

## Creating Effective Writing Assignments

### Common Challenges

- **The student work doesn't seem to respond to the assignment.**
- **The work responds to the assignment but lacks depth, original thought, insight, or appears hastily composed.**
- **The work is handed in late, or not at all.**
- **The work contains plagiarism.**

### Research

Studies have shown that assigning writing is one of the most important things instructors can do to promote learning, but there's nothing more frustrating than sitting down with a stack of student writing only to discover that few, if any, of your students have responded to the assignment in the way you had hoped. Though it's easy to blame the students in this situation, often the problem can be traced to the assignment itself. Creating effective writing assignments requires some time and energy at the outset, but the results are worth it — writing assignments that enhance student learning and are on-topic, thoughtful, and maybe even exciting to read.

### Some WAC/WID suggestions

- **Design assignments you want to read.**  
Specificity and creativity are the enemies of plagiarism — and of boring, derivative writing — so whenever possible make your writing assignments as specific to the unique materials and content of your course as you can. A history assignment that asks students to argue persuasively about the causes of the Civil War is more likely to produce plagiarized work than an assignment that asks students to analyze archival sources or to compare the use of sources by two historians whose work they read for your class. You may even wish to consider involving the students directly in the design process; they often propose more challenging tasks than their instructors! Check out some examples of [creative assignments].
- **Design with the end in mind.**  
Students are excellent at spotting “busy work” and tend to produce lackluster responses to assignments that seem to be “tacked on” rather than fully integrated with the course objectives. Start with the skill you wish your students to master, and then work backwards towards an assignment that might teach that skill. Make sure that you are clear with yourself about your objectives for each assignment and how those objectives correspond to your overall goals for the course. Don't keep those goals a secret! Share the motivation behind each assignment with your class; whenever possible, explain how the skills developed in one assignment will be honed in the next or how they might eventually be used in more advanced courses or on the job.
- **Use written instructions and a rubric.**  
Verbal instructions can be difficult for students to follow and even harder for them to remember; they will have an easier time staying on track with an assignment when

they have [a written version of your instructions] to which they can refer in addition. Developing and sharing a [grading rubric] with students before they begin working reinforces your instructions and demystifies the grading process, reducing anxiety for your students and grading time for you.

- **Think like a student.**

Once you have written out your instructions and grading rubric, try reading them in the way you imagine a student might. Where might they become confused? Do the implicit goals reflected in the rubric differ from the stated goals of the assignment? Do the instructions call for research but offer no guidance on appropriate and inappropriate sources? Try to make every aspect of the project as clear as possible, then have the students explain the assignment using their own words in a low-stakes written response.

- **Offer good examples.**

You know what you're looking for; let your students see it too. Keep a bank of good responses to your assignments (with students' permission) and make these as accessible as possible, perhaps by posting them on Blackboard or even assigning them as required reading. Though some instructors like to provide a range of examples — good, mediocre, and poor — it's simpler and clearer to offer students something to aspire to instead of something to avoid.

- **Help them think ahead.**

Whenever possible [scaffold] your larger assignments by breaking them down into smaller, more manageable units. For instance, you can help students prepare for a final research project by brainstorming in class and by requiring short, low-stakes writing assignments on their topic in the middle of the semester. These shorter assignments need not be graded, but should prompt students to begin working long before the due date, so you'll get fewer late (or nonexistent) papers as well as more thoughtful ones. Including a [peer review] process can also help students to develop their thinking and writing in advance of submitting the final draft.

## Further Reading

Bean, John C. *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*. Jossey-Bass, 1996

Bean's landmark work on writing-across-the-curriculum. *Engaging Ideas* includes a section on "designing problem-based assignments" that provides a number of useful examples for guiding assignment creation. This work is particularly valuable for its focus on the ways in which the design of writing assignments can produce different modes of critical thinking in students.

Gottschalk, Katherine, and Keith Hjortshoj. *Elements of Teaching Writing: A Resource for Instructors in All Disciplines*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004.

An excellent exploration of writing in the classroom. The chapter "Designing Writing Assignments and Assignment Sequences" offers discussion of some of the key concerns in assigning writing, including considerations of audience, topic, and objective, and offers suggestions for sequencing small assignments and scaffolding larger ones throughout the semester.

Howard, Rebecca Moore. "Forget About Policing Plagiarism. Just Teach." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. 16 Nov. 2001: B24.

A provocative consideration of the problem of plagiarism that focuses on the importance of giving students "authentic" writing assignments. Amidst growing concern over plagiarism in our colleges and the increasing availability of tools for detecting and policing the misuse of sources, Howard suggests that it may be our curriculum that needs reform, not our students.

Kiefer, Kate. "Integrating Writing Into Any Course: Starting Points." *Academic Writing* (2000): <<http://wac.colostate.edu/aw/teaching/kiefer2000.htm>>.

This brief article guides instructors through the process of designing writing assignments by working backwards from the learning objective to the assignment and offers several useful examples.

Moss, Andrew, and Carol Holder. *Improving Student Writing: A Guidebook for Faculty in All Disciplines*. Dubuque, IA: Kendall Hunt, 1988.

A useful guide to creating effective assignments. *Improving Student Writing* suggests techniques for both formal and informal writing assignments and provides examples of effective assignments from a wide variety of disciplines including engineering, biology, and criminal justice. The issue of assessment is also discussed, and the authors provide excellent examples of grading rubrics and checklists.

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