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Designing and Assessing Effective Classroom Writing Assignments for NES and ESL Students

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Writing is essentially a social act: It takes place in specific contexts, and the situation for writing influences its purpose. Writing tasks differ in the purposes that call them into being and the audience(s) for whom they are intended, from grocery lists to published research reports, from letters to friends to assembly directions for a bicycle, from mystery novels to commercial advertisements. Academic (school) writing as prepared by U.S. college and university students is much narrower in scope but not without its own set of complexities and variables. Students may be asked to summarize a journal article in a biology class, write a persuasive proposal for a business class, do a literary analysis for an English class, or complete a research paper for a geology class—all in the same semester.

Formal school writing differs from most nonacademic writing tasks because the social context is unusual: The writing is not voluntary, the topics are usually assigned, and the written products are evaluated. The audiences and purposes for school writing are thus unique. The audience is usually limited to the person (the teacher) who also **designs, assigns,** and **assesses** that writing. To complicate the writing situation, the teacher-audience also faces unusual social interactions in her or his responses to and evaluation of student writing. Teachers often play several roles, among them coach, judge, facilitator, expert, responder, and evaluator as they offer more response and more intervention than an ordinary reader (Anson, 1989; Elbow, 1993; Freedman & Sperling, 1985; Johnson, 1992; Moxley, 1989, 1992; Radecki & Swales, 1988). Thus, the relationship between the writer and the reader differs from that of most other socially situated writing. Instead of an expert-to-novice relationship or a colleague-to-colleague relationship between the writer and the reader (as in "real" writing–reading events), the relationship is skewed: novice-to-expert, with the expert (teacher-reader) assessing the novice (student-writer) in ways that have consequences for the writer's life.

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The purposes of school writing tasks also differ from those of nonacademic writing. Both native English speakers (NESs) and English as a second language (ESL) writers understand, perhaps better than their teachers, that the primary purpose of academic writing assignments is not to inform, persuade, or entertain the teacher. From the student-writer's perspective, the purpose of writing assignments is to **demonstrate** understanding of the assignment in ways that the teacher-reader already anticipates (Belanoff, 1991; Horowitz, 1991; Popken, 1989). Although some writing assignments direct students to offer their opinions and support those opinions with various pieces of evidence, this student-writer "participation," especially in general education (or lower division) academic classes, does not usually inform or educate the teacher. Rather, teacher-evaluators are often familiar with the quality and quantity of available evidence; their role, then, is to assess the ways in which student-writers employ and arrange that support.

In other words, academic writing is a form of testing. Instead of testing class content or communication skills by multiple choice or true–false formats, writing assignments ask students to "perform," to demonstrate their knowledge and skills by composing and presenting written material. And like all tests, the completed writing assignment will be assessed. Criteria for evaluation of these writing "tests" differ according to the class (e.g., has the student assimilated the content of the course? synthesized concepts? arranged evidence appropriately? used language skillfully?), and the criteria for evaluation may be overt, covert, or even unconscious. But whatever the assessment criteria, teacher-evaluators expect students to fulfill those criteria, and they will judge the written product accordingly. Students know that academic writing tasks are tests: They almost invariably ask "What does [the teacher] want?" They realize that despite whatever "audience" may be assigned ("Write this essay for a classmate/the student newspaper/the President of the U.S."), the specter of the teacher-evaluator remains the "real" and most important audience, and the purpose of their writing is to demonstrate their ability to produce what the teacher expects for a certain grade. Consequently, designers of writing "prompts" (i.e., assignments that "prompt" students to respond in writing) should consider the purpose(s) for the prompt, the parameters and constraints of the assignment, and the way(s) in which the product will be evaluated. As Alice Brand (1992) states:

> Faculty have a right to expect competent writing. But they cannot expect competent writing when the prompts themselves are carelessly prepared. They cannot expect writing to be an accurate reflection of content knowledge or of higher-order thinking when the written assignments lack essential information or provide too much, are unclear or contradictory, are vague or picayune. (p. 157)

Because academic writing assignments can influence the lives of the students they test, all of these assignments should be designed and evaluated as carefully as any other test of student skills. This article discusses a range of issues in the design and assessment of classroom writing assignments given by teachers in courses across the U.S. college/university curriculum. In related work published in the *Journal of Second Language Writing,* we presented a framework designed to discuss the development of prompts for large-scale testing purposes (Kroll & Reid, 1994), and we will use categories from that framework to discuss the preparation and design of writing tasks administered by individual instructors in courses within the English/writing curriculum and in a variety of academic content courses. Finally, we will analyze successful and unsuccessful writing assignments and offer suggestions that will enable teachers to design and assess effective essay assignments.

