SISYPHEAN HIGH
"WHAT DO I DO NEXT?"
<!--ANNOTATIONS-->

These annotations will tackle the "What do I do next?" handout out of order, starting with the universal skills and traits. Remember that this is a *loop*, so there should be constant movement between steps.

③ **Analyze the universal skills and traits that inform and enable learning.**

The verbs here are important. You might *use* every skill and trait in a particular task, but you probably can't actively strengthen all of them. You need a focus for your analysis, whether that takes the form of personal reflection and metacognition or teacher-directed discussion.
Note that the skills related to test-taking — timed multiple-choice work and timed essay writing — aren't part of this list, despite being part of earlier forms of grade abatement. Considering how much time is spent, even in a grade-abated classroom, on test prep, that deserves explanation:
(1) Test-driven skills are just mutations of other, more authentic skills. Close reading is twisted into a gamified form of speed reading; effective writing is twisted into a performative, formulaic kind of writing; and so on.
(2) High-stakes tests actively prevent collaboration, lack empathy, and damage amenability (as the scores are often black boxes).
(3) When the goal is gamesmanship — get a higher score or else — it's usually a matter of critical thinking and organization.

Collegiality ⇆ Empathy

This is the crux of the course and the stuff of your growth: the collaborative learning environment and experience. Productive collegiality depends on the skill of empathy, which you build through discussion, writing, and **especially reading** in the Humanities.

The image comes from the RSA Animate video for Ken Robinson's "Changing Education Paradigms," which you can watch here.
The idea of honing empathy as a skill comes from Chad Fowler's essay, "Your Most Important Skill: Empathy," which you can read here.
This video explains how literature builds empathy. Paul Graham's "Age of the Essay," available here, points out that literary *analysis* (see the section on close reading below) is "three steps removed from real work," which is why ELA reading is emphasized here.

Integrity + Character

This is the focus on the individual learning environment and experience, especially the honesty and openness necessary to take risks. **Individualize learning** as much as possible.

This icon was created by iconoci for the Noun Project.
Integrity is a counterpart to collegiality — a focus on how the individual is deconstructed and reconstructed in a learning environment. The skills

External Artifacts

○ Close Reading ⟹ Internalization

This includes the texts you analyze for emulative purposes, the memorization of universal languages and structures, and especially the literature read for empathy.

○ Critical Thinking ⟹ Metacognition

This is the skill of problem-solving in an authentic context, especially the metacognitive problem-solving that drives each learning choice.

○ Effective Communication ⟹ Writing

This centralizes writing, especially essays, as essential to making learning permanent. Discussions and other communications support and scaffold the writing process.

These icons were created for the Noun Project by Dan Vo, Ale Estrada, and Carol Costa, respectively. The symbolism is probably obvious, but just in case: The elephant never forgets; the owl is wise; and the octopus… actually, I'm not sure about the octopus. The metaphor we use for writing is a river — courtesy of Paul Graham — and octopi don't live in rivers. He looks a little like Cthulhu, which pops up occasionally, so maybe that's it.

The idea in this section is that you hone these skills by *creating* things. That's why there is often a note about "external artifacts"; you need to generate hard evidence of growth here in order to make that growth permanent. Not everything happens externally, of course, so it's more about the root of the word "artifact": a thing made with skill. You write to crystalize metacognition; you take notes to crystalize reading; you stitch it all together through essays that search out something meaningful.

Close reading is also about avoiding low-information sepsis, which is one reason these skills come after the central concepts of integrity and collegiality: You have to work together to internalize what you need to internalize. It's not just strength in numbers; it's that the course is built *for* groups. Not many folks can hack and rebuild themselves as students — the makerspace goal of the class — without help.

