

CHAPTER 3

Prewriting

*"Writing is just having a sheet of paper, a pen,
and not a shadow of an idea of what you're going to say."*

—Francoise Sagan

In this chapter you will learn

- how to explain writing assignments by analyzing them for purpose, audience, context, scope, style, and format.
- how to use detailed assignment instructions and grading rubrics to help students write sooner and better.
- how students can use invention strategies to find and focus their topics.
- how to coach students' research and reading skills.

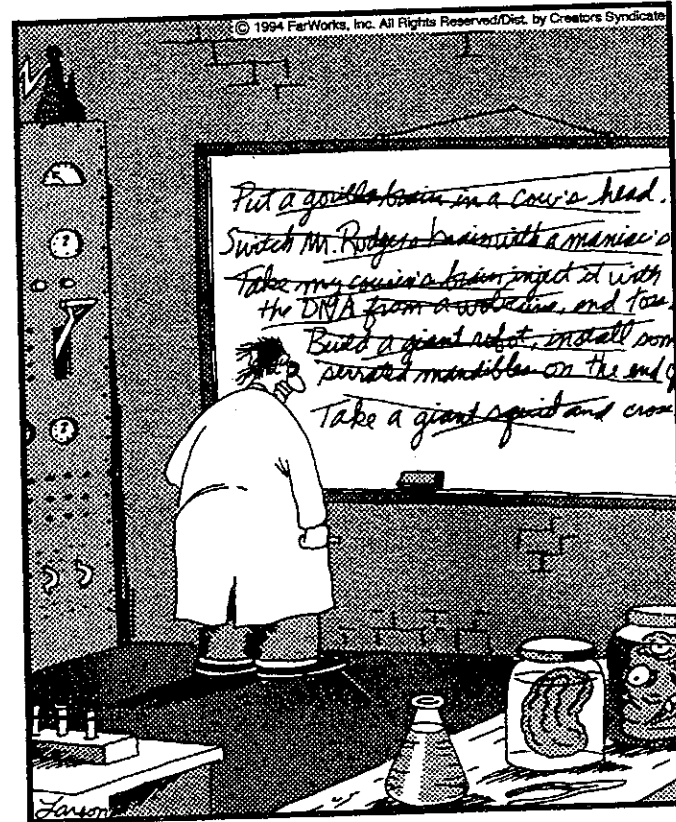
Students confronted with a writing assignment may feel frightened or unsure of what is expected of them, and they will sometimes put off writing until just before their papers are due. When this happens, usually you and your professor have to read poorly written papers, and students learn little more than how much Coke they can drink at 2 A.M.

To prevent procrastination and anxiety, you must get students started on their writing assignments early. They need time to think carefully about the assignment; find interesting questions to explore; conduct research, if necessary; and plan, draft, revise, and edit their papers. This chapter discusses methods you can use to get students started on their assignments—the prewriting step of the writing process.

Explaining Writing Assignments

The first thing you should do is make sure your students understand the writing assignment you are giving them. In order to do this, be sure you understand the assignment yourself. Read the written instructions carefully and review them with your professor, clarifying any questions you may have. Remember: If something isn't clear to you, it probably isn't clear to your students either.

THE FAR SIDE® BY GARY LARSON



The curse of mad scientist's block

The Far Side® by Gary Larson © 1994 FarWorks, Inc. All Rights Reserved. Used with permission.

The following is a sample writing prompt from an introductory political science class.¹

Discuss your own political culture. What are your major values and assumptions? In what ways were you socialized? Have changing situations forced you to reevaluate and rework your childhood assumptions? Papers should be five to six pages in length.

The following questions and commentary analyze the preceding assignment. Such an analysis is key to making any writing task as clear and workable for students as possible.