DESIGN GUIDELINES

In general, effective writing assignments, whether for large-scale testing or within the U.S. academic classroom, must fulfill the testing expectations of the teacher-evaluators while at the same time be as fair as possible to the students: What is being tested? Why? In what specific ways? Have students been sufficiently prepared for the task(s)? An effective academic writing assignment should be clear, appropriate, and sound pedagogically; it should offer student-writers, whether NES or ESL, the best possible opportunity to demonstrate their strengths and to learn from their writing (Basham & Kwachka, 1991; Carlson, 1988; Cox, 1988; Hamp-Lyons, 1991b; Hamp-Lyons & Mathias, 1994; Larson, 1986). The effects of a writing task should be twofold: to measure student skills and to provide a learning opportunity for the writers (Ferris, 1994; Hamp-Lyons, 1991a; McKay, 1989; Walvoord, 1986; White, 1992). That is, students should "write-to-learn"; cognitive change and growth—education—should occur as a direct result of the writing task. Furthermore, writing assignments can define the emphasis and structure of a course because they reflect some of the values held by the teacher (Larson, 1986; Silva, 1993; Walvoord & McCarthy, 1991).

Teacher-designers of classroom writing prompts must therefore consider more than the general academic reasons for an assignment; they should ask themselves a series of questions to identify the contextual considerations which determine how best to shape a writing assignment that will serve both the teacher and the student most successfully (Figure 1). These questions, which we developed from our original framework (Kroll & Reid, 1994), demonstrate the social, cognitive, and affective aspects of student-writers as well as the global course/program objectives that teacher-designers should consider. For example, the complexity of a writing assignment, and even the amount and kind of detail in the instructions for the writing task will depend on such variables as the age and experience of the students (traditionally aged freshmen? second semester senior business majors?), the level of the class (an undergraduate general education class? a graduate seminar?), and even the individual learning styles and levels of motivation of the student-writers. Fortunately, most classroom teachers have substantial knowledge about and insights into their students' needs and limitations—the **classroom context**. Thus, teachers can design assignments that will "bias for the best":

FIGURE 1. Contextual Considerations in Assigning Writing[1]

- For what reason(s)/purpose(s) will the writing be assigned?
- How will the assignment fit into the immediate context, and how in the overall objectives of the class? That is, how authentic is the prompt?
- In what ways will the content of the prompt be accessible to students as it integrates classroom learning with long-term goals?
- Who are the students who will be responding to the assignment, and what are their needs?
- How will the writing processes engage the students and further their knowledge of the content and skills being taught?
- What knowledge should the students be "demonstrating" in their written product?

They stretch the students without overwhelming them and provide students with significant learning experiences.

In addition to focusing on individual student factors and classroom objectives, teacher-designers are aware that an effective writing assignment should:

- be contextualized and authentic—it should be closely linked to classroom work, and students should be able to see the relationship of the assignment to both the class objectives and their "real world" future work (Canale & Swain, 1980; Frey & Ross, 1991; Leki & Carson, 1994; Paulson, 1992).
- be based on accessible content—it should tap into the existing background knowledge of the student-writers so that they can link old knowledge with new (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1984, 1987; Carrell, 1983; Clayton, 1993; Newell & MacAdam, 1987).
- be engaging—the task(s) should involve the students, and the product should be of interest to the teacher-reader as well (Conlon & Fowles, 1987; Sudlow, 1991; Thorne, 1993).
- be developed in tandem with appropriate evaluation criteria, that reflect course goals (Allaei & Connor, 1990; Hamp-Lyons, 1994; Paulson, 1992; White, 1994).

