



Designing Effective Writing Assignments Series

PART 1: Strategies for Designing Effective Writing Assignments

Writing assignments can be important meaning-making activities in that they often help students engage with course content in more holistic ways while offering them an opportunity to make that content their own. However, designing effective writing assignments that can achieve these goals takes effort. No matter the writing situation, Bean (2011) argues that successful writing assignments “evoke a high level of critical thinking, help students wrestle productively with a course’s big questions, and teach disciplinary ways of seeing, knowing, and doing” (pp. 1-2). On the other hand, if a writing assignment is poorly designed, it can be difficult for the instructor to teach it, and more importantly, difficult for the students to write it (Wilhoit, 2008). Part of what makes designing a writing assignment challenging is that what counts as “good writing” in college can often differ depending on the rhetorical situation, the discipline the writing is situated within, a teacher’s purpose in assigning the writing project, and the goals of the course itself.

Common concerns about assigning writing

Bean (2011) describes several concerns that teachers across the disciplines have with incorporating writing assignments into their courses:

Concerns	Responses
<i>Writing activities are incompatible with the subject of my courses.</i>	On the contrary, short, informal writing activities can help students better understand a course concept, while other writing activities can expose students to common disciplinary genres and conventions.
<i>Assigning writing activities will take time away from covering content.</i>	Bean argues that writing activities can actually help students process more content by encouraging students to actually use their developing content knowledge to address disciplinary problems.
<i>I don’t have enough time to grade all of those papers.</i>	There are a variety of strategies teachers can use to mitigate the workload presented by writing assignments. These strategies are discussed in more detail further below.
<i>I don’t have enough knowledge of writing to help students be successful.</i>	Teachers can be most helpful to students by acting as honest readers, pointing out areas that are confusing or in need of more support. This type of feedback does not require any special knowledge of writing.

Best practices for designing effective writing assignments

Writing assignments should be: 1) specific and purposeful; 2) encourage students to think critically about course material; and 3) tied to the learning objectives of the course (Bean, 2011; Glenn & Goldthwaite, 2014; Herrington, 1981; Wilhoit, 2008). Having a clear conceptualization what you are asking students to do, as well as how and why you would like them to do it, is key to designing an effective writing assignment. Mary-Ann Winkelmes (2014) notes that effective assignments are transparent and suggests that instructors discuss the “learning goals and design rationale” of an assignment before students begin writing.

Additionally, she offers the following suggestions for designing transparent assignments:

- Include a list of the skills students will practice on each assignment sheet. This provides students with the **purpose** of the assignment, which is a key aspect of transparency.
- Make the “learning benefits” of each assignment clear to students from the beginning, including “skills practiced, content knowledge gained, the tasks to be completed, the criteria for success.”
- Clearly articulate the steps students should take to thoughtfully complete the assignment



- Provide a rubric or some other indication of criteria for a success on each assignment before students begin writing.
- Provide students with examples of prior students' successful work, and discuss or otherwise indicate how the example meets assignment criteria.

In the chart below, Glenn & Goldthwaite (2014) provide a distinction between what a good assignment is and is not:

A good assignment is...	A good assignment is not...
One that has a clear, specific purpose, and only asks students to deal with 1-2 specific questions to which a thesis can be the answer.	One that can be responded to with a simple true/false, yes/no, dichotomy.
One that asks for a response about a specific, immediate situation instead of an abstract or theoretical one.	One that leads to short and/or unfocused responses, or conversely one that asks too many questions in an effort to elicit a specific response.
One that allows students to tap into their already existing experience and/or knowledge.	One that assumes too much student knowledge on the topic or within the discipline.

