# CREATING EFFECTIVE ASSIGNMENTS

*From http://web.mit.edu/writing/Faculty/createeffective.html*

Research has shown that the more detailed a writing assignment is, the better the student papers are in response to that assignment. Often it is necessary to make explicit for students the process or steps necessary to complete the assignment because many students tend to treat assignments as though they were step-by-step instructions. Instructors can use that tendency to help students write more effective papers. For example, explicit descriptions of assignments on the syllabus or on an "assignment sheet" tend to produce the best results. Such assignment sheets should detail the kind of writing expected, the scope of acceptable subject matter, the length requirements, formatting requirements, documentation format, the amount and type of research expected (if any), the writer's role, and deadlines for the first draft and its revision.

Providing questions or needed data in the assignment helps students get started. For instance, some questions can suggest a mode of organization to the students. Other questions might suggest a procedure to follow. The questions posed should require that students assert a thesis.

The following areas should help you create effective writing assignments.

### Examining your goals for the assignment

1. How exactly does this assignment fit with the objectives of your course?
2. Should this assignment relate only to the class and the texts for the class, or should it also relate to the "real" world?
3. What do you want the students to learn or experience from this writing assignment?
4. Should this assignment be an individual or a collaborative effort?
5. What do you want students to show you in this assignment? To demonstrate mastery of concepts or texts? To demonstrate logical and critical thinking? To develop an original idea? To learn and demonstrate the procedures, practices, and tools of your field of study?

### Defining the writing task

1. Is the assignment sequenced so that students write a draft, receive feedback (from you, fellow students, or staff members at the Writing and Communication Center), and then revise it?
2. Does the assignment include so many sub-questions that students will be confused about the major issue they should examine? Can you give more guidance about what the paper's main focus should be? Can you reduce the number of sub-questions?
3. What is the purpose of the assignment (e.g., review knowledge already learned, find additional information, synthesize research, examine a new hypothesis)?
4. What is the required form (e.g., expository essay, lab report, memo, business report)?
5. What mode is required for the assignment (e.g., description, narration, analysis, persuasion)?

### Defining the audience for the paper

1. Can you define a hypothetical audience to help students determine which concepts to define and explain? When students write only to the instructor, they may assume that little, if anything, requires explanation. Defining the whole class as the intended audience will clarify this issue for students.
2. What is the probable attitude of the intended readers toward the topic itself? Toward the student writer's thesis? Toward the student writer?
3. What is the probable educational and economic background of the intended readers?

### Defining the writer's role

1. Can you make explicit what persona you wish the students to assume? For example, a very effective role for student writers is that of a "professional in training" who uses the assumptions, the perspective, and the conceptual tools of the discipline.

### Defining your evaluative criteria

1. If possible, explain the relative weight in grading assigned to the quality of writing and the assignment's content:

- organization
- focus
- critical thinking
- original thinking
- use of research
- logic
- appropriate mode of structure and analysis (e.g., comparison, argument)
- format
- correct use of sources
- grammar and mechanics
- professional tone
- correct use of course-specific concepts and terms
- depth of coverage

### Checking the Assignment

Here's a checklist for writing assignments:

- Have you used explicit command words in your instructions (e.g., "compare and contrast" and "explain" are more explicit than "explore" or "consider")?
- Does the assignment suggest a topic, thesis, and format? Should it?
- Have you told students the kind of audience they are addressing--the level of knowledge they can assume the readers have and your particular preferences (e.g., "avoid slang, use the first-person sparingly")?
- If the assignment has several stages of completion, have you made the various deadlines clear? Is your policy on due dates clear?
- Have you presented the assignment in a manageable form? For instance, a 5-page assignment sheet for a 1-page paper may overwhelm students. Similarly, a 1-sentence assignment for a 25-page paper may offer insufficient guidance.

### Sequencing Writing Assignments

The concept of sequencing writing assignments allows for a wide range of options in creating the assignment. There are several benefits of sequencing writing assignments:

- sequencing provides a sense of coherence for the course;
- it helps students see progress and purpose in their work rather than seeing the writing assignments as separate exercises;
- it encourages complexity through sustained attention, revision, and consideration of multiple perspectives; and
- it mirrors professional work in many professions.

