

Teaching with Writing: A Guide for Faculty and Graduate Students

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<http://www.princeton.edu/writing/university/resources/TWW.pdf>

- from "Crafting Assignments," pp. 28-29

Once you've established your assignment sequences, as discussed in Section 4, you can work on crafting each assignment to position students to perform particular kinds of intellectual work. The way an assignment is formulated will have an enormous impact on student performance. If the assignment is unfocused or inexact, you're likely to see unfocused, inexact papers. If it calls for students to "discuss," you're likely to see descriptive answers rather than papers with an articulated viewpoint. So it's important to craft assignments with precision and foresight—the way an experienced writer crafts any important piece of writing.

Surprisingly, more than a few writing assignments lack the crucial ingredient: the assignment itself. These ineffective assignments, consisting of paragraphs full of background information, multiple directives, questions to ponder, and/or a list of topics, may never actually give a unified instruction as to the intellectual work required. Four useful strategies for crafting clear assignments are these:

- (1) Encapsulate the assignment in a single sentence, beginning with "Your assignment is to ..." and a strong verb, such as "analyze," "assess," or "explain," that signals the intellectual work required;
- (2) Minimize the amount of background information you provide so that instead of framing students' papers for them (and possibly stealing their thunder), you're requiring students to frame their papers for themselves;
- (3) Put any advice for approaching the assignment in an "Advice" section, separate from the assignment itself; and
- (4) Include logistical information about when and where the paper is due, how long will it probably be, what the formatting specifications are (margin width, font size, etc.), and which citation style should be used.

The first two strategies are the hardest to implement, but doing so will ensure that your assignment is clear and unified. Here are a few examples to inspire you:

Your assignment is to . . .

... Critique Aristotle's Nichomachean Ethics using DeMott's work on contemporary "friendship orthodoxy."

... Assess emotivism or prescriptivism as an account of moral disagreement.

... Analyze the relationship between Ishi and the anthropologist Kroeber as portrayed in the film *The Last of His Tribe*.

... Test Richard Rorty's hypothesis that novels foster solidarity, using J. M. Coetzee's novel *Disgrace* as your test case.

... Argue why one Impressionist painter more accurately captures some aspect of nineteenth-century Parisian society than another painter from the same period.

... Re-evaluate a contemporary public policy issue through the lens of social class.

... Agree or disagree with realist theories that treat states as a unitary rational actor, supporting your argument with specific historical examples.

The exercise of encapsulating your assignment into a single, sharp-edged sentence will help you and

your students alike identify with precision the intellectual work you're asking students to perform.

The Reader Test

Having drafted the assignment, you should try reading it from your readers' point of view—in other words, you should submit it to the Reader Test. Will students read the assignment and know what's being asked of them? Will they think they're supposed to answer several questions instead of just one? Will they know to limit their topic and write a coherent paper? What are the likely responses you can imagine to the assignment, and are these in any way problematic?

A professor in a literature course drafted an assignment that asked students to do the following:

Select a story by either Eudora Welty or Flannery O'Connor and make an argument for its being typified as Southern, concentrating on aspects such as characterization and setting, and dominant themes such as family relations and community.

In reviewing her assignment, the professor saw two main problems—first, that students were likely to provide flat or banal definitions of “Southern,” thereby dooming their papers from the start, and, second, that they were likely to string together paragraphs on the topics mentioned in the assignment instead of narrowing their analysis. She also saw that the assignment would probably produce responses with no tension or interest in them; she could all too easily imagine a stack of papers “arguing” that Welty's or O'Connor's stories should, indeed, be “typified as Southern.” A better assignment, she realized, would nudge students toward a more interesting or complex take on Welty's or O'Connor's “Southernness.”

Once the professor read her assignment as a student might, and once she thought, too, about what the strongest papers in response would look like, she was able to produce a revision that addressed all the problems she saw:

Louis D. Rubin identifies six characteristics of Southern literature, all of which could be defended as general characteristics of what it means to be Southern: [six characteristics listed here]. Using a short story by either O'Connor or Welty, make an argument about how the author comments on, complicates, or critiques one of these characteristics of Southernness.

Note that the revised assignment is not only more straightforward but also more challenging than the original, asking students to regard the relationship between a Southern author and her depiction of Southernness as complicated—and therefore worthy of analysis.

A Sample Writing Assignment

The draft of the assignment discussed above was clear enough, but a little reflection suggested that it would prompt students to write uninspired papers. Many assignments suffer far greater ills. A student responding to the following assignment felt totally at sea, with good reason:

Write an essay describing the various conceptions of property found in your readings and the different arguments for and against the distribution of property and the various justifications of, and attacks on, ownership. Which of these arguments has any merits? What is the role of property in the various political systems discussed? The essay should concentrate on Hobbes, Locke, and Marx.

“How am I supposed to structure the essay?” the student asked. “Address the first question, comparing the three guys? Address the second question, doing the same, etc.? ... Do I talk about each author separately in terms of their conceptions of the nation, and then have a section that compares their

arguments, or do I have a 4 part essay which is really 4 essays (two pages each) answering each question? What am I going to put in the intro, and the conclusion?" Given the tangle of ideas presented in the assignment, the student's panic and confusion are understandable.

A better formulated assignment poses significant challenges, but one of them is not wondering what the instructor secretly wants. Here's a possible revision, which follows the guidelines suggested above:

Logistics [Course Name and Title]
[Instructor's Name]
Paper #2
Due date: Thurs., February 21, 11:00am
Length: 5-6pp. double-spaced

Assignment

Limiting your reading to the source packet, choose two of the three theorists we've read—Hobbes, Locke, and Marx—and make an argument for the persuasiveness of one theorist's conception of property over the other's.

Advice

The best papers will focus on a single shared aspect of the theorists' respective political ideologies, such as how property is distributed, whether it should be owned, or what role it serves politically. The best papers will also state and argue for a thesis, and describe the theorists' viewpoints clearly and concisely.

Rather than asking students to do little more than demonstrate their reading comprehension, the assignment asks them to use their understanding of the reading in the service of their own argument—a higher-order skill than mere demonstration, certainly, and an entirely appropriate (and more engaging) one for college students to develop.