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skills through the library's reference department. Other skills—note taking, reading comprehension, and cognitive development, for instance—could be housed in a number of departments. If you can't find them immediately, see if your school has an academic services, student services, educational skills, or like-titled office. Sometimes the counseling center may house these services; at some schools, they are under the aegis of the school of education. (Of course, some schools can't afford to offer them at all.) Ask your dean or director whether your school provides any of these services to students.

One of the best resources many campuses offer is a writing center. Contrary to popular student belief, writing centers aren't places where someone will proofread the student's paper. Writing centers focus on metadiscourse—talking about, and writing about, student writing. They are there to help students become more aware of their own writing processes, to help students refine and improve their writing skills, and to teach them techniques for improving all facets of their writing (including proofreading). If your campus has a writing center, make sure you visit it and find out what services its staff can offer. Oftentimes you will find strong allies there, who can give you suggestions for working with particular students as well as making arrangements to see students who need the center's help. Writing center theory is too complex to summarize here (the bibliography offers a start at doing so); don't neglect this vital resource or dismiss it as merely an editing service or you will be shortchanging yourself and your students.

Okay. So now you know the nuts and bolts of putting your course together and running your classroom. But this isn't a talking and reading class, is it? It's a writing class. So let's talk about what's at the heart of such a class: the writing assignments.

## CHAPTER

# 7

## *Designing Writing Assignments*

Only the actual pieces of writing that students complete provide them opportunities to practice the closed competencies they have studied and to incorporate those closed competencies into open structures. In short, writing assignments let students and teachers see how far they've come in achieving their goals. But if assignments are to serve this purpose, the instructor must design them with care. The writing assignment must create a purposeful rhetorical situation and invite students to use that situation to create meaning in language. This takes—like everything else in teaching composition—an understanding of the writing process and careful planning. This chapter covers the development of formal writing assignments that serve the purpose of both teacher and student.

*A poorly designed writing assignment will not help you assess student writing*

### **The Principles of Good Writing Assignments**

One of the most common things writing teachers tell their students is that writing always happens for a reason. So do writing assignments. **They must form part of a sequence that helps students achieve the short- and long-term goals of the course.** If the goal of a particular section of the course is to have students develop inductive arguments, then the writing assignment must create a situation where induction is appropriate. It should also ask students to use strategies or skills they have learned previously, to build on those achievements, to complicate their writing. If you identified your class goals clearly in the planning process and set up your syllabus to achieve those goals, then sequencing your writing assignments should come more easily; you already have a theoretical framework in place. If not, it's never too late to start!

When it comes to designing a successful assignment sequence, there are many possible approaches. One of the most common approaches involves designing and organizing assignments to reflect stages of cognitive development. Students begin with assignments that are less cognitively demanding (e.g., writing on a familiar topic for a familiar audience) and move toward increasingly complex assignments (e.g., writing on a public issue for an unknown audience). Another popular approach is to sequence assignments in terms of purpose or rhetorical

*to know how to write for an audience*

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“aim.” Early assignments have more personal aims (e.g., to “express” feelings), while later assignments have more public aims (e.g., to “argue” a position). Additionally, many teachers develop sequences around a common topic or theme, such as education, work, or the media. Here’s an assignment sequence that might be used for all three approaches:

Assignment 1, Literacy Narrative Choose a meaningful literacy experience or a series of literacy experiences from your own writing/reading history and re-create the experience(s) for your classmates with vivid examples and details. Think about both the external reality (what happened? when?) and the internal reality (how did you feel? why?).

Assignment 2, Community Literacy Profile Observe the literacy practices of a social group in your community and describe these practices for a peer who is interested in community literacy but is not a member of this class. Pay particular attention to how the social group uses language to express its identity and values.

Assignment 3, University Literacy Profile/Analysis Describe and analyze the language that is used to represent the university (this can be the university as a whole or an individual, group, or discipline within the university) for someone outside the university community.

Assignment 4, Public Literacy Analysis/Evaluation Summarize, analyze, and evaluate a piece of persuasive writing written for a public audience. What is the writer saying? What is the writer doing in the piece to get his or her point(s) across to the intended audience? Given the purpose and audience, do you think the piece is “effective”? Why or why not? (Your audience is readers of the magazine or journal that published the article.)

When writing the assignments themselves, you will want to make sure that they have a context. Too often students are given assignments whose constraints are not made clear. One of my students once showed me a paper assignment for his literature class: “Write a paper about the most interesting aspect of *Paradise Lost*.” No wonder the student was bewildered! What kind of paper—critical analysis, explication, argument, personal interpretation? Who decides what the most interesting aspect is—the student, the teacher, some critic? Aspect in what context—structural, orthographical, poetic, literary critical, historical, theological? How long should the paper be? Can the student consult outside sources? What kind of documentation is required? When is it due? How will the teacher evaluate it? Is it too late to drop the course?