**Use the writing process itself.** In its simplest form, "sequencing an assignment" can mean establishing some sort of "official" check of the prewriting and drafting steps in the writing process. This step guarantees that students will not write the whole paper in one sitting and also gives students more time to let their ideas develop. This check might be something as informal as having students work on their prewriting or draft for a few minutes at the end of class. Or it might be something more formal such as collecting the prewriting and giving a few suggestions and comments.

- **Submit drafts.** You might ask students to submit a first draft in order to receive your quick responses to its content, or have them submit written questions about the content and scope of their projects after they have completed their first draft.
- **Establish small groups.** Set up small writing groups of three-five students from the class. Allow them to meet for a few minutes in class or have them arrange a meeting outside of class to comment constructively on each other's drafts.

- **Require consultations.** Have students consult with someone in the Writing and Communication Center about their prewriting and/or drafts and request that the Center inform you that such a visit was made.
- **Explore a subject in increasingly complex ways.** A series of reading and writing assignments may be linked by the same subject matter or topic. Students encounter new perspectives and competing ideas with each new reading, and thus must evaluate and balance various views and adopt a position that considers the various points of view.
- **Change modes of discourse.** In this approach, students' assignments move from less complex to more complex modes of discourse (e.g., from expressive to analytic to argumentative; or from lab report to position paper to research article).
- **Change audiences.** In this approach, students create drafts for different audiences, moving from personal to public (e.g., from self-reflection to an audience of peers to an audience of specialists). Each change would require different tasks and more extensive knowledge.
- **Change perspective through time.** In this approach, students might write a statement of their understanding of a subject or issue at the beginning of a course and then return at the end of the semester to write an analysis of that original stance in the light of the experiences and knowledge gained in the course.
- **Use a natural sequence.** A different approach to sequencing is to create a series of assignments culminating in a final writing project. In scientific and technical writing, for example, students could write a proposal requesting approval of a particular topic. The next assignment might be a progress report (or a series of progress reports), and the final assignment could be the report or document itself.
- **Submit sections.** A variation of the previous approach is to have students submit various sections of their final document throughout the semester (e.g., their bibliography, review of the literature, methods section).

**Selecting an Effective Writing Assignment Format.** In addition to the standard essay and report formats, several other formats exist that might give students a different slant on the course material or allow them to use slightly different writing skills. Here are some suggestions:

- **Journals.** Journals have become a popular format in recent years for courses that require some writing. In-class journal entries can spark discussions and reveal gaps in students' understanding of the material. Having students write an in-class entry summarizing the material covered that day can aid the learning process and also reveal concepts that require more elaboration. Out-of-class entries involve short summaries or analyses of texts, or are a testing ground for ideas for student papers and reports. Although journals may seem to add a huge burden for instructors to correct, in fact many instructors either spot-check journals (looking at a few particular key entries) or grade them based on the number of entries completed. Journals are usually not graded for their prose style.
- **Letters.** Students can define and defend a position on an issue in a letter written to someone in authority. They can also explain a concept or a process to someone in need of that particular information. If you wish to add a creative element to the writing assignment, you might have students adopt the persona of an important person discussed in your course (e.g., an historical figure) and write a letter explaining his/her actions, process, or theory to an interested person (e.g., "pretend that you are John Wilkes Booth and write a letter to the Congress justifying your assassination of Abraham Lincoln," or "pretend you are Henry VIII writing to Thomas More explaining your break from the Catholic Church").
- **Editorials.** Students can define and defend a position on a controversial issue in the format of an editorial.
- **Cases.** Students might create cases particular to the course's subject matter for other students to solve.

- **Position Papers.** Students can define and defend a position, perhaps as a preliminary step in the creation of a formal research paper or essay.
- **Imitation of a Text.** Students can create a new document "in the style of" a particular writer (e.g., "Create a government document the way Woody Allen might write it" or "Write your own 'Modest Proposal' about a modern issue").
- **Instruction Manuals.** Students write a step-by-step explanation of a process.
- **Dialogues.** Students create a dialogue between two major figures studied in which they not only reveal their theories or thoughts but also explore areas of possible disagreement (e.g., "Write a dialogue between Claude Monet and Jackson Pollock about the nature and uses of art").
- **Collaborative projects.** Students work together to create such works as reports, questions, and critiques.