In addition to thinking purposefully about the assignment yourself, you must also be able to clearly communicate the tasks and expectations of the project to your students. One of the most important aspects of an effective writing assignment is a clear, concise assignment sheet. Wilhoit (2008) offers the following essential pieces of information that should be covered on every writing project assignment sheet:

Elements	Explanations
Task and type of assignment	Explain the specific writing task and the type of writing project you would like students to write. Try to be as unambiguous as possible in describing the task students are to carry out in a writing assignment. What exactly are you asking them to do, and how are you asking them to do it? See below for examples of types of writing assignments.
Rhetorical situation	Who is the audience for this assignment? What role does the writer have in this project? What is the topic students are meant to cover, and what is their purpose in writing this project?
Grading criteria	Providing a clear rubric or grading criteria can help your students to better align their responses with your expectations. If you intend to have students write collaboratively, make sure you also provide guidelines for group work on the prompt. Stevens & Levi (2005) corroborate the importance of having a transparent rubric, noting that this is especially helpful for first generation students, minority students, and non-native speakers of English.
Due date and desired length	Some students are still learning how to manage their time well, and will benefit from having clear deadlines for all parts of an assignment. Regarding length, some teachers feel that if they specify how long a response should be, students will only write to that length. On the other hand, not specifying a page range or specific length can lead to a wide range of very short or very long responses.
Formatting and documentation guidelines	Make sure you specify any formatting or organizational requirements you have on the prompt. If you would like your students to use a particular citation style like APA, MLA, or Chicago, make sure you specify that on the prompt.



Relation to prior course assignments	Explaining this can help you students understand how this assignment builds on prior work they have completed, and how it will help them achieve the learning goals of the course.
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When assigning a writing project, it can be helpful to go through the assignment with your students, giving them plenty of time to ask questions. Winkelmes et al. (2016) found that this transparency can be especially important for first-generation students, and in their study, lead to increased retention and academic confidence. During this conversation, you might help your students get started by providing them with suggestions or options for how they might approach the writing assignment, as well as warnings of common mistakes or misinterpretations students have made with the assignment in the past.

Types of writing assignments

There are a variety of different types of writing assignments to choose from when integrating writing into a course, ranging in length and formality depending on the purpose of the assignment. Bean (2011) and others offer a few examples of effective writing assignments that can be modified to fit a variety of disciplinary contexts. Below are a few examples of common writing assignments:

Example Activities	Activity Descriptions
Summary papers	These assignments ask students to summarize a key concept from the course, or a reading or set of readings.
Formal research reports	These projects ask students to research a topic related to the course, and report their findings in a specific format (chosen by the instructor).
Position or argument papers	These projects ask students to research a topic from a variety of viewpoints, and then use that research to support their own perspective.
Compare/contrast papers	Students are asked to compare/contrast theoretical positions from key scholars, reading, methods, or procedures for completing a task, etc.
Reading responses	Students are asked to respond to specific questions about course readings. These can take place in reading journals that you occasionally collect, or reading responses on a discussion forum (on Canvas or elsewhere).
Position response papers	Students are provided with a position that they must then defend or refute using course concepts and outside research.
Disciplinary problem papers	These projects ask students to make an argument for the best solution to a disciplinary problem.
Data analysis papers	Students are provided with raw data (or asked to collect raw data themselves) that they must then analyze using a particular methodology from the course.

Glenn & Goldthwaite (2014) note that it is important to carefully consider your purpose in assigning a writing project when choosing what type of writing you will be asking your students to engage in. The authors also note the importance of defining and explaining action terms like “analyze,” “define,” “compare,” “argue,” etc., as students may not have clear understandings of what those terms are asking them to do.

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Designing Effective Writing Assignments Series **PART 2: Aligning Writing Assignments with Learning Outcomes**

Consciously aligning the goals and objectives of your writing assignments with the larger learning outcomes of your class can be an effective way to add meaning and importance to the writing you are asking your students to engage in. Herrington (1981) argues that students are more likely to learn from writing assignments that are linked to course objectives, especially when those objectives are ones that “emphasize more than just recall of facts” (p. 120). Research has shown that when instructors think critically about designing writing assignments that will help students achieve course goals, students tend to find these assignments help to improve their understanding of course material (Bean, 2011; Herrington, 1981).

