital. Important learning will occur in your group discussions and during the three hours of every class. Every effort should be made not to miss a class or group discussion. Moreover, missing a class equals no participation for that week, and missing a group discussion will matter as well. It is important to do all the necessary reading and other requirements leading up to group discussions and the weekly classes.