We've all seen assignments like this, of course; many of us had to complete them when we were students. Experience has taught *us* that the first thing we do with an assignment like that is bombard the teacher with questions like those in the previous paragraph. But inexperienced students may lack the courage or knowledge to do so; many will try to wrestle with the assignment as given, and many will despair. It's not their fault; they're not stupid, as they may believe when they fail with the assignment. No, the assignment is at fault. It is completely arhetorical; it omits totally the context needed for successful completion.

In addition to including contextual information, assignments must be concrete. They should be written out and distributed to students well in advance of the due date. It's only fair to students to know exactly what is expected; and it will save you the phone calls on the night before the due date when students ask, "What exactly did you want us to do in this paper?" If duplication is a problem in your teaching situation (budgets are tight everywhere), write the assignment out clearly on the board, and see that students copy it carefully. Review the key points (goals, physical constraints, procedures) to make sure all students know what is expected. And make sure the assignment is distributed far enough in advance of the due date for students to complete it successfully. Adjust your evaluation standards accordingly: your criteria should be different if students have one night to complete a writing task than if they have a month.

### Composing Writing Assignments

The following list identifies four fields of information that a good assignment should cover. It also suggests places where less specificity, rather than more, may be helpful. If you cover these four fields, your students should have enough information to tackle the assignment successfully.

1. *Physical constraints.* When is the assignment due? When are drafts due? What form is the paper to be in (essay, lab report, editorial, etc.)? What would be a reasonable length? Must it be typed? Should all scratchwork be submitted? What kind of documentation should be used?
2. *Discourse context.* What is the topic, subject, or principle behind the assignment? Has the instructor specified an exact topic, or is the student supposed to find a topic by narrowing down the subject area? If so, what kinds of narrowing might be profitable? What kinds of skills are students expected to demonstrate? Who is the audience? For what purpose is the author writing? What questions or problems does the assignment raise?
3. *Resources.* Where in the text can the student seek help? What class discussions are relevant? Are there particular kinds of prewriting, drafting, and/or revising activities that will be helpful? May the student seek outside

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help from fellow students, authorities, and librarians? Is the student expected to consult secondary scholarship? If so, what kind(s)?

4. *Evaluation criteria.* What will determine success or failure in completing this assignment? How do the criteria reflect or support course goals? Are criteria presented in language that students will understand? Will students have an opportunity to receive feedback before they submit the assignment for a grade?

### Teaching in Practice

Here are perspectives from six teachers (three in composition, three in other disciplines) that show the reasoning behind writing assignments they design. They've each included parts or all of assignments they have recently given. How effective are these assignments, in light of the criteria outlined above?

*~ Kelly:* At the school where I teach, we're expected to give assignments out of the textbook so that "students get their money's worth." They have to show particular skills like narrative, analysis, and so on. Anyway, that means I adapt the assignments written by the textbook authors to the needs of my class. This, for example, is what I did with an exercise in our book that asked students to write a brief narrative about a turning point in their lives. First, I modified the exercise so that it would better prepare students for the persuasive writing that we would be doing later in the semester (a persuasive letter on a local issue and a longer, researched argument on the same issue). I asked students to write a narrative account of a time in their lives when they saw the persuasive power of words—either their own words (on someone else) or someone else's words (on them). Then I added this paragraph:

"Make your narrative about four typed pages long, and assume that your classmates will be your primary audience. Bring your prewriting to class on Wednesday, and bring a rough draft to class the following Monday. Turn a completed version in for my response by noon on Friday."

*✓*  
**Joaquim:** I have a lot of freedom in what I assign in Comp 101; our students have to produce a certain number of words each term, but we are expected to have them read other writers' work as well as student writing. So this is one of the kinds of assignments I have them write; like you, Kelly, I also include due dates and suggested length guidelines.

"You have been reading editorials about discrimination and affirmative action that have appeared in the campus newspaper over

*\* Need Resources → grading criteria  
 Bring in one of my own  
 Conversation?*

*Ties in goals*

the past two weeks. Now, you will have an opportunity to participate in the printed conversation about these topics by writing your own letter to the editor (and, ideally, submitting it to the campus paper). In your letter, you will want to begin with a brief overview of the issues raised by the editorials you have been reading and then state your own opinion or perspective. You will want to rely not only on observations and experiences to forward your view but on the rhetorical appeals we have discussed in class: ethos, pathos, and logos."

By suggesting they write a letter, I'm trying to get them to stretch beyond the typical "papers" they've written. Since we're using portfolios, I won't grade the letter at this stage, but I did include this statement in the assignment: "In evaluating your letter, I'll consider the clarity of your presentation, paragraph and sentence development, use of rhetorical appeals, and your ability to select an appropriate tone and style for your audience." We've been working on these things for the past month, and I want to see how they're mastering these concepts.

**Carolyn:** Last semester, I designed my course around the theme of advertising. One of the most successful assignments was a comparison of how two different issues of the same magazine (an old issue and a recent issue) represented gender, class, ethnicity, or age. Students identified a popular magazine with a 20-year-plus history (e.g., *The New Yorker*) and considered how the representations had (or hadn't changed) over the years. Here's the assignment sheet that I used:

*✓ x*

Description: Choose a popular magazine with a 20-year-plus publishing history. Compare an early issue of the magazine with a more recent issue, in terms of cultural representations (i.e., the way the magazine represents gender, class, ethnicity, or age [choose one]). Have the representations changed over the years? How so?