Strategies	Explanations	Teaching Suggestions
Outline the main units of your course	Outlining your main units will give you a sense of what topics your project might cover, as well as which units might be best suited for a writing assignment.	Make a list of the main units of your course, including the content you and thinking skills (e.g., habits of mind, use of evidence, etc.) you intend to cover, and your main objectives for student learning for each unit.
Be transparent with students about learning outcomes	Winkelmes et al. (2016) found that providing greater transparency on assignments significantly improved academic outcomes for first-generation, low-income, transfer, and underrepresented students.	Be transparent about which learning outcomes the assignment is designed around on your assignment sheets, as well as in your discussions with your class and with individual students.
Sequence your writing assignments	Sequenced assignments that become increasingly complex throughout the term can help scaffold the development of key skills and concepts in your course.	Consider assigning a sequence of writing projects that build on each other.
Align your grading criteria with the learning outcomes	Aligning your grading criteria and learning outcomes will ensure that your students are thinking critically about the goals of the course as they write, and not just grammar and correctness.	Consider designing rubrics (or modifying existing ones) that actively align your grading criteria around the major learning outcomes of your course, and be sure to provide your students with these rubrics before they begin writing.
Create disciplinarily “authentic” assignments	Both Bean (2011) and Herrington (1981) argue that writing projects can provide students with valuable opportunities to learn “the particular patterns of inquiry of a discipline” (Herrington, 1981, p. 120). For example, “authentic” writing projects ask students to practice the types writing and thinking professionals in their discipline actually engage in (Anderson, Hoffman, & Little, 2014).	Authentic writing projects can give students a chance to see what writing and inquiry looks like in their own disciplines while providing them with an opportunity to write to a realistic audience, and not just their instructor. Consider how knowledge is created and disseminated in your field, and design writing projects that will mimic that process in the controlled environment of the classroom.



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PART 3: Strategies for Increasing the Efficiency of the Grading and Feedback Process

No matter how well designed a writing assignment is, the grading process will likely take longer and be more intensive than other types of activities for you and your TAs. However, this is time well-spent, as research has shown that timely feedback focused on learning outcomes plays an important role in helping students learn (Ambrose et al., 2010; Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Kuh, 2008). You can make the feedback and grading process much more efficient by designing clear assignments and allowing your students plenty of time to ask questions. Here are a few strategies to get you started, adapted from Bean (2011) and Glenn & Goldthwaite (2014):

Strategies	Teaching Suggestions
Set clear expectations	Make your expectations clear in both the writing assignment prompt and your evaluation criteria, and allow time for questions when you introduce an assignment. The clearer you are up front, the less time you will need to spend correcting misunderstandings when grading.
Break the assignment up	Consider assigning multiple short writing projects throughout the term, rather than a single long project at the end. This will cut down on grading time overall, especially during the already busy end-of-term.
Check-in with students	Have your students send you a short prospectus or a paragraph explaining their thesis. This can offer you an opportunity to check-in with your students and catch mistakes or misunderstandings early, saving you in feedback time later.
Schedule strategically	Consider your and your TA's schedules when assigning due dates for writing projects, and if possible, stagger due dates if you are teaching multiple classes.
Identify common feedback trends	While grading, create a list of comments you make repeatedly on students' papers, and then use this list to revise your assignment so that it is clearer for future classes. Also, go over your list with your students when you return their papers, so that they can have a clearer understanding of your expectations on future writing assignments.
Consider allowing revisions/rewrites	Bean (2011) argues that the time an instructor spends providing feedback is largely wasted unless students <i>do something</i> with that feedback. Therefore, he suggests that instructors should comment on late-stage drafts and allow rewrites. This also has the benefit of improving the overall quality of the writing received from students.

However your assignment is designed, Herrington (1981) argues that ultimately, "if the teacher treats the resulting writing as unimportant, or merely samples of writing, then the students begin to resent having to write" (p. 124). Nelson (1990) concurs, noting that students rely on instructor feedback to help them understand course and instructor expectations; without that feedback, students may have trouble evaluating and improving their writing as the term progresses. Therefore, you should carefully consider how you and your TAs will provide feedback on your students' writing.

Additional Resources

Additionally, please see our resource series titled "[Effective Feedback](#)," for more strategies and suggestions on providing effective feedback on a variety of different types of activities.



Citation

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