

## How can I design effective writing assignments?

When writing assignments aren't carefully designed and integrated into a course, they can feel like they have just been added on, and students don't have a clear sense of what they should learn from them. This can lead to frustration for both instructors and students: we find ourselves reading poor work, and students struggle to succeed on these assignments. Designing effective assignments requires us to take a step back and ask ourselves some bigger questions about where we're aiming our students' thinking, what our assignments require, and how we will prepare them to be successful. Most importantly, it requires us to realize that the work of assignment design is about more than just determining what the product of students' work will be: it's also about how we will guide the process of that work to ensure that our assignments lead to learning.

### What do effective writing assignments look like?

#### *Principles to guide writing assignment design*

- Writing assignments should clearly and explicitly align with the goals of the course.
- Writing assignments should require students to do meaningful work.
- Writing assignments should be designed with an eye toward the kinds of practice students will need to do in order to prepare for the work of the assignment.
- Writing assignments should provide structure to help students engage in an iterative writing process over time.

#### *Putting these principles into action*

- **Articulate what you want students to learn from this assignment and how that relates to the goals of your course.** Before we design writing assignments, we need to have a clear sense of where our course is aiming our students, typically expressed in a set of course goals. These goals are essential because they help us integrate our major writing assignments into a larger sequence of ongoing work that focuses and directs students' thinking. When we design assignments, we must ask ourselves what students need to do to help us (and them) determine whether they are making progress toward the goals we have set for them. After we have clarified for ourselves how the assignment connects to our goals, we also need to help students see why the work they are doing matters by explaining this connection to them (in writing!). While the connection between goals and assignments may sometimes seem obvious or self-evident to us, taking the time to make those connections explicit is well worth it. Describing the connection between the writing assignment and the course goals gives meaning and purpose to the work students do because it helps them see how assignments are important to their success in the course and beyond. (Winkelmes 2013). This process can also help us zero in on the specific disciplinary thinking skills we want students to use in the assignment.
- **Use assignments to help students learn authentic disciplinary thinking skills.** Much of the writing that students have traditionally done in school was designed for

them to *show* what they know instead of *using* what they know to respond to authentic problems or situations. As a result, students' prior experiences with writing in our disciplines have often been superficial and inauthentic—a performance rather than a learning experience. A different approach to assignment design is to give students “meaning-constructing” tasks, which ask them to use critical thinking to respond to meaningful disciplinary challenges. Meaning-constructing tasks present disciplinary problems within a context that gives students a role or purpose, a targeted audience, and a form or genre to write in (Bean, 2011). In short, these kinds of assignments ask our students to do what we actually do in our own work: take positions, make arguments, pose questions, propose solutions, and communicate our thinking about disciplinary issues to an audience that shares our interest in these issues. In addition to helping engage students more effectively in the writing process, research shows that more authentic, problem-centered assignments lead to greater student learning than traditional pseudo-academic assignments like term papers (Winkelmes, 2016). Assignments that require higher-order disciplinary thinking have the added effect of inviting students into a community of scholars in our field.

- **Analyze your assignment to determine the skills students will need in order to be successful (so that you can design frequent practice).** When students do poorly on assignments, it's often because they haven't spent enough time throughout the course doing the kind of work the assignment requires. For example, if they have spent the majority of the semester listening to lectures that describe disciplinary concepts and taking tests that merely assess their basic understanding, they will struggle on a writing assignment that requires them to apply concepts—because they haven't had the practice or preparation they need to do this work. Practice doesn't mean just having students “do things,” though: before we can design real practice, we need to articulate the kind of thinking that the assignment actually requires them to do. After we have designed a meaning-constructing task that asks students to do authentic disciplinary thinking, we need to step back and ask ourselves exactly what is required of our students. This means considering not only what students need to know, but also what skills they will need to use to complete the assignment successfully. Conducting a thorough skills analysis helps make those skills visible to us so that we can design the formative work that will give students opportunities to practice those skills multiple times before the assignment is due. A skills analysis often shows us that an assignment we initially considered to be fairly straightforward is actually quite complex and requires significant sophistication on the part of our students. Coming to this realization during the assignment design process is vital to helping us begin to plan the day-to-day work we will assign in our course so that we can help students prepare to complete the assignment successfully.
- **Require students to engage in ongoing work on the assignment and give them small amounts of regular feedback.** Students need multiple opportunities to receive feedback on the development of their writing and thinking while they are working on assignments, not only on final drafts. We often think that having students submit full

rough drafts is the most effective way to give them feedback, but often that feedback comes too late in the writing process and the problems that emerge can't feasibly be handled in such a short time. In addition, when we don't have students do substantial work on assignments early on, they will often "binge write" and produce large chunks of text at one time. Not only does this practice lead to writing that isn't carefully thought through, it also deprives students of the opportunity for frequent writing practice and feedback. A more productive approach is to ask students to practice writing frequently and tackle assignments in small chunks: cross-disciplinary research in *Writing Across the Curriculum* suggests that short, frequent writing exercises can produce substantial improvement in students' understanding of disciplinary concepts and in the clarity of their writing (Bazerman et al., 2005). In addition to providing practice, these small assignments provide students the opportunity to receive your feedback early on, when they still have significant time to consider and act on it. The skills analysis described above can inform our decisions about the kinds of small steps students can take that will allow them to receive feedback on their development of the essential skills required for success on the assignment. This means that the practice students do should include having them make iterative attempts at elements of the assignment so that you can respond to those attempts.