In our earlier work analyzing the process of designing effective writing prompts for the assessment of writing per se, we suggested that test developers need to consider and control six critical categories: contextual variables, content variables, linguistic variables, task variables, rhetorical variables, and evaluation variables (Kroll & Reid, 1994). In Figure 2, we modify some of the descriptions of these categories in order to demonstrate how our earlier framework can be adapted to serve teachers in all disciplines as they shape writing assignments for their courses.

The last variable, apprising students of the evaluation criteria for a writing assignment, is perhaps the least well-developed criterion in prompt design. Yet it is integral to the process; only if the students fully understand how the "test" will be evaluated can they take responsibility for their own writing and learning. The more specific these criteria, the clearer the assignment

FIGURE 2. Assignment Design Guidelines

- Context
  - place of writing task in course objectives, curriculum or long-term program goals
  - student capabilities, limitations, learning objectives
  - criteria/reasons for the assignment
  - authentic/real-life context
- Content
  - accessible to all student writers, culturally and otherwise
  - authentic audience and purpose(s)
  - appropriately "rich" (for example, to allow for multiple approaches)
- Language
  - instructions
    - comprehensible
    - as brief as clarity allows
    - unambiguous
  - prompt
    - vocabulary and syntax appropriately simple or complex
    - transparent
    - easy to interpret
- Task(s)
  - appropriately focused to accomplish within external parameters (for example, time constraints)
  - further students' knowledge of classroom content and skills
  - allows students to "demonstrate" their knowledge
  - engaging, interesting, involving
- Rhetorical specifications
  - clear direction concerning shape and format(s)
  - instructions concerning register and tone (i.e., audience relationships)
  - adequate rhetorical cues[2]
- Evaluation
  - assesses what is being taught
  - clear, specific, unambiguous criteria articulated to student-writers

objectives will be for the students, thereby reducing student beliefs that the real criteria for "good" writing (as evidenced by a final grade) are a mystery, that the teacher knows the "secrets" of good writing but will not share those secrets, and that students must therefore guess "what the teacher wants." Overt evaluation criteria can also assist teachers in their assessment processes. As Hamp-Lyons (1991a) as well as other researchers have demonstrated, without articulated scoring criteria, teacher-evaluators often apply "implicit criteria," using unarticulated and perhaps unconscious biases (toward, for example, article usage or neatness) as the basis for their assessment (Davis, Scriven, & Thomas, 1987; Greenberg, 1981; Huot, 1990; Mendelsohn & Cumming, 1987; Sweedler-Brown, 1993). To avoid such covert bias, writing assignments and evaluation criteria should be given in written form as well as orally.

A written set of assessment criteria can be designed to be handed out with a writing assignment; the criteria sheet can also be used as the cover sheet for the product that results from the assignment, and it then functions as an assessment guide as the teacher reads the paper. Appendix A demonstrates two rather generic cover sheets that can be adapted for a variety of writing tasks: the first identifies a variety of text properties that can be assigned weighted numerical values, depending on the context. The second, for an Advanced Composition course, concentrates on writing skills (although content is evaluated through the criteria of development, purpose, and audience). Appendix B demonstrates a more specialized cover sheet, this one for a problem–solution essay, in which points are given for the successful fulfillment of specific criteria that include both content and writing skills and that are specifically identified to the student-writer. In content courses across the curriculum, such specific evaluation criteria can accompany each writing assignment.

SUCCESSFUL PROMPTS

Below are several prompts from classes across the curriculum at three state universities. Because each of the prompt assignments in this article is taken out of the classroom context, it is difficult to fully examine the effectiveness of the writing assignment within the course objectives, the place of the writing task in the course, and the individual needs of the student-writers. We have, however, developed and/or collected these assignments from individual students over a period of two decades and have received written and oral feedback from students concerning the assignments discussed. We therefore believe that the following prompts have been analyzed with all available information and that they adequately control for the variables outlined previously (Figures 1 and 2) in ways that maximize students' ability to complete the assignments successfully. After each prompt is a brief analysis of the qualities that make the assignment effective; specific criteria from Figures 1 and 2 are underlined.

1. Freshman Composition

The following assignment has been used by both authors, with both NES and ESL writers, with substantial success. Usually, the assignment was given more than midway through the composition class, when the sense of classroom community (and its accompanying mutual trust and respect) had been established and developed, after the student-writers had been trained in the roles and benefits of group work, and during the time the students were being taught the writing skills of analysis and the use of evidence for support of their opinions.

