



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.



Citation

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References

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