Resources: Take a look at the section on analyzing advertisements in our textbook.

Criteria: Vivid descriptions of the ads, analyses of how the ads represent a particular cultural group, clear organization, concise style, few mechanical errors (in polished form).

Length: As long as it needs to be to make your point.

*more specific*

*No. by the way*

*by our way for itself*

**Bob:** In political science, I use writing as a way for students to stretch their skills and show me that they can use what we talk about as a class to conduct their own analyses. I do have requirements for form, documentation, and editing, but mostly I'm concerned with their development of ideas. So this is a typical assignment I use:

*Need eval crit.*

"We have used the Clarence Thomas confirmation hearings in class to discuss the constitutional theory of separation of powers. For this paper, I would like you to choose a contemporary (since 1985)

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federal political issue other than this one that involved all three branches of government. Describe its development and resolution (if it's had one) to begin your paper, and then use this issue to consider how well (or poorly) the separation of powers doctrine worked in this case. From your evaluation, conclude by recommending what changes (if any) you find necessary in the separation doctrine."

I also include how many sources I expect them to find and what kind of documentation (Turabian) I want them to use, as well as the usual due date stuff.

✓ **Anita:** I use writing in my earth science classes to help students learn course concepts, and I offer them the option of working collaboratively on assignments like these. These short assignments help me check on their mastery of ideas, as well as reinforce things they should be learning about form and documentation. I know it's not as fancy as what you do in writing courses, but my students seem to benefit from it.

"In our course notebook at the Reserve Desk you will find an article from *Scientific American*, May 1989, p. 22, titled "Pinning Down Clouds." With one or two classmates, do the following:

- List the words you don't fully understand. Write their dictionary meaning on your paper. If there's more than one dictionary meaning, explain why you chose the one you did.
- Write a summary of the article's main points, about a third the length of the original. Use your own words and sentence structure to avoid plagiarism.
- List several questions raised in your minds by this article. If two people work together, there should be five questions; if three people work together, there should be seven questions.
- Write out the complete, correct citation for this article.

This assignment is due in class on Monday, Sept. 28."

(Assignment contributed by Anita Rau of the Biology Department, Bucks County Community College)

✓ **John:** My experience has been that students don't really learn something until they try to explain it to someone else. So I pick a principle we're working on in physics and try to think of some real-world application of it, then ask students to explain the concept in their own words and pictures. It's a challenge to them, but most of them think that doing these kinds of writing tasks helps them learn the concepts more thoroughly.

"As part of *Newsweek's* America's Cup coverage, you are assigned to write a short sidebar article explaining the physics of "tacking," that is, sailing into the wind. Your audience will be laypeople who have an interest in science and sport but not much formal training in either. Your article of about 500 words should be

accompanied by a clear diagram and written in a style suitable for this magazine. Your deadline is November 5, in class." (Assignment contributed by John Jewett of the Physics Department, California State Polytechnic University—Pomona)

While your assignments, like most of these, will typically require students to work individually, you may want to consider including at least one collaborative paper. Besides helping students develop as thinkers and "practice and master the normal discourse" of the "knowledge community" (Bruffee 1984), collaborative assignments prepare students for the modern workplace, where knowing how to work with others is increasingly important.

### Scenario

As you come into the coffee room, you hear two of your colleagues, Dr. Leon Haroldson and Chris Mayagama, talking about the comp courses they are teaching. Dr. Haroldson, an older professor who specializes in James Joyce, is advocating very specific assignments. "In twenty-six years," he says, "I've learned that the less rope you give students to hang themselves with, the better. Give them a really specific topic, like 'How to Tie Your Shoes,' and see what they do with it. It's easier to give fair grades because all the students are trying to do the same thing and you can compare their achievements. When you don't give them specific direction, you're setting them up to fail."

"I don't know," Chris, a second-year TA, responds. "I like to give them more choice on assignments so that they can find a subject or an angle that they have some stake in. Then they can't say 'I don't care about this topic'; they have no excuse not to get involved. I think a more open-ended topic lets them have more control, and use more of their writing skills, even if they do crash and burn once in a while."

Both teachers look up at you. What are you going to add to the conversation?

It takes time to design writing assignments that help students reach their writing goals, but it is time well spent. Not until you've seen an entire class misinterpret—and botch—a writing assignment can you

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really appreciate the value of the time spent in working up a good assignment. If it weren't for the harm done to the students involved, who almost always do their best to meet even the worst assignments and suffer the penalty for bad ones in grades, it might almost serve teachers right to have to read twenty-five or fifty papers on "The Definition of Friendship" or "My Interpretation of *Song of Solomon*" or "The Causes of the Civil War." Some teachers come away from such experiences blaming their students; most, though, will honestly wonder what went wrong. Usually the students were asked to write without context or an understanding of their goals. If your assignments cover the four fields outlined on page XX, you should be spared the agonies of grading papers you should never have assigned.