Women's/Men's Roles

> Imagine that you have two weeks to live as a person of the opposite sex. That is, if you are female, imagine you have two weeks to be a male; if you are male, imagine that you have two weeks to be female. Think of

> the differences in social roles, everyday life, and feelings that you might have. Use some of the questions below to begin pre-writing.
>
> A. What about your life would be better? Try to list at least 3 things.
> B. What about your life would be worse? Try to list at least 3 things.
> C. What about your life would not be changed? Try to list at least 3 things.
> D. What would you most enjoy being able to do in those two weeks that you can't do now? Describe 1 thing in detail.
> E. What would you least enjoy having to do in those two weeks that you would probably have to do? Describe 1 thing in detail.
>
> Write a 2–3 page (typewritten, double-spaced) essay in which you discuss the roles of women and men, using your pre-writing and personal observations to support your opinions. Your audience will be a classmate of the opposite sex with whom you will discuss your idea and who will review your essay drafts with you. Your final draft (and all your preliminary work for this assignment) is due on November 14th.
>
> Your essay will be graded on the following criteria:

Organization	30%
Content	50%
Mechanics	20%

Analysis. The language of the prompt and instructions was simple and direct; students understood immediately (though some were initially skeptical about the assignment). The reasons for the assignment were to (a) give the students an opportunity to use their own experience, memories, and observations to gather easily accessible content ("data"), and (b) then have the students organize and present their opinions and evidence in ways that would fulfill the parameters of the assignment. In-class discussion and organizational techniques and the use of evidence (rhetorical specifications) were integral to the writing process; peer review groups and at least one student–teacher conference were also part of the ongoing assignment.

The evaluation criteria, while not as detailed in the prompt as they might be, were part of previous assignments; however, students knew that in addition to the criteria listed, their essays would have a cover sheet like the second example in Appendix A. They were, therefore, well aware of the evaluation criteria for the course at the time in the semester. The resulting papers demonstrated that students were interested and involved in the tasks, that they were able to understand and address the tasks with success, that they used a variety of approaches to present their opinions and evidence, that they were able to discuss and review their partners' drafts, that their feedback on the drafts assisted the partner-writers, and that students could muster available evidence and present their opinions effectively.

2. Second-Year Biology Course

This hour-long midterm examination was used by a biology instructor who was committed to the concept of writing across the curriculum (WAC) and who designed this prompt with the students' learning experiences in mind. The results proved to be very successful; both NES and ESL students were able to demonstrate their knowledge and at the same time be creative in their responses.

> You are the only doctor in a small, rural town. People of all ages begin coming into your clinic with the following symptoms:
>
> headache
> aches in joints
> fever of 102 degrees Fahrenheit
> swelling in the abdomen
>
> The people in the village are not familiar with the germ theory of disease, and they are very frightened. Write an explanation of the disease process for these people.

Analysis. First, the context of this prompt was clear for undergraduate students who had been studying the theory of contagion: They understood the reasons for the test, they knew they had been studying the disease process in class, and they prepared accordingly. The language of the instructions and the prompts was relatively simple, brief, and unambiguous; even students with limited English language skills who had studied for the test understood the instructions and the task. The major reason for the assignment was to give students the opportunity to demonstrate and apply their knowledge in a specific, nonclassroom situation; moreover, the task was both narrow enough for students to respond to adequately in the time period and "rich" enough to allow the teacher-evaluator to discriminate between effective and ineffective responses. In addition, all students (who studied) had equal access to the content of this prompt, and the rhetorical specification ("Write an explanation") was simple but effective; it cued students to shape their responses.