### ***Examples of Elements of an Effective Writing Assignment (from a course in nursing)***

#### Alignment of assignment with course goals

Below are three important course goals that this instructor wants to assess with a writing assignment requiring research.

By the end of this course, students will be able to

- Analyze controversies in alternative medicine with a critical eye
- Evaluate the professional literature about alternative medicine
- Use the kind of critical thinking and problem-solving skills required of nurses

#### Brief description of assignment focused on disciplinary thinking skills

*The situation:* You are a staff nurse at a large urban hospital. Recently the hospital became embroiled in a major controversy over the use of Therapeutic Touch (TT), a form of alternative medicine in which the healer is said to effect therapeutic changes in the patient's energy field by moving his or her hands slightly above the patient's body on patients. The controversy began when several nurses were discovered to be practicing TT on patients without the permission or knowledge of their supervisors or of attending physicians. The hospital governing board reprimanded the nurses and issued a general statement forbidding the practice of TT, which they called "non-scientific quackery."

*Your task:* Research the professional literature on TT, looking especially for evidence-based studies. Then write a four-to five-page argument, addressed to the hospital governing board, defending or refuting the board's decision to forbid the practice of TT. Support your position with reasons and evidence based on the professional literature.

### Skills analysis

In order to complete this research assignment successfully, here are some of the key skills students will need to use:

- Locate professional literature on TT
- Distinguish professional from popular sources of information about TT
- Distinguish evidence-based studies from other professional writings about TT
- Evaluate evidence-based studies about TT
- Synthesize evidence from professional literature to develop a position on the board's decision
- Develop and communicate a position through a thesis that will guide an argument
- Analyze the intended audience to determine how best to write persuasively
- Given the audience and context, decide which evidence from the research best supports a position and thesis
- Use evidence from the professional literature to support a thesis
- Organize an argument using the evidence

### Short preparatory assignments that could help students develop these skills

Note: This is not an exhaustive list but describes some of the types of work students might do, both in class and on their own, to prepare for this assignment.

- Before doing any research, students read the brief scenario described in the assignment and write a short, informal position statement explaining what they currently think about this case and why. They submit this statement to the instructor for feedback.
- While they are conducting their research, students engage in an in-class task where they are asked to distinguish between professional and popular sources of information.
- While they are conducting their research, students create a short bibliography where they annotate the five sources they plan to use for their paper, explaining how they plan to use each source. They submit this bibliography to the instructor for feedback.
- After they have conducted their research, students revisit their initial position statement and write a short statement explain how their thinking has changed and why. This statement also includes a draft of the thesis of their paper. They submit the statement and thesis to the instructor for feedback.
- After they have conducted their research and revised their thesis, students write a brief audience analysis where they carefully consider the values and priorities their readers will hold, making predictions about what kind of evidence is most likely to be persuasive for that audience. They submit the analysis to the instructor for feedback.
- After they have determined their thesis, students write a brief outline explaining the key points of evidence they will use to support their position. They submit this outline to the instructor for feedback.
- After they have begun writing drafts, students engage in an in-class activity where they evaluate sample papers to determine the most important qualities of effective argumentative writing.

### ***Resources about effective writing assignments***

Bazerman, C., Little, J., Bethel, L., Chavkin, T., Fouquette, D., & Garufis, J. (2005). *Reference guide to writing across the curriculum*. West Lafayette, IN: Parlor Press.

Bean, J.C. (2011). *Engaging ideas: The professor's guide to integrating writing, critical thinking, and active learning in the classroom*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Perrault, S. T. (2011). Cognition and error in student writing. *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching*, 22(3), 47-73.

Winkelmes, M. (2013). Transparency in teaching: Faculty share data and improve students' learning. *Liberal Education*, 99(2), 48-55.

Winkelmes, M. Bernacki, M., Butler, J., Zochowski, M., Golanics, J., & Weavil, K.H. (2016). A teaching intervention that increases underserved college students' success. *Peer Review*, 18(1/2), 31-36.

If you'd like to learn more about designing effective writing assignments for your courses, please feel free to [request a consultation](#).