- **What is the purpose?** What does the professor want the students to learn or discover as they write their papers? Perhaps the professor wants the students to reflect on their political background. Perhaps he or she wants them to apply certain terms they have been studying (such as *political culture* and *socialization*) to their own individual situation to demonstrate an internalizing of the concepts. Discuss the professor's motivations with him or her so that you can give your students appropriate guidance.
- **Who is the audience?** You may say, "Obviously the professor." But is it? Usually it is good to think of an audience beyond just the person who will be grading the paper. Students who think they don't have to explain things "because the professor knows it already" forget that the professor wants to know if the students *themselves* understand the material. Ask the professor what kind of audience he or she wants the students to have in mind when they are undertaking a writing assignment.
- **How does the context influence the assignment?** The assignment should also be considered in terms of its context. Because it is part of an introductory political science class, this particular assignment would prompt certain kinds of content, such as detailed explanations of kinds of political cultures. A similar assignment for a sociology class might require different treatment. Students need to think of the assignment in terms of what they have been learning in class.
- **What is the scope of the assignment?** Does the professor want the students to cover *all* their major values and assumptions or limit their discussion to just a few? Does the professor want a complete life history from childhood until the present time or just one or two formative experiences or circumstances? Answers to such questions will make the writing task more specific by helping students zero in on what it is they have to write about.
- **What style is appropriate?** Does the professor want the students to stay with a more formal, scholarly style, or would a personal style (using first person, using descriptive language, etc.) be more appropriate for this assignment? It's quite possible that the professor might have different styles in mind for different types of assignments.
- **What format is expected for the assignment?** This assignment gives a page requirement, but what about font size, margins, line spacing, or headings? Does the professor expect documentation? What style guide is preferred? These details may sound picky, but you should know exactly what the professor has in mind.

Using questions of purpose, audience, context, scope, style, and format to analyze a writing assignment will help you understand what is expected of your students and will also help your students understand what you expect of them. If you are unable to answer any of these questions definitively, you should discuss your concerns with your professor.

Teaching Tip: Discipline-Specific Formats

Students are understandably confused when asked to write in a format that is new to them. Someone who has written only literary analyses for English classes will probably feel somewhat lost when asked to write a lab report for a microbiology class. When a writing assignment requires conforming to discipline-specific conventions your students may not be familiar with, help them understand the expectations. Bring in samples of various successful documents written by both professionals and students to help them visualize the final product. Analyze the documents together in terms of purpose, audience, context, scope, style, and format. You could show the models on an overhead projector during class, make them available on a Web site, or divide the students into groups where they could examine print copies of the models together. Help the students understand what is expected in this kind of writing, and they will feel more capable of meeting those expectations.

Using Detailed Assignment Instructions and Grading Rubrics

After you discuss your analysis of the writing assignment with your professor, he or she might be interested in revising the assignment's instructions. Or, with your professor's guidance, you may choose to create a handout explaining the assignment in more detail. In either case, you and your professor should remember to include specific guidance on purpose, audience, context, scope, style, format, and any other important aspects of the paper. (For example, if your students are writing a scientific report, you might list the individual parts or sections that must be included: Introduction, Methods, Results, Discussion, and Conclusion.) If you decide to prepare a handout, think about what problems the students are likely to have with the assignment and address those problems directly. Clarifying writing assignments will not only help students understand and fulfill the requirements of the assignment, it will also make evaluating the papers much easier once they are written.

Giving students a scoring guide or grading rubric that lists the criteria you or your professor will use to evaluate students' papers is also a good idea. If the students know from the outset what "counts," they will be able to put their energy into meeting those expectations. Example 3.1 features an assignment from a computer science class with instructions and the grading rubric the professor used to evaluate students' papers. (See Chapter 11 or bedfordstmartins.com/ta_guide for additional examples of grading rubrics.)

Distributing detailed assignment instructions to your students, and perhaps including a grading rubric, will help them get started on their writing. However, instructions and rubrics should not overcontrol the content of the piece. Assignments that prescribe exactly what to say in each paragraph of the paper do not give students any freedom to explore or discover. A good assignment provides the purpose and guidelines for writing without dictating exactly what to say.

EXAMPLE 3.1. A Writing Assignment and Grading Rubricⁱⁱ

CS 236—FORMAL WRITTEN REPORT

Purpose

The purpose of this assignment is to compare the time to execute two equivalent relational algebra expressions and to explain the results of the experiment to the reader.

Context

You have written a Relational Database System in projects 1 and 2. Your system allows you to execute select, project, and join operations on relations. You have studied relational algebra expressions and you learned that expressions can be optimized. The order of operations in the expression can be changed so that the expression executes in less time but still gives the same result.

Experiment

The following two relational algebra expressions are equivalent. The second expression is an optimized version of the first.

$$\pi_{AD} (\sigma_{A=25} (\sigma_{E=113} (r1 \bowtie r2)))$$
$$\pi_{AD} ((\sigma_{A=25} r1) \bowtie (\sigma_{E=113} r2))$$

Execute each of the relational algebra expressions. Count the number of times a tuple is accessed during execution. The contents of relations $r1$ and $r2$ are given by files $r1.txt$ and $r2.txt$. Relation $r1$ has scheme ABC and $r2$ has scheme CDE .