While evaluation criteria for the examination were not specifically stated, we assume that students who took this test at midsemester knew the general parameters of the assignment and the assessment criteria on which they would be evaluated, namely, on their demonstrated knowledge about the disease process and their ability to effectively fulfill the assignment.[3]

Finally, the greatest strength of this prompt was, we think, the authentic audience and purpose that provided a provocative "frame" or scenario for student writing. The assigned persona of being the "only doctor in a small, rural town" involved the students both personally and professionally. However, not all simulated scenarios are as effective as this one; often, the more detail that is provided, the more complex the scenario, and the less successful the prompt (Brand, 1992; Redd-Boyd & Slater, 1989; Smith et al., 1985). An example of how students do not appreciate assignments that are too confining is provided by Steinberg (1980), who notes:

> It was clear that the students were moving from amusement to annoyance when one day about mid-semester I came into the room at the beginning of the hour and saw on the board something like the following: "Write an explanation of a one-armed paper-hanger who is allergic to paste about how he can paper the room while standing on one foot without harming the newly shellacked floor." (p. 166)

3. Second-Year Genetics Laboratory Report

Sophomores in a large lecture-based genetics class received this exercise in their laboratory section. ESL students in that laboratory section reported that they understood the assignment (though they were initially "shy" about fulfilling it) and that their laboratory teaching assistant helped them individually with some vocabulary in the prompt.

- Purpose: This laboratory exercise and the subsequent report are intended to permit you to compare actual data obtained from the class, and a data sample of your own, with theoretical values, obtained from the development of Punnett squares.
- Procedure:

  (a) A data collection sheet will be passed around each laboratory group. You should answer each question (e.g., your blood type, do you possess a widow's peak, or dimples, attached or free ear lobes, etc.). You will also be provided with an individual collection sheet. Note that at the bottom of the sheet is an area regarding color perception. Following your instructor's directions, complete this section of your sheet. Remove it at the broken line and turn it in before the end of the period. All of the data for the entire class will be pooled and provided to you at the next laboratory period.

  (b) Before the next period, obtain an independent sample of your own from about 35 persons OTHER than members of the class—for example, your dormitory group, a club, or just the first 35 persons you encounter on campus. Select any TWO traits from the data collection sheet (additional traits are not necessary). NOTE: Retain your tally sheet and include it as an appendix with your report.
- Report: The report should include the following sections:
  - (a) Introduction—the purpose of the study
  - (b) Material and methods—how were the data obtained?
  - (c) Observations—the actual data
  - (d) Discussion—develop Punnett squares for each of the following, and each should be included in your report: a dihybrid cross, a sex-linked trait, and a multiple-allele system.

Analysis. The report for this genetics class required actual student fieldwork that integrated class learning and application: to invest time and energy collecting data and then to report that data in an organized (and expected) way. The classroom context was clear and the audience was authentic: Students practiced what they had been learning, and the results interested both the individual students and the instructor. The data were equally accessible to every student; one particular strength of the assignment was the language of the directions for collecting the data (the content of the report), which was transparent and unambiguous. The language for the actual assignment of the report was more complex for the uninitiated, but students had learned vocabulary such as "dihybrid cross" and "multiple-allele system" previously during the class.

For this assignment, evaluation criteria were implicitly included in the rhetorical specifications; the instructor assessed how effectively student-writers communicated their data in a report format (with introduction, materials, observations, and discussion sections), and how successfully they "develop[ed] Punnett squares" for each of the categories. In other words, the instructor assessed what had been taught.

4. Third-Year Introduction to Linguistics Course

This short essay assignment was given to a class of varied student backgrounds: undergraduate and graduate students, linguistics majors and minors, education students, and others. The assignment came near the end of an academic semester; students and teacher had established the context of a classroom community.

> Date Due: November 14, 19___
>
> Write an essay of approximately 500 words (2 typed pages, double-spaced) in which you discuss how one or two concepts or principles you learned about linguistics or about the English language in the first 10 weeks of this course either (1) particularly interested or intrigued you, (2) surprised you, or (3) appear to you to have potential usefulness in a present or future career choice. Do not include any material you have studied for your group project presentation.
>
> In your discussion, identify not only the linguistic learning that took place but explain your reaction to that learning. This paper is not meant to be a summary or review of the semester but a discussion of one or two issues only.
>
> Your essay will be evaluated on the basis of its manifestation of linguistic awareness and correct understanding of linguistic concepts, along with its demonstration of such features of standard academic English as good organization and control over language.
>
> Your essay should be typed or prepared on a word processor using double spacing and printed on white bond paper. Proofread and correct any typing mistakes. Do not put your paper in any kind of binder or folder; simply staple the pages together.
>
> Remember: No late homework assignments will be accepted.

