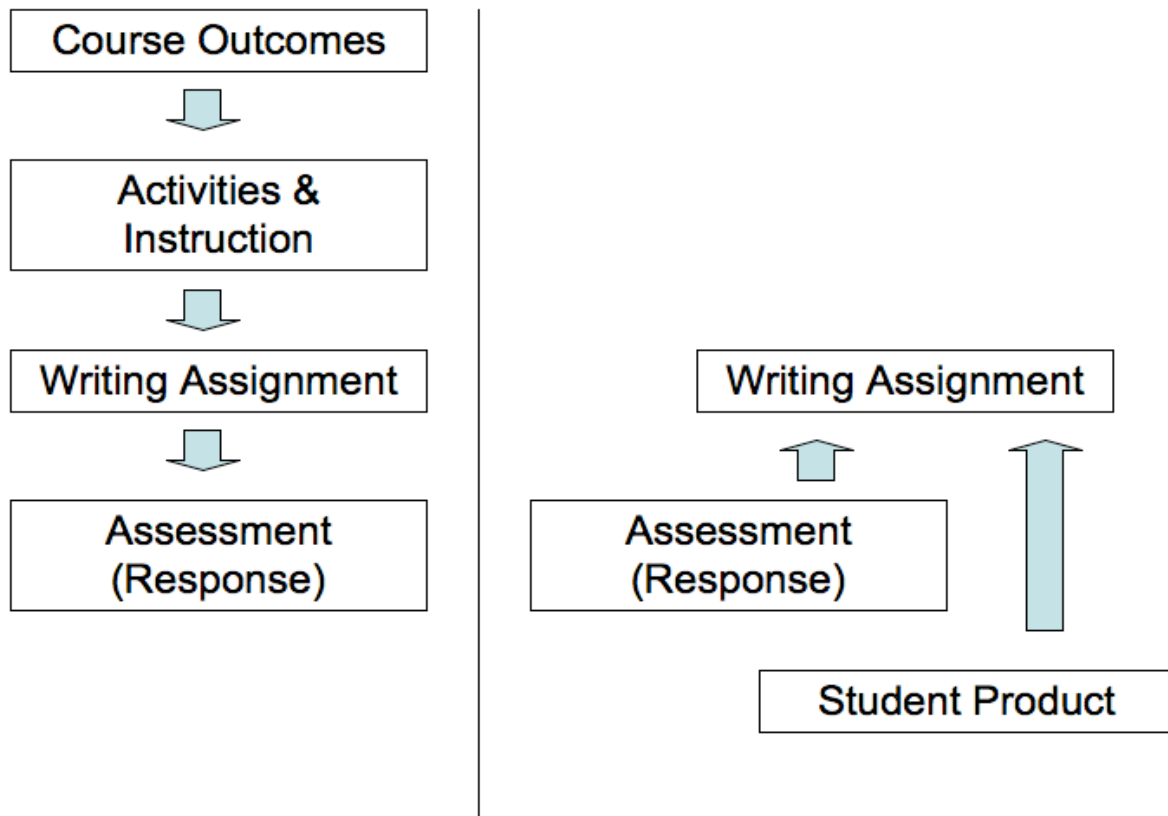


Untangling Grading: Aligning Your Grading Criteria & Your Assignment

Working Backwards



preface: the discourse acts of assigning and responding (via Richard Haswell)

Among the considerable attention given to responding to student writing, a 2006 article by Richard Haswell conducts a comprehensive summation of this body of research while at the same time offering an intriguing taxonomy of the complex issues surrounding our choices (and our successes and frustrations) in crafting these responses to students. While Haswell is not strictly concerned with assigning student writing, he does ask us to consider acts of response as **discourse acts**. The prompting assignment is therefore part of that discourse—primarily a discourse between instructor and student.

