

the Art of Teaching

## Writing Effective Writing Assignments

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"Can my writing assignments set students up for success (or failure), or, everything I need to know about creating effective writing assignments."

### **preface: do no harm**

My ideas for this workshop began with a conversation with Gretchen Whipple at Fall Faculty Retreat when she proposed a session on how to “do no harm” in writing instruction. After thinking about this for a while, I’m confident that no one can inflict any lasting harm on a student writer, no matter what the assignment. In every case, I’d adopt the premise that there is some benefit just in getting students to write.

Still, an assignment that is overly directed or allows few options tends to re-inscribe the programmatic approach to writing that is current in secondary schools (the 5-paragraph theme, still lives as do similarly defined structures for exam-based writing, especially the writing in AP and IB). Faced with more of this restriction in college, some students might begin to equate writing with drudgery rather than inquiry or discovery—which is how I envision writing in the liberal arts.

It is also, I suppose, possible for you to sabotage both your students and the colleagues in your division if you present an idiosyncratic mode or style of writing as the norm for the department or discipline.

But you seem most likely to harm *yourself* (and your teaching relationship with your students) if you craft an assignment that delivers something other than what you want. There you are with a stack of papers, none of which achieves what you had hoped—or worse, that you can’t figure out how to evaluate.

Today’s session aims to offer some ways of thinking about the rhetorical situation of the writing assignment and some strategies in creating assignments that will make their outcome more consonant with your expectations. And all along, the goal should be to make those expectations transparent so that students experience this consonance as success.

### **the prompting dilemma: flexibility=“too vague” & direction= “too restrictive”**

We have all heard student responses from both sides. The assignment we give is too “vague,” which means that the student can’t find any traction or doesn’t know what to write about—and he feels lost in this surplus of freedom. Or the assignment is too “restrictive,” which means that the student senses there are few correct products—and she resists (or resents) this loss of freedom intellectual. After many years of adjusting my writing assignments to either end of the spectrum, I no longer think that one can find the sweet spot that combines the ideal level of freedom with the proper directedness. We will always have students on each side of this divide no matter what kind of writing assignment we write. Still, I think it’s possible to craft an assignment that provides ample direction while also including an openness that encourages (indeed, demands) students to find their own way.

## teaching — writing assignment — evaluation

While I'm focusing here on the writing assignment itself, I think it's essential to consider the assignment within its full pedagogical context. If I draw out what is probably a recursive process into a linear structure, the writing assignment comes out of (and is surrounded by) your teaching, and it is followed by evaluation.

### What Do I Want?—create your evaluation criteria prior to (and along with) the assignment writing to learn — learning to write

Viewing the process this way allows us to align hoped-for outcomes with parameters that are likely to produce the desired result. *We work backwards to create an effective writing assignment.* In this, your first question should be: *What do I want to evaluate and how will I evaluate it?* The bases for your evaluation will likely be several and might include both course content and writing outcomes, might be both broad and minute:

**w-t-l:** course goals (over-arching goals or a subset of them)

**w-t-l:** coverage of course material (engagement of certain chapters or texts)

**w-t-l:** grasp of brute facts or specific processes

**w-t-l:**

**l-t-w:** mastery of (discipline-specific) writing conventions/genres

**l-t-w:** professionalism (sentence-level mechanics, proper format, style sheet, etc.)

**l-t-w:** research abilities in the discipline with disciplinary databases and texts

**l-t-w:**

**l-t-w / w-t-l:** ability to connect personal experience to course material (relevance)

**l-t-w / w-t-l:** ability to conduct an inquiry/perform analysis/problem solve

**l-t-w / w-t-l:**

### assignment: scope & mode

For instance, if you want to just introduce students to research tools in your discipline and see how they navigate them, you might assign a 5-page evaluation of materials uncovered in the library. But if you want to evaluate a more sophisticated involving how well a student can take a theme from a course unit, consult recent scholarship, synthesize the debates, and come to a conclusion, then assigning a 5-page evaluation is a recipe for failure (not to mention a kind of joke). (You might instead assign 10-page position paper, perhaps.)

Thinking first about your evaluation will also keep you from arbitrarily choosing and assigning a writing strategy. For instance, a 2-text comparison essay is a good means for students to work through the nuances of a scholarly debate on a given topic if the texts are pre-chosen to highlight that debate. But if you need to have students comprehend the intricacies of a single, seminal argument (perhaps as foundation for other work later in the course), then don't assign comparison, which will only complicate that goal. (Consider, instead, a 1-text analysis, explication, or even summary.)