That said, metacognition is the key skill in probably *all* of this. At all times, we need an awareness of why we do what we do. And writing is the most powerful way to get at truth with a capital-T, especially the Truth of ourselves. We shape our thoughts by shaping our writing, as Orwell wrote, and we must reimagine essays as extensions of that process, not just the mechanical repetition of what is commonly available on Wikipedia or Sparknotes. Orwell's advice is more important than ever (emphasis mine):

A scrupulous writer, in every sentence that he writes, will ask himself at least four questions, thus: What am I trying to say? What words will express it? What image or idiom will make it clearer? Is this image fresh enough to have an effect? And he will probably ask himself two more: Could I put it more shortly? Have I said anything that is avoidably ugly? But you are not obliged to go to all this trouble. **You can shirk it by**

Internal Artifacts

Amenability ⇆ Self-Awareness

Amenable folks seek and accept criticism and praise about all aspects of themselves and their work. That process must be goal- and growth-oriented at different times, and it requires a clear picture of strengths and weaknesses.

Assiduousness ⇆ Self-Efficacy

This is how to live like an academic tardigrade: Test limits, develop resilience, and embrace failure as essential to learning. Hard work is just part of what is required to overcome procrastination, impulsivity, and complacency.

The tardigrade is taken from "Chibi Tardigrade" by Daieny Schuttz, which can be seen here. The picture of Donkey Kong is by Joseph Le. The original is here, and there's a GIF.

These are cartoony symbols for serious ideas. Water bears have a history in grade abatement, for instance; they symbolize toughness, especially when it comes to risk-taking and distress tolerance. Donkey Kong is more roundabout: The greatest threat to amenability is the Dunning-Kruger effect, and if we're following Orwell's other advice ("The sole aim of a metaphor is to call up a visual image"), we can imagine ourselves dodging our way past another DK, Donkey Kong.

The "internal artifacts" that often accompanies these two doesn't preclude external evidence, any more than the previous header precluded internal stuff. But the majority of what you shape with skill is going to happen *internally* here — through metacognition, reflection, and an epiphany or two. These are the traits that go into remaking yourself as a student, and they are as desultory as they are crucial.

Another thing: These traits go hand-in-hand (or paw-in-whatever-tardigrades-have). Your self-awareness builds self-efficacy, and you can only push yourself when you realize the *need* to push. Cockiness breeds complacency. Confidence breeds a kind of courage.
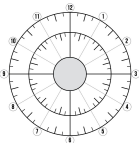
Organization ⇒ Autodidacticism

A systemic, systematic, and individualized approach to getting things done is what frames the rest of these skills and traits. **Learn how you learn**, and you can teach yourself anything.

This image looks like a bullseye, which is fine; autodidacticism is about hitting targets, and the "ready, fire, aim" method of actionable plans is a good one. We never stray far from violent metaphors, either. But the image is actually a DoubleDex from this site — an adaptation by Julie Sheranosher of another effective time-hacking tool, the chronodex. Organization is the (not-so) secret skill that frames the rest. The goal is autodidacticism: teaching yourself under a grade-abated aegis, honing the skills and traits *you* need to hone, and constantly iterating on

whatever blueprint works best. There *is* no bullseye, in fact, just incremental progress toward what Dan Pink describes in [this video](): autonomy, mastery, and purpose.

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① **Delve into the interstitial and collaborative instruction of the course.**

The verb is again key: You need to *delve* into this stuff, not just glance over it. These aren't handouts, and they aren't textbooks; they are the substructure that supports everything you will ever do in a course like this. These sites evolve, iterating and reiterating the ideas and machinery we're using to learn, and you need to work with just as much flexibility. You also need to read the verb "delve" as meaning "make painstaking inquiries into something," because each of these elements is highly responsive and almost completely transparent. Asking questions on the website can generate entirely new directions for assignments; responding to a Medium essay can deepen your understanding of a concept; comments on Google Classroom can lead to extensions and alternatives for some assignments; and Google+ makes it possible to work together, whether you're sharing your writing or discussing a text, at any point and from anywhere.

In other words, if you embrace these elements, you'll find a truly interstitial learning environment. It won't matter if you're sick, tired, stressed, bored — any momentary inability to work can be navigated, because the classroom is powerfully flexible.