Evoking the theory of discourse allows Haswell (and now us) to consider the characteristics of separate discourse activities as they play out in the complex of assigning and responding to student writing. Here, we'll pull out just two of Haswell's foci (which he borrows from Paul du Gay's "circuit of culture"):

Regulation: "Response is regulative because it hopes to move novices and their writing toward some more mature psychological, professional, social, or cultural ends" (Haswell)

Consumption: "In terms of teacher response, consumption asks some hard questions. [including] Is the communication channel between teacher and student viable?" (Haswell)

Haswell, Richard. "The Complexity of Teacher Response to Student Writing." *Across the Disciplines* 3 Dec. 2006. Web. 5 Sept. 2010. <<http://wac.colostate.edu/atd/articles/haswell2006.cfm>>

“Regulation”—What guides our response

Creating your assessment criteria prior to (and along with) the assignment

Viewing the process from the back end allows us to align hoped-for outcomes with parameters that are likely to produce the desired result. In this, your first question in drafting a writing assignment 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. A first way to sort through the complex of what you’re looking for can come via the distinctions Haswell raises.

Haswell notes that **regulation** “is perhaps the basic motive for teachers and their response to student writing” (Haswell). In this we regulate (both correcting, affirming, and guiding) via multiple overlapping—and often competing—criteria, which Haswell outlines:

Criteria: our individual go-to lists of “good writing” criteria (informed by idiosyncrasy as well as training)

Yours: _____

Genre & Mode: the conventions of a specific assignment (genre: lab report v. personal essay; mode: descriptive v. expressive)

Yours: _____

Disciplinary Style: the conventions of a discipline (from citation styles to rhetorical preferences)

Yours: _____

Standards: external criteria (at the level of department, college, professional institution, or publication guidelines)

Yours: _____

learning to write — writing to learn

All of Haswell's 4 categories point to ways we might assess whether students have learned to write, but many assignments also include course outcomes among the elements to be assessed in a piece of writing. Here, the first questions are: *are you asking students to learn how to write? Or to write in order to learn course material? Can you do both at once?*

learning-to-write: 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

writing-to-learn: 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

Yours: _____

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

Yours: _____

genre & mode (& scope) of assignment

Let's say 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 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 assessment 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 a 1-text analysis or summary.)

In fore-fronting assessment, 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.

“Consumption”—What your student hears

Getting Your Assessment—and your assignment—Across

No assessment—or assignment—is effective if your best intentions aren’t heard well by your students. Haswell uses the discourse category of “**consumption**” to point out the common communication failures in the writing-responding discourse between student and instructor.

noise: higher and lower-level evaluative concerns

If you are assessing from all four of Haswell’s categories and mixing learning-to-write and writing-to-learn outcomes without differentiating them, students are going to hear a lot of noise—and their writing will likely suffer. Haswell surveys some of these disconnections:

Students place the most importance on vocabulary, teachers on substance (Yorio, 1989). In his study of student and English teacher reading predilections, Newkirk (1984) observed that students preferred the obvious and familiar, teachers the unusual and new; students overt meanings, teachers unstated; students explicit organization with headings, teachers implicit organization; students a bland tone, teachers an emotionally enhanced tone; students a high register, teachers a middle register. (Haswell)

Too often our writing assignments—or our assessment of them—seem to fixate on what we’d call lower-level concerns (the document and sentence-level surfaces that tend to fill our personal **criteria** and **disciplinary styles** as above). These are important, but what’s lost are the ways to craft an assignment that will engage higher-level concerns involving the intellectual work of writing while still insisting on a professional final presentation.

priorities

It’s not that any set of regulations is superior to another. What’s most important is that you **prioritize** your concerns. Doing this can also allow you to stage different concerns at different points in the semester. In the end, you won’t be trying to assess *everything* in every paper, and your students will have greater clarity as they “consume” your assignment.

transparency: put your evaluation criteria on the assignment

All of this comes down to this important step: 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, we suggest that you literally write up your evaluation criteria as a preliminary step to drafting the assignment.

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. Since it’s unlikely that you’ll have time to actually write the essay yourself, 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?