Analysis. Although the assignment seems a bit abbreviated, the teacher and students had ample opportunity to discuss the assignment and to negotiate information not mentioned in the prompt (e.g., specific "concepts or principles"). Note that the teacher asked students to choose their topics (content) individually, referred to other assignments ("Do not include material studied for your group presentation"), indicated what the assignment was *not* ("a summary or review of the semester"), and helped students to narrow their topics ("a discussion of one or two issues only").

The rhetorical specifications and evaluation criteria occupied half of the prompt and constituted its greatest strength for this analysis. Students learned the parameters and constraints of the assignment ("2 typed pages, double-spaced" and stapled), and they learned how they would be assessed (linguistic awareness, standard academic English, good organization, and language control). Papers resulting from this assignment demonstrated that both NES and ESL graduate and undergraduate students were able to access the directions and write appropriate, high-quality responses.

5. Urban Water Management Graduate Course

The classroom context for this graduate research paper prompt differed from the previous examples. First, it is apparent from the due dates (in a semester system) that this assignment was given near the beginning of a graduate seminar and that it would be a major part of the course and the course grade. Second, the participants in this class were all graduate students in the field of water management. Third, the assignment required more than a written account; students would also do an oral presentation—the language, audience, and purpose of which no doubt differed from the written paper.

> A major part of the class effort will be directed toward a research paper and oral presentation. The goals of the exercise are: First, you will study a particular topic of interest in enough detail to become an expert; second, you will convey to the class in the form of a summary abstract and a brief oral presentation the most important aspects of the subject you chose.
>
> Due dates:
>
> *February 10:* Submit a one-page proposal for your topic, with objectives and scope of the paper. I will comment on them and return.
>
> *March 31:* Submit a one-page summary abstract of your paper and oral presentation. Include any diagram that may help illustrate your topic as part of the one page. These will be collected, assembled, printed, and distributed to the class as reference material.
>
> *April 7:* Oral presentations begin. I will provide a schedule and copies of the abstracts. Each oral presentation will last 5–10 minutes, including questions. We will schedule about 4 per class period. We will arrange to have an overhead projector or a slide projector if you request one in advance.
>
> *April 24:* Written papers due. They should be well presented in a format similar to that you would use for a journal article submission. This means: clear, objective, good presentation of facts; a conclusion; and references. Length should be about 5–10 pages, single-spaced equivalent.

Analysis. Notice that this was not as detailed an assignment as would be necessary for an undergraduate, nonmajor class. The assignment did not, for example, detail the overall organization of the "proposal"; rather, it indicated the expected sections, the "objectives and scope of the paper." Nor did it describe the instructor's expectations concerning the "summary abstract"; as part of the classroom context, the graduate students should already have known the parameters and the constraints, the rhetorical specifications, and the language expected in this part of the assignment. In addition, students did not have an opportunity for "multiple approaches" to the prompt; rather, the rhetorical specifications were relatively rigid. However, since the purpose of this assignment was not to discriminate between effective and ineffective lower division writing, for example, but rather to develop a community of learning among senior colleagues, multiple approaches was not an important criterion.

On the other hand, the assignment itself was directly related to course objectives and to the students' professional futures: The purposes of the assignment were to assist students in becoming "experts," using their expertise to inform others in the class and learning to write an article suitable for submission to a journal in their major field. Moreover, the process outlined in the assignment provided students with essential deadlines and instructor support ("I will comment on [the proposal]").

The most specific directions in this assignment concerned the format and rhetorical expectations of the final paper. Graduate students in the class needed to investigate or refresh their knowledge of the format(s) for "journal article submission," and their papers were evaluated on "clear, objective, good presentations of facts, a conclusion, and references."

For the ESL students in the class, the language of this assignment was not as clear as it might have been; for example, they professed some confusion about the amount of required material. In particular, the second sentence ("The goals . . .") should probably have been rewritten into two or three clearly detailed sentences. However, these ESL students reported that the negotiation necessary to decipher this sentence did take place in class.

