

## WRITING FROM THE CENTER VOL. 3, ISSUE 1

# Creating Better Writing Assignments

*Why can't students write better papers?* The answers to this question are many and complex. Lack of effort, confusion over subject, limited exposure to the discipline, or too little practice writing over the years can contribute to the kinds of papers that don't come close to faculty expectations. However, one lesser-recognized contributor may be the assignment itself.

Unfortunately, what is clear to the instructor creating the assignment is sometimes unclear to the student responding to the assignment. Students, many of whom come to the Writing Center, often write without understanding the task they are supposed to carry out, the purpose or relevance of their writing, discipline-specific expectations, or evaluation criteria. Faculty can help these students write better by strengthening writing assignments and providing model responses.

### Problems with Assignments

Anna, a sophomore in a history survey class, was conferencing with a Writing Center instructor. When asked "Do you have a written assignment?" she replied, "No. My professor just told us we could write a 15-page footnoted research paper on any topic covered this semester." Later, a newly declared biology major, Drew, came in with the following written assignment: *Read any article that interests you from a journal. Summarize the article in no more than one page and give your personal response.* A third student, Jordan, came in with an assignment for a women's study course. The lengthy assignment asked her to evaluate a reading. Scattered in the assignment's prose were suggestions to analyze, compare ideas learned in class, respond, and argue a point of view! None of these three students were clear about key elements of their papers, and their lack of understanding showed in what they had written.

### What Does My Professor Want?

Because many students give only a cursory nod to the particulars of their assignments, often the first thing we discuss with them in the Writing Center is how to "read" their assignment. Unfortunately, without a well-crafted written assignment as guidance, Writing Center instructors are limited in their ability to help the writers.

Anna, for example, did not understand what types and how many sources to use. Further, what she had written was simply a report. Was *that* what her professor wanted? Drew, like many students, did not understand the parameters of summary. Further, what exactly did "personal response" mean? He had found an article on cloning and wrote an argument against it based on scriptural doctrine. Was *that* what his professor wanted? Finally, Jordan was confused by the variety of tasks the assignment seemed to require. *What did this professor really want?*

### What We Know About Assignments

In *A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers*, Erika Lindemann defines the qualities and goals of effective writing assignments. She writes,

Since students learn to write by writing, our responsibility is to control and vary the rhetorical demands of writing tasks to give students practice in adjusting relationships among writer, reader, and subject, manipulating more and more complex variables. However, most writing assignments . . . leave too many variables to chance and guesswork. They don't provide enough information to help students define rich rhetorical problems. Instead, they present students with a "paper-writing problem" a meaningless exercise in jumping hurdles for a grade. (192)

To address these variables, an effective writing assignment should

- **Explain the Purpose of the Assignment Explicitly:** *What should the student's text accomplish/to whom should it be addressed (task & audience)?*
- **Identify Needed Content & Provide a Model of an Effective Response:** *What specific material/issue/problem should be addressed in the paper, and what might an "A" paper, for example, look like?*
- **Designate Required Format:** *What is the length, font, type size, required citation style, etc.? Also, discipline-specific requirements may be assumed by the instructor but are often not on the student's radar.*



## Student Writers' Bill of Rights



In spring 2000, Laurence Musgrove, Writing Program Director at Saint Xavier University, asked undergraduates in a course on issues related to writing to develop a bill of rights for writing students. A partial list of these rights is below. (For the whole list, visit [http://www.uncc.edu/engldept/student\\_rights.html](http://www.uncc.edu/engldept/student_rights.html))

### Student writers have the right to

1. written assignments.
2. clearly outlined assignments.
3. assignments that are relevant to the course.
4. the opportunity to write for real audiences.
5. evaluation criteria with assignments.
6. assignments that will not be changed midstream.
7. adequate time to complete assignment.
8. models of effective responses to an assignment.
9. objective evaluation that is based on criteria and not standard set by best performance in class.
10. individual conferences with instructor.
11. opportunity to revise the first paper of the semester in order to better understand the instructor's expectations.
12. prompt return of graded papers.

(Effective assignments should do the following... continued from front)

- **Outline the Process:** *When are revisions, drafts, conferences scheduled?*
- **Specify Evaluation Standards:** *What are the specific criteria for assessment—how will the paper be graded? These may be different for different drafts. You may give your students evaluation checklists to turn in.*

Using the preceding guidelines, we can transform Drew's problem biology assignment. The revised version (below) is longer, but more user-friendly.

### Revised Biology Assignment

**Task and Purpose:** Read any article about an experiment that interests you from a professional scientific journal in our field. Summarize the article in no more than one page; then give your personal response to the article in no more than two pages. (A model of an effective summary and response are attached.) My hope is that you will demonstrate the ability to understand current literature and to have a coherent dialogue (on paper) with the material. Both of these skills are important to developing a scientific frame of mind.

**Audience:** Members of the class. You should explain as much as a classmate would need to know, in language familiar to your peers. You will need to define unfamiliar biological terms for your readers. [*Content, tone, support can be better shaped when students know the audience.*]

**Format:** Double-space and use 12 pt. type and standard margins throughout. Avoid contractions or biased or clichéd language. [*Don't assume your students know what you consider acceptable.*]

**Helpful Hints:** In your summary, begin by explaining the experiment described in the article. First state the purpose and scope of the experiment. Then divide the experiment into stages and explain each stage clearly. Summaries should not include your opinion or any sort of evaluation or speculation. Next, express your response to the article. Avoid making generalizations such as *The article was interesting*. Instead, tell what made the article interesting or ways in which the article surprised you, confirmed your own ideas, related to material we've covered in the class, or jogged your curiosity. You might also discuss any questions you have about the article. [*Suggestions should be limited and clearly related to the task. Some assignments give so many suggestions and instructions that the students forget or fail to address the essential task.*]

**Due Dates:** [*Include dates for initial drafts to be reviewed by peers or in conference with the student, and a final due date. Some faculty also include a date for revisions to graded papers.*]

**Evaluation Criteria:** [*Include substantial detail. Students already know from your syllabus how many points or what percentage a given paper counts. What they don't know are your criteria for grading. For example, how much does content count? Thesis? Quality of sources? Where does grammar fit in? Spelling? Writing style? You can make up a checklist and distribute it with the written assignment. Or you can discuss your criteria with students after giving them the assignment and have them help you make up a checklist. Students then know clearly what is expected and can use the checklist as a working reminder of priorities as they write, then submit, the paper.*]

As you can see, the revised biology assignment is explicit about its task, purpose, and expectations. It identifies needed content, designates required form, clarifies evaluation standards, and provides samples of effective responses to the assignment. Providing this level of detail is more than a courtesy to students; it can be an important part of an instructor's pedagogical repertoire that teaches a student what it means to be a thinker and writer in a discipline.

—Dee Baer and Gilda Teixeira Kelsey

#### Works Cited/Links of Interest

- Lindemann, Erika. *A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers*, 4th Ed., Oxford Univ. Press, 2001.
- Designing Effective Assignments: <http://www.idbsu.edu/wcenter/ww80.htm>
- Ten Tips for Designing Writing Assignments <http://tengrrl.com/tens/034.shtml>
- Writing in the Disciplines: <http://mwp01.mwp.hawaii.edu/wm8.htm>

The University Writing Center supports the academic mission of the University of Delaware by emphasizing the fundamental role that writing plays in learning and reasoning. We serve all members of the University community at any stage of the writing process with intensive one-on-one and small group consultations, workshops, and classes. We are prepared to advise faculty and staff across the campus about writing and the teaching of writing.

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