Report

Write a report with the following organization:

- Introduction
- Methods
- Results
- Analysis
- Conclusion

The Methods section tells the reader how you did the experiment. You should give enough information to allow the experiment to be repeated.

The Results section presents your results to the reader. You should present the results in a way that the reader can easily understand the

meaning of the results. You may want to use charts or tables. Remember to give units for any numeric values.

The Analysis section explains what the results mean. Help the reader understand the implications of the results. Explain why the two queries have different access counts.

Format

The paper must be typewritten with double-spaced paragraphs, using a 12-point serif font and 1-inch margins.

Grading

The paper will be evaluated using the five criteria listed below. The paper will be judged to be either strong, average, or weak in each area.

<i>Content</i>	Are your ideas accurate, complete, relevant?
<i>Organization</i>	Is the information organized efficiently?
<i>Language</i>	Is the language clear and direct?
<i>Mechanics</i>	Do you use correct spelling, punctuation, grammar?
<i>Format</i>	Is the format easy to access and attractive?

Helping Students Find and Focus Their Topics

When students understand the assignment, they will be better prepared to think about the particular topic they will address in their writing. However, choosing an appropriate topic is always difficult. A good topic for a paper needs to be appropriate to the assignment, sufficiently limited for the scope of the paper, and, above all, interesting to the writer. If the writer is not interested in the topic, no doubt readers won't be either.

Good writers find a good topic by recognizing inconsistencies, problems, or concerns that would bear examination. Linda Flowers and John Hayes, pioneering researchers on the writing process, point out that in many ways writers "create the problems" they intend to solve through writing.¹ As a TA, you can guide your students to find good topics for their writing by giving them exercises that encourage them to think about ideas in fresh ways. Following are prewriting strategies you can use in class or in one-on-one meetings to help your students find topics to write about.

LISTING

After reviewing the assignment instructions with the class, lead a discussion in which students call out possible ways of approaching the assignment while you write the ideas on the chalkboard or a transparency. The rule is that no idea is stupid. Let one idea lead to another. After five or ten minutes of listing, stop and have students write down ideas for their own papers.

Students might come up with the following list for the political science assignment on p. 25:

Republican, Independent, or Democrat?
my stance on "big issues"—political or apolitical?

examples

social institutions

- family (mom, dad, grandparents, sisters)
- school(s) (friends, teachers, classmates)
- neighborhood
- religion
- geographic region (?)
- clubs/teams

experience (direct and indirect)

youth = idealism (innocence)

age = cynicism (experience)

FREEWRTING

The goal here is to get the brain to churn out ideas with the internal editor turned off. For five or ten minutes, as quickly as possible, have the students write everything they can think of in connection with the assignment. Anything goes. They don't even need to write in complete sentences, worry about spelling, or think about grammar. The only restriction is that what they write must have something to do (however slightly) with the assigned paper. Most students will be surprised at what they discover they have to write about.

A student might freewrite the following paragraph in preparation for the Physical Science 100 research paper in Example 12.1 on pp. 121–122.

We have to write on one of the four physical sciences we have covered. I really liked the astronomy section. I love Star Trek! I would like to see if manned space travel is really a possibility outside of our solar system. Maybe I could find out what would be the physical challenges to that really happening. I read that book Physics of Star Trek—maybe I could start with that and then find some more information in other places. I guess time is an issue. The speed of light and all that. Maybe I could find why we could or couldn't really travel at warp speed some day.

Another idea is to give the students a few minutes to freewrite on each of an assignment's subtopics. For example, for the political science assignment on p. 25, the students could write for three minutes on political culture, two minutes on major values and assumptions, two minutes on how they were socialized, two minutes on how changing situations have influenced them, and so forth. This will help the students look at the assignment from various angles.