UNSUCCESSFUL PROMPTS

The following prompts also are authentic writing assignments from a variety of U.S. college/university classes across the curriculum. Again, we have collected these assignments from our NES and ESL students over two decades of teaching, eliciting both verbal and written student input about the prompts. So, while we cannot speak to the exact classroom context for each assignment, we have asked students in the represented classes about their responses to the prompts, and in some cases we have seen the drafts of those responses. Our investigations demonstrated that, because these prompts were poorly designed, they caused difficulties for students in the classes. While the prompts often exhibit several problems simultaneously, this section will evaluate only the major problems of each prompt. The first three assignments are examples of the flaw most often found in problematic writing assignments: They are too broadly focused for successful student writing within the classroom context in which they were assigned; in terms of the design guidelines, their content is flawed. The next two prompts present classroom context problems, particularly in the areas of prompt relevance and understanding of student capabilities and learning objectives. The last prompt poses the more visible problem of language difficulties and misunderstandings for ESL students. The analysis following each prompt is based on student input as well as on the guidelines for effective assignment design (Figures 1 and 2); we have underlined criteria from Figures 1 and 2.

Flawed Content

1. ***Freshman Political Science Course.*** We have numerous prompts from this class, brought to us by angry NES and overwhelmed ESL students over a period of years. All of the prompts present the same major problems, which are the result of a departmental policy to hire undergraduate students, many not even political science majors, to run discussion sections for the large-lecture format of the class and then to "design" a research paper assignment. Because these discussion leaders lack teaching and prompt-design experience and expertise, they tend to write the most global prompts possible (under the mistaken assumption of "the bigger the better") and then to assess the resulting papers arbitrarily. Assigned just after midterm for an end-of-term due date, none of the prompts considers the limitations of freshmen concerning library use, synthesis of substantial amounts of material, and the presentation of material about which they have very little background knowledge or experience.

> The purpose of this paper is to examine the origins and results of Soviet control and influence in the Soviet satellites of Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, Romania, and Poland, as well as the current reforms and their implications. Your paper must be 6–10 double-spaced, typewritten pages. The written quality of your paper will be graded. This will include the use of proper grammar, correct punctuation, spelling, and word usage as well as the citation of references and the inclusion of a bibliography in the proper form.

Analysis. The major problem with this assignment was in the content of the assignment itself: The focus of the assignment was broad enough for a book (at least) rather than being "appropriately focused to accomplish within the external parameters of the task" (Figure 2). That is, 6 to 10 pages provided freshman writers only with an experience in frustration: Most began as novices in the topic, and as they gathered information, they found extraordinary quantities of material that needed to be read, analyzed, and synthesized. In fact, the assignment contained nearly 20 separate tasks, at least one third of which could each fill 10 pages of a research report. Since the students had to comment on origins, results, current reforms, and implications of the reforms in five "satellites" in 10 pages, the resulting research papers could not help but descend into gross generalizations with virtually no evidence; plagiarism occurred as students struggled to fulfill the expectations of the evaluators. Instead of having room to develop an argument and to gather and arrange persuasive evidence, student-writers tried to cram short responses to all of the tasks into the paper in order to fulfill the unrealistic demands of the assignment.

Especially for freshmen, designing assignments with framed/constrained content, clear objectives, and rhetorical cues can give the student-writers substantial assistance. With this assignment, how could the student-evaluator help but be disappointed in the results? Furthermore, while the evaluation criteria were given generally, ESL students reported that the student-instructor did not clearly define such instructions as "bibliography in the proper form."

2. *Freshman Music Class Research Paper.* This was the first writing assignment given in the class, during the second week of class. The course, a "cultural context" requirement, is frequently taken by first-semester freshmen and by newly admitted ESL undergraduates. Given this classroom context, we were not surprised when puzzled NES and ESL students arrived at the university Writing Center and in our offices almost immediately. We advised the students to ask the instructor specific questions.

> You will write a 3–5 page research paper on a **musical topic**. The purpose of this assignment is to familiarize you with music resources in the library. You must cite at least three different sources found in the library in your paper. This paper must be typed and double-spaced. The paper is worth a maximum of 60 points. It is due Nov. 6.