In forwarding evaluation, you might encounter what Richard Fulkerson calls "modal confusion" between the mode your assignment requires and the mode assumed by your intended evaluation. For instance: you've assigned students a self-reflective

narrative of an off-campus learning experience (which is writing in an expressivist mode), but you plan to evaluate them based on their ability to compel their readers with logic and reasoning (what Fulkerson obliquely classifies as the “mimetic” mode), or else you plan to evaluate them based on the internal organization and grammar of their piece (a “formalist” mode). Such disconnection can only end in tears for both parties.

Or, you might even find that your outcomes are more suited to an exam than an paper.

### **priorities: higher and lower-level evaluative concerns**

Too often our writing assignments seem to fixate on what I’d call lower-level concerns (the document surfaces I’ve collected as “professionalism” above). Instead, we should be thinking about how to craft an assignment that will engage higher-level concerns involving the intellectual work of writing while still insisting on a professional final presentation. Students, for their part, quickly gravitate to the lower-level. This interest seems to reflect their high school training where good writing was “correct,” dutiful, and superficially perfect. Moreover, these mechanics are also alluring because they can be clearly accomplished, and also clearly evaluated on the binary or correct or incorrect.

### **transparency: put your evaluation criteria on the assignment**

I recommend that you include the criteria you’ll use for evaluation as part of the assignment sheet. It will keep your own expectations aligned and keep students aligned to the kind of writing you expect. If you have a course-wide rubric, you can refer to it. But even if you choose not to take this step of inclusion, I suggest that you literally write up your evaluation criteria as preliminary to drafting the assignment.

### **teaching: preparing for and informing the assignment**

Having a clear sense of the bases for evaluation criteria and embedding them in the writing assignment will also impact your teaching. This might mean increased attention to the logistics of a given unit: what texts and topics you need to cover, in what order, and with what emphasis. In addition, a clarity that extends through the teaching—assignment—evaluation continuum often allows impromptu teaching moments like: “you might consider this line of thought in your essay” or “be wary of falling into this trap when you are writing.” The payoff, again, is a final set of more successful papers.

### **What Do You Want?—sympathetic understanding of the assignment**

If all the above places you in the role of the teacher-as-evaluator while creating an assignment, it is equally important for you to read your own assignment as if you were a student. Ideally, we would all actually write the assignment ourselves. But what I once seemed to have time for as an eager TA now seems a far-off luxury. Still, you can effectively test an assignment by asking yourself *What kinds of theses (or responses or products) might come from this assignment?* If you can’t imagine what you might write, your students don’t have much hope. But don’t chalk your assignment up as a success once you have one good idea about what a student could possibly write. You should be equally wary of the assignment that seems to have only one possible “solution” (that is, unless your desired outcome is some sort of rote response). Not only is an assignment reduced to a single option pedagogically suspect (as a kind of “fishing”), but do you really want to read 20-25 identical papers?

## writing assignment as rhetorical situation

When I say “writing assignment” I think of some kind of separate assignment sheet delivered to students prior to their writing, although some instructors include an assignment as part of their syllabi. (And we could talk separately about the best timing for delivery of any assignment.) Beyond that, a writing assignment forms a rhetorical situation of its own. A full consideration of this situation would lead us to its purpose, audience, stance, genre, and media/design. For the moment, let’s use this awareness to consider just a few of these elements.

### **purpose (of the assignment itself as it fits in a unit of course instruction):**

- a self-contained, everything-included unit of instruction
- a reminder of assignment’s premise and/or requirements
- a set of directions
- a prompt, a question, a springboard
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### **audience:**

- you’re writing to students, who will be reading this late at night
- you’re writing to *your* students, who can be referred to common knowledge, understandings, or rubrics from your class
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### **stance (you’ll likely take more than one):**

- the collaborator summarizing the key points of the unit
- the coach or advocate giving strategies for success
- the voice of experience delivering the history of options and common “errors”
- the evaluator explaining the means of assessment
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### **genre:**

- the problem set-up assignment
- the sequenced assignment
- the ongoing assignment (e.g. response paper, reaction paper)
- the one-sentence or one-question prompt
- the assignment-with-tips-or-checklist
- method-and-write-up
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### **media/design:**

- research confirms that the “Goldilocks Assignment” (neither too long nor too short) results in superior student accomplishment
- white space: make it (young, American) reader-friendly
- lists or bullets to enumerate choices or lay out explicit requirements
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## the 20-minute rule

A virtual-colleague of mine<sup>†</sup> has quantified a truth we all know: you have to give classroom time to any learning you hold important. Our writing assignments are among our greatest pedagogical challenges and house many of our greatest pedagogical idiosyncrasies. We would all do well to devote 20 minutes in class to navigating their assumptions and structures—best done interactively with our students.

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<sup>†</sup> E. Shelley Reid @ George Mason, whom I know only from a writing program administrator’s listserv