

Sharing Teaching Methods and Assignments for Using Writing in Courses

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Monday, February 27, 3:00-4:00 in the Old Main Faculty Lounge



Why don't students "get" the assignment?

Bartholomae, David, & Matway, Beth. (2010, October 4). The Pittsburgh study of writing. *Across the Disciplines*, 7. Retrieved February 23, 2012, from http://wac.colostate.edu/atd/articles/bartholomae_matway2010/index.cfm

Data Collection

- a paper survey of existing courses and the "w-requirement" in Arts and Sciences
- focus groups: 10 groups of undergraduates; 3 groups of TA/TFs
- on-line survey: 1,000 Arts and Sciences Juniors and 1,000 Arts and Sciences seniors invited to participate
- faculty interviews: 27 faculty from across the academic departments

What was your worst writing experience—the least useful or the least satisfying? What made it so unsatisfying?

When describing their worst writing experiences, focus group participants did complain about writing assignments they were "not excited about," but they objected even more vehemently to assignments that appeared "disconnected" from the rest of the course work.

What Can Professors Do to Help?

When they mentioned instructional practices that had enabled them to do their best work, students recalled receiving feedback on drafts of a long project. In speaking of their worst writing experiences, they repeatedly asserted the difficulty of writing "with no feedback and no guidelines." And when explicitly asked what professors might do "to enable students to successfully complete their writing assignments," the students again asked for clear assignment guidelines and feedback on drafts.

Student comment: Many of the professors teaching writing courses (not necessarily W courses) do not do a good job in actually teaching. All they do is assign a grade to your essays, and if the grade isn't an "A," they have a hard time trying to explain what exactly to do to make the paper better. Often times this results in a mediocre grade in the course, unimproved writing skills, and frustration.

Provide Guidelines. *Students agreed that they have trouble tackling an assignment that asks for a particular type of writing but offers no instruction in how to do it. More generally, they find it difficult to succeed in a class with writing assignments but "not much talk about writing."*

Many students expressed their wish that professors would give feedback on a draft so that they could revise it before turning it in as a finished product. "I prefer when the teacher requires a draft," was a typical remark.

Pay Attention to Timing and to Schedules. One other instructional practice was mentioned often enough to be noted here: the careful scheduling and timely introduction of writing assignments. Students frequently asserted that they want sufficient time to complete an assignment while keeping up with their other classes. They ask professors to “be mindful that their class is not our only class.” For these focus group participants, “sufficient time” seems to mean more than a week.

What are the best and worst writing assignments you have given or received?

Sample assignment for Lorraine Hansberry’s *Raisin in the Sun*
Sandra Jamieson, Colgate U

ORIGINAL:

Is Mama a realist or an idealist? Define both terms and explain what evidence you used to make your judgment.

REWRITTEN (Clarified):

Is Mama a realist or an idealist? The answer to this question will be the thesis of your paper. Before you can decide on your answer to the question, you must develop a written definition of each term. You should explain these definitions in your paper, perhaps the introduction. As you prepare to write, make a list of all the evidence that explains why you believe your thesis, and use that evidence to help structure the paper. Don’t forget to list counterevidence that might contradict your thesis, and include a passage showing why the counterevidence is not as persuasive as your evidence.

What are some tips for designing assignments?

1. Prepare a student handout.

- **task** (what student is to write about);
- **role and audience** (e.g., “Address the paper to students who have not taken this course/ experts in the field/ someone who opposes your position”);
- **format** (length, form and so forth);
- **time schedule and information about drafts;**
- **criteria for evaluation** (e.g., weight given to ideas and their organization and development, weight given to grammar and mechanics, weight given to process components: things like prospectus, first draft, peer review, final draft)

2. Clarify the assignment by suggesting strategies for approaching it or a brief outline of a process students might follow for gathering data and organizing material, for example, a numbered list of steps. Use moderation, however, because “lengthy assignments containing several pages of extensive advice and explanation will probably overwhelm/intimidate students” and result in uninspired, formulaic writing.

3. Offer choices. The most effective assignments offer two or three choices of topic or of rhetorical mode (argue, compare and contrast, describe). Certain options work well for some students and not at all for others.

4. Clearly spell out the schedule in the initial handout.

- A *research/term paper* will require interim deadlines for drafts, peer review, instructor’s response, and revision

- *A weekly three-page paper assignment* may require
 - nothing more than turning it in, or
 - a rough draft or outline at the end of the first week, a draft two weeks after the initial assignment (for peer review), and a final copy on the date due
- *Multistaged assignments* are valuable for students who are inexperienced in writing in the discipline.
 - Stage 1. Ask students to identify an area or topic and describe why it interests them. Have them write one or two paragraphs on the topic and a one-sentence summary of why they care about it. Then have students generate a question or series of questions and integrate these into a general discussion of the topic. Collect the assignment, comment on the choice of topic and suggest where it needs more development or focus.
 - Stage 2. Require an annotated bibliography on the topic.
 - Stage 3. Have students define their topic questions and submit them for review.
 - Stage 4. Direct students to conduct the research, do the reading, and outline the paper.
 - Stage 5. Have them write a first draft.

5. Sequence your assignments

Begin with short, structured questions in which you tell students exactly what to do, e.g. *Compare and contrast such and such*. Take time to show what you mean by compare and contrast. Give examples. Move on to unstructured questions - e.g. *Create a case scenario. Explain that the response is to be in two parts: 1. Information and 2. Applying information to the situation.*

6. Guard against last-minute, rough-draft writing and against plagiarism by requiring students to submit some form of preliminary writing, e.g., Exploratory writing in journals or notebooks, prospectus, outline, draft.

7. Provide examples of the kinds of writing you expect - handouts or reserve reading in the library

Source: Rebecca Moore Howard & Sandra Jamieson. *The Bedford Guide to Teaching Writing in the Disciplines*. Boston: St. Martin's Press, 1995.

RESOURCES

Writing Resource Center: <http://www2.cortland.edu/departments/english/wrc/>

http://brown.edu/Administration/Sheridan_Center/teaching/teaching_tips.html

<http://www.dartmouth.edu/~writing/materials/faculty/index.html>

<http://bokcenter.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do?keyword=k1985&pageid=icb.page485854>

<http://www.crlt.umich.edu/tstrategies/tswa.php>