

CE 4071: Land Use, Development, & Controls
Writing Intensive Course Summary
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Learning Objectives:

- To introduce students to the policies and issues associated with land use planning.

This objective is addressed by assigning a significant amount of reading. Writing about what has been read reinforces the concepts and allows the students to make their own connections between the material, its application in real-world situations, and ultimately, to themselves.

- To provide an understanding of the regulatory framework under which land is developed and the built environment is designed.

A significant component of the civil engineering and planning professions deals with the development of land. Whether the application is in the development of regulations or the interpretation of them, students will need to understand the structure and style of legal writing. This objective is addressed by requiring students to find, read, interpret and apply a variety of local, state, and federal regulations regarding zoning, impact assessment, and environmental mitigation. They are also tasked with recommending revisions to existing code to encourage better utilization of land.

- To provide students with an understanding of the process utilized by planners and developers in their preparation of land use development plans and designs.

This objective is met by introducing students to a variety of case studies, providing examples of actual site plans and the regulations for which they were designed to comply with. The term project provides the opportunity to mimic this process for a parcel of land that is currently being considered for development. Students must write about the details of the project and how it is consistent (or not) with regulations, social goals, and environmental betterment.

Assignment Examples

- Essays – A higher expectation for polished writing is expected in an essay. Key elements are organized structure, providing evidence to support claims, and a clear and convincing argument
- Review and interpretation of zoning ordinances – Students are required to obtain a copy of the zoning ordinance or land use regulation that pertains to their selected project topics. They need to compare the project topic development case study to these regulations, and they also need to separately interpret the ordinance for a homework assignment.

- Memorandum to client – The last homework assignment asks student to use GIS to map various constraints to development (both environmental and regulatory) in a community. Students need to select the best place for a residential subdivision and report back to their client about why that particular location is the most suited.
- Group presentations – While students conduct individual research throughout the term, they are tasked with presenting the combined learning outcomes of their independent research topics in thematic groups. For example, projects associated with the development of alternative energy projects were grouped together so that a student who studied the controversy around a solar farm installation could share learning with one who looked at a wind farm project. This combined knowledge needs to be delivered effectively in a 10-minute oral presentation. Most students elect to use PowerPoint, although it's not required.

The Term Project

The term project for this course is an independent research project. It offers a chance to explore a variety of written genres. It builds in alignment with course content. Each week, a new section is drafted, and all previous sections are re-written.

- First, the students need to review news media to identify a conflict over how land is used. They then need to write a brief description about why there is not agreement over the proposed development. This will serve as the introduction of their report. While at first, the utilization of only the news media coverage is sufficient, students are later asked to back up their claims with primary sources as their research continues.
- Next, the students explore the regional context and general development constraints for where this proposed development is taking place. What are the neighborhood or community goals? What are the physical site constraints (steep slopes, wetlands, etc.)? Are there any economic constraints? Etc. The challenge here is getting students to focus on the land itself – not the proposed development project. With this weekly submission, they are also asked to redraft the Introduction.
- When the course transitions from planning topics to land use law topics, the project submission becomes an analysis of the land use regulations that are in place for the parcel of land in question. Here, interpretation of legal documents and code is needed. Again, students need to focus on describing the rules that apply – not whether or not the development is consistent with these rules (yet). Also, previous writing is redrafted with the weekly submission.
- Now students can analyze the proposed development and compare to the regional context, site constraints, and applicable regulations. This is a higher-level analysis that requires objective writing with excellent citation of references.

- After the analysis is complete, students can now write their opinion – what is the best use of this land considering all the factors analyzed in the last section? Instruction and examples about “how to write a good argument” are discussed in class prior to this submission.
- Finally, students get a chance to revise legal language to better encourage their “highest-and-best use” as presented in the previous section.

Responding to Student Writing

- Rubrics are often provided to students ahead of time as a way to clarify expectations for particular assignments.
- Peer review is utilized in this course for the weekly project submissions. Students are paired at random, and allowed time in class each Friday to share their remarks with the other students. Each week, the pairs are switched. This allows students to learn from others’ writing strengths while sharing content of individual student research.

Opportunities & Plans for the Future

- Consider journaling to track student understanding of reading material – but with a more concerted effort to select one topic each week to be redrafted as an essay or position paper.
- Continue to review and enhance the suite of assignments to achieve an appropriate diversity of writing genres that are aligned with course topics.
- Tighten the requirements of the last homework assignment to result in a professional “technical memorandum” as the format for the deliverable.
- Improve/reinforce the importance of writing for presentations (beyond PowerPoint design – effective word choice).