

Designing Writing Assignments

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Begin by considering what you want your students to learn.

Then select assignments that both teach and test the learning you value most. Writing assignments generally assist students in exploration, analysis, argument, and research. If you are interested in making sure that students understand key terms or facts, objective tests or quizzes might be a better form of assessment.

Make the scheduling and sequencing of assignments support your course goals.

Use "layered assignments" when your task is a complex one. For example, you can ask students to complete an annotated bibliography before assigning a research essay. Make sure that the ordering of assignments reflects an increasing difficulty in tasks. Try to avoid assigning the same type of assignment over and over again. See information on sequencing assignments in this handbook.

Ask yourself whether the workload you are planning for yourself and your students is reasonable, strategically planned, and sustainable.

Are you challenging students enough? Are your assignment due dates scheduled at a feasible time for you and your students? Are there ways that you can use in-class time or students can use out-of-class time to reinforce key proficiencies so that you are not killing yourself grading papers?

Put all of your directions and guidelines clearly and comprehensively in writing.

Give students a special handout for each assignment. Include in your instructions:

- The genre or mode of the writing (lab report, research paper, personal essay);
- The audience (you, their peers, experts in a certain field, a general audience);
- The purpose (to communicate their knowledge of a topic, to persuade, to simulate activities of a professional in a certain field, to combine disciplinary perspectives);
- A clear articulation of the problem or questions to be addressed;
- The organizational plan and other needed forms of presentation (What typically comes first, in the middle, and toward the end? Are there subheadings, certain documentation styles used?)
- The evidence that counts (logic, quotations from experts, statistics, first-hand experience)
- An explanation of how the writer might go about investigating the topic and creating the paper;
- Your expectations regarding paper scope, depth, format, and length;
- What resources you expect to be used;
- The evaluation procedures and standards you will apply to the paper. Make sure your assignment sheet is an appropriate length. Overly detailed and lengthy prompts can produce "cognitive overload"; assignments that consist of a single directive or only a couple of

sentences are too short. One page is generally a good length. It is helpful to go over these directions in class and to seek student input in creating the evaluative criteria for papers.

To allow time for the composing process to work, issue assignments at least ten days (but preferably two weeks) in advance.

Encourage students to consult each other about paper ideas, visit the writing center, or approach you in office hours. Scheduling individual conferences with students or reading and commenting on drafts before the paper is submitted for a grade can be an excellent way of ensuring that students are on the right track.

Invite students to read models of the mode in which they are expected to write.

Discuss with them the codes, conventions, and assumptions of the disciplinary audience. You might want to put samples of model technical writing on reserve in the library.

Use or encourage peer groups so that students can motivate and educate each other.

Workshopping drafts of student papers (either in pairs, small groups, or as a whole class) or asking students to write critiques of each other's drafts helps students to hone their critiquing abilities and to learn how to revise their own work. (Caution: Peer review works best, if it is done regularly. Students must establish a comfortable and honest rapport with each other for the comments to be helpful.) See information on peer reviews in this handbook.

Make sure your assignments are challenging enough.

Students will be more encouraged to write multiple drafts, to seek outside assistance, and to develop their thinking and writing abilities.

Avoid creating assignments that only ask students to regurgitate someone else's views.

Students will not engage in their own thinking. If possible, ask questions that have multiple responses.

Provide enough flexibility in the assignment so that students can write about something that interests them, rather than what you already know.

Writers create better texts when they are addressing issues and themes that are intriguing to them.

Where possible, try to make your assignments approximate real communication situations, where the writer communicates something to a reader who wants to learn more about it.

(This is the reverse of the exam situation where you have set answers that students need to reproduce.) If possible, have students distribute their work to their intended audience (e.g., letter to the editor, proposal to a certain official).

If possible, write some of your own assignments along with the students, and (if you have the courage) share the results with your students.

Alternatively, talk honestly and openly about your own writing process, obstacles, and idiosyncrasies. Bring in drafts of your own work. Let them know through your example that writing is tough work and a social process; even accomplished writers seek help from others and must work through multiple drafts.

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