CLUSTERING

Clustering (also called webbing or mapping) helps students move from a general idea to a more focused topic for a paper. It has the added benefit of leading to a

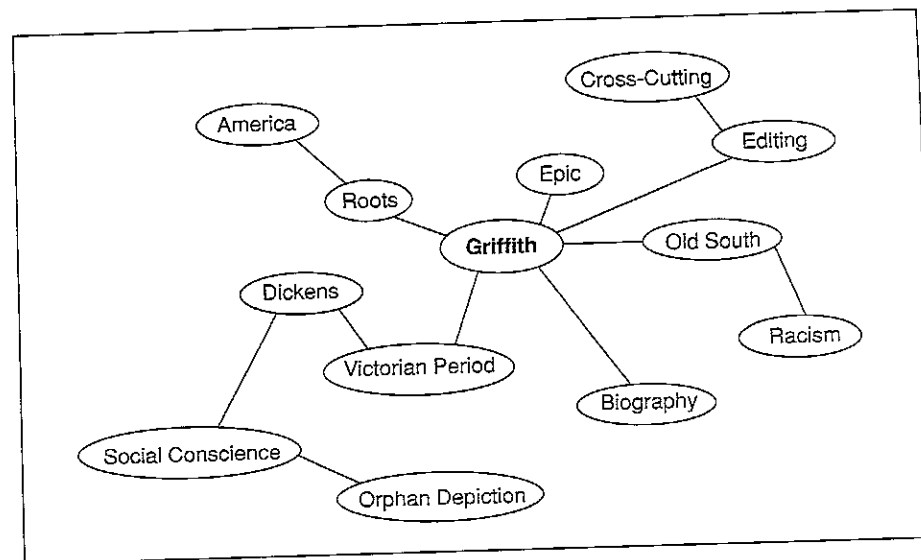


Figure 3.1. Example of a Clusterⁱⁱⁱ

kind of structure for the paper as well. Have students put the main idea for the paper in a circle in the middle of the page. Then draw lines out from the center to various possible subheadings, and then lines from those subheadings to the next possible level.

In a film class, students were asked to write a research paper on an issue in film history. Starting with an interest in the director D. W. Griffith, the cluster in Figure 3.1 could be generated.

The student who prepared the cluster in Figure 3.1 would begin to think of connections he or she may not have made otherwise, moving from Griffith to the Victorian period to Charles Dickens to social conscience to orphan depiction. At some point, the student would find a question or issue that seemed both interesting and focused enough to explore in this particular paper.

The student could then put his or her focused topic in the center of a new cluster to explore ways of developing that idea. For example, the student who completed the cluster in Figure 3.1 might start a new cluster with "Griffith's Depiction of Orphans" in the center, and then explore various possible subsets of that idea.

TALKING

Sometimes just talking is the best way to get the ideas flowing. Try "pair shares." Have the students choose partners to talk with. Explain that one is the talker and the other is the listener. The listener needs to keep the talker talking about his or her paper for a set period of time (maybe five or ten minutes). The listener does

ⁱⁱⁱThanks to Darl Larsen, Department of Theatre and Media Arts, BYU.

this by acting interested, asking good questions, and being encouraging. Then the students switch roles, and the same procedure is followed. After the talking exercise, have the students write down the ideas they thought of as they talked.^{iv}

As a TA you will frequently use the pair-share technique to help students think about their writing. When students come to you for help, encourage them to talk to you about their ideas. Think of good questions to get students talking. Be truly interested in what they say. (For more on conducting one-on-one writing conferences, see Chapter 8.)

WRITING-TO-LEARN ASSIGNMENTS AS INVENTION

Many of the Writing-to-Learn assignments discussed in Chapter 2 could serve as invention exercises for a long paper.

The following are some examples of brief in-class writing prompts or journal assignments. Taking even a few minutes to write answers to questions such as these will help students make real progress toward writing a draft.

- “What do you think you might write your paper on?”
- “What kind of personal experience do you have with the topic we are discussing?”
- “Tell me about one source you have found for your paper.”
- “Imagine you are someone who disagrees with your assertions. What arguments would such a person make against your ideas?”

Technology Tactics

Email messages can be an efficient means of preventing procrastination and encouraging prewriting. Try one of the following assignments or create one of your own using whatever technology is available to you. Remember to apply the principles for invention strategies listed on pp. 29–31.

- **Electronic submissions.** Your students can use email to submit their potential topics, thesis statements, or outlines to you. Then you can respond to them in a reply email. This way the students get immediate feedback, and you don't have to take time in class to collect or return anything.
- **Electronic questions.** Students can use email to ask you (or each other) questions about the assignment, clarify requirements, and discuss ideas for papers.
- **Electronic pair shares.** You could require students to email partners about their plans for the upcoming paper. Students would give each other feedback on the ideas, asking questions to encourage further thought.