○	**Sisyphean High** This is the hub: It contains all units and lessons, plus links to everything else. **Use the comment section to ask questions directly of your teacher.**
○	**Medium** The @sisypheanhigh account has critical teacher essays that explain and explore the units, lessons, and philosophy of the course. **Read them carefully.**
○	**Google+ Community*** The instructional content here is student-generated. Use this to generate evidence of collaboration and to **experience the protege effect**.
○	**Google Classroom** All formal assignments, deadlines, requirements, and announcements are housed here. **Use this to organize your calendar of work.**

I think this set of four will stay in place for a while. A [course subreddit]() and [Twitter account]() are still there, but they've fallen out of regular use; Google+ replaces their functionality from a spot within GAFE, which makes it easier to use and monitor.

The reason these descriptions are so much briefer than the descriptions for the elements of grade abatement: Each of these sites runs *very* deep, and it takes serious exploration to develop the right habit of mind.

> Covering everything you'll find on Sisyphean High, for instance, would be impossible if it *wasn't* constantly evolving to meet the needs of the course, and the Google Apps must be rebooted at the start of each school year..

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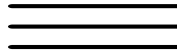
② Collaborate, create meaning, and gather evidence of learning.

> This step used to say, "Explore, create, learn," and that's all. Before explaining the current version, here is how I explained it back then:
>
> > (1) Explore not just the readings and lessons of the interstitial classroom, but the weird and ramiform stuff that comes out of them. Get yourself lost. Remember what it's like to be curious about learning.
> > (2) Create things. You are primarily learning about and hacking yourself (through grade abatement) and writing (through bishop composition), but you should consider this course a Humanities makerspace — a place where you create the stuff that makes us human beings.
> > (3) That last bit is pretty abstract, though, so the third verb is simpler: Learn from what you do. Develop the core skills that make you smarter and more thoughtful. Inculcate the traits you'll need in the future. Pick up new knowledge about random subjects. Learn something every day, if you can, about yourself and the world you inhabit.
>
> That's all worth reiterating here. The update is more actionable, though, and focuses on collaboration and evidence-gathering. If we're always thinking about what evidence we're creating, we will probably avoid imprecision and abstraction.

○	**g+**	### Google+ Community* Start discussions. Share ramiform reading. Post works-in-progress. This is the in-class learning community extended beyond the school walls.
○	▲	### Google Drive Use Docs to take notes, reflect and metacogitate, and collaborate on early drafts of essays. Organize evidence in Drive. Experiment with other tools, too.
○	M	### Medium* Share final drafts of essays and other work here. Then publish and publicize the best of it. Enter a broader and more authentic discussion.
○	👥	### Google Classroom Submit a copy of all required work by the deadline. Attach metacognitive and reflective writing as necessary. Account for any individualized assignments.

These are the tools you'll use to collaborate, create meaning, and gather evidence of learning. They help bring us back to the extrinsic motivation of the classroom — the stuff we need to keep GAP work honest for all students — without sacrificing any authenticity or efficacy. This is also how you'll generate evidence for grade abatement without driving yourself (or your teacher) to the brink of exhaustion. Most importantly, this is an evolving mechanism. If we find tools that work better, we'll use them. This is where the hacker- or makerspace mentality shines: Your goal is to *create*, which is messy and difficult. It's also fun. That's why we lean on Piet Hein:

Art is solving problems that cannot be formulated before they have been solved. The shaping of the question is part of the answer.

Writing is an art. So is learning. And that makes you an artist. All you need is to figure out what problem you are in the midst of solving.

☆   **Repeat Steps 1-3.**

The idea of treating the Humanities as an artistic makerspace is summed up in this easily-overlooked bit: You repeat Steps 1-3. You iterate. You fail at something, ask for help, and try again. Depending on the problem you're solving and the work you're creating, you don't *stop* doing that.
In other words, the process doesn't stop with a GAP score. It doesn't stop with a high-stakes test, a presentation, a performance. When the goal is growth, you just keep going.
That doesn't mean that your final products aren't important, of course, and extrinsic motivations are part of the system. Beautiful writing should be published. Fresh insight should be shared. High scores on a test should be celebrated.
But the process is always more important than those things.