Coaching Related Skills

Often at the prewriting stage students will need help with other skills which are necessary for writing a good paper.

RESEARCH

If the paper is based on library research, students may need help finding sources in your particular discipline. Your professor may be able to arrange for a subject librarian to show students how to access specialized indexes for your discipline. As a more experienced student who has done this kind of research in the past, you can share your own research process, the kinds of indexes you use, how you develop search terms, and how you manage your research once you've gathered it.

Students also need guidance in evaluating sources. Questions such as the following will help students determine if a source is credible.

- Is the source peer reviewed? (That is, does the journal or publisher require manuscripts to be reviewed by experts before publication?)
- Is the source based on solid research? Is there a substantive list of sources?
- Is it objective in tone?
- Is the author an expert in the field?

Internet research is especially problematic. Explain to students that anyone can create a Web site on any topic, whether or not that person is a credible authority on the topic. Teach students to evaluate Web sites carefully, checking for authority, accuracy, bias, and currency.²

If original research (laboratory experiments, surveys, interviews, etc.) is required for the paper, students will need to be guided through that research process carefully. For appropriate disciplinary guidelines, confer with your professor and perhaps consult discipline-specific writing guides such as those listed in the Bibliography.

READING

Once they have found sources, students may then need help understanding the material, which is often written for an audience of experts in the field. Take the time to teach students how to read typical professional writing in your discipline. For example, explaining the format of a scientific paper would help students know what to expect from each section. Show the students how to scan abstracts for useful material and how to find what they need in the results sections. Read an article together in class. Give students in- or out-of-class activities that will train them to read critically. Even a little bit of guidance in how to read professional writing can make this information much more accessible.

Also teach students to read their sources actively by making notes in the margins and asking questions of the text. Tell them to cultivate the art of asking

^{iv}See Karen Spear, *Sharing Writing: Peer Response Groups in English Classes*, in the Bibliography, for useful ideas on this topic.

“Why?” Looking for relationships and inconsistencies among their various sources will lead to insightful revelations. Help them to understand that just because something is in print doesn’t mean it is necessarily true. Also help them to understand that all authors, however objective they may seem, write from some kind of bias. Learning to watch for that bias can help students to read actively.

Conclusion

For students, getting started is often the hardest part of writing. Guide your students in this difficult task by helping them to understand the requirements of the assignment and by building prewriting and invention exercises into the class. Teach students to research thoroughly and to read with real inquiry. Doing this will lead to better writing and better learning.

Chapter Checklist

- Making sure your students understand the assignment is the first step in prewriting.
- Detailed writing assignments and grading rubrics clarify expectations for the students and help to prevent frustration, anxiety, and procrastination.
- Listing, freewriting, clustering, talking, and even Writing-to-Learn assignments help students find interesting problems or issues to explore in their writing.
- Students will likely need direction in finding and reading authoritative sources. They will especially need guidance in collecting original data if that is part of the assignment.

Applications to Your Own Situation

1. Choose a writing assignment from the class you are TAing. Following the model on pp. 25–26, analyze the assignment for purpose, audience, context, scope, style, and format. Were you able to answer all the questions? Do you have any new questions? If necessary, consider ways of revising the assignment to clarify any confusing points.
2. Practice using the invention strategies described in this chapter to start an assignment for the class you are TAing. Which strategy worked best for you? Think of other activities that would help students get started on this particular writing assignment.
3. Reflect on your own experience as a beginning student in your discipline. What advice on conducting research or reading journal articles in your field do you wish you had been given? Compose a list of research and reading tips for your students. Add to the list as students ask you questions and as more ideas come to mind.

Working with Your Professor

1. Discuss the various aspects of the writing assignments for the class you are TAing. Be sure you and your professor understand the expectations for each assignment in the same way, using the analysis model on pp. 25–26. If you have completed the first item from the “Applications to Your Own Situation” exercise, use your findings as a basis for your discussion.
2. Discuss ways to use invention strategies and Writing-to-Learn assignments to encourage the students to start working on their papers early. You and your professor might also consider requiring such intermediate assignments as a preliminary topic for their paper, then a preliminary bibliography, then a draft for peer review.
3. Ask your professor for advice on guiding students’ research and reading. If you have completed Application 3, share your list with your professor. Does your professor have any tips, resources, or ideas for teaching research or reading skills that he or she can share? Add his or her suggestions to your list.