Analysis. While the language of the instructions and the prompt for this research paper were clear, the content for the paper was vague, especially for a first-semester freshman audience. For example, students had no framework for choosing a viable topic that they could write about satisfactorily in 3 to 5 pages (Rap? The use of the violin in Broadway musicals? Seventeenth century Baroque music? How Bach's life affected his composing? Elvis?). Perhaps because the stated objective of the prompt was to "familiarize students with music resources in the library," the instructor felt that the topic did not matter (i.e., any topic would do). However, because no specific rhetorical specifications or evaluation criteria were given, students could not guess "what the teacher wanted," nor could they assume that their choice of topic would not influence their grades.

In response to student questions about the topic, the instructor later added this sentence to the prompt: "Subjects for this paper are limited to subjects found in the *New Groves Encyclopedia of Music,* which will provide a good bibliography."

3. *Third-Year Business Course.* This writing assignment, given during the last quarter of the course in a class for management majors, caused special problems for ESL students, whose major-field background knowledge was culturally different from the NESs in the class. For example, "performance appraisal" is a culturally bound concept and a form for that appraisal completely "foreign." Moreover, even though the NESs had a better grasp of the jargon and the instructor's expectations, they still had difficulty interpreting the assignment.

> Create two performance appraisal forms based on your knowledge of the process. Each form should contain performance dimensions relevant to the position under consideration. The forms should utilize appropriate behavioral anchors for each dimension being measured. A generic form may not be used.

Analysis. Even within the context of the class, this prompt is vague, full of jargon, and directionless. Unfortunately, the instructor in this class felt that this written prompt was self-explanatory, and so did not discuss the assignment with the students. Among student questions were the following: Why are we doing this? (learning/teaching objectives). What does [the instructor] want? (evaluation criteria). What form for the appraisal should I use? What form, if not "generic," may be used? (rhetorical specifications). When is the due date? The length? (instructions). What is the "position under consideration"? (language).

Note that while the problems with the content of this prompt are completely clear to us (and to other nonbusiness instructors), we believe that prompt designers in all fields regularly write prompts that seem to the instructor to be crystal clear, while students (and other nonspecialized audiences) reading the prompt flounder.

Flawed Classroom Context

1. Freshman Astronomy Course. The following assignment, given near the end of a course for "extra credit," smacks of elementary school "book reports." It was, unfortunately, given as a "special" assignment in order to "bring up" the grade of an ESL student who was failing the class. However, the ESL student had never written such a report and so had little rhetorical information or perspective about the topic.

> Do a report on an astronomer who is currently living or has lived in the past 100 years. The report should consist of 4 or 5 typed pages and should be well written and well researched.

Analysis. The most important problem with this prompt is that it lacks crucial information about the classroom context for the task. What was the purpose of the assignment? What was the place of this writing assignment within the objectives of the freshman astronomy course? What was being tested? Was a biographical narrative (perhaps a summary of a single book or book chapter) a "report"? In what ways did this prompt consider student needs and potential for learning? What did the student learn doing this assignment? In addition, what did the instructor use as evaluation criteria: What did he or she consider "well written" and "well researched"?

2. ***Second-Year History of Science Course.*** This assignment was given just before the midterm of the semester to a class of nonscience and science majors in order to fulfill an "intensive writing" component for the class. Clearly, the content of the task is too broad and unfocused for more than a cursory response ("examining Western culture before, during, and after *Origin of the Species*"!). But, in addition, student complaints highlighted the relationship between content and classroom context in prompt development. In particular, an ESL student in the class spent an inordinate amount of time during the semester working to fulfill the assignment, slighting other parts of the class (and other university classes) to complete the paper, and thus hurting, rather than helping, his course grade.

> Write a 7–10 page paper with at least 7 different sources on the social, political, philosophical, and religious consequences of Darwinism. This paper should place Darwin's theory in its cultural context, examining Western culture before, during, and after the *Origin of Species*. How did people react to the theory? Why did they react to it?

Analysis. The scope of this course involved centuries of scientific discoveries. While Darwin occupied a section of the course, class reading and discussion (and other forms of testing) encompassed only 2 weeks of the semester. Students who immersed themselves in this writing project later learned that the paper represented only a fraction of their course grade, an imbalance that was neither written nor discussed in class. In addition, the reason/purpose for this task was unclear: What was the teacher "testing"? Finally, there were no evaluation criteria, nor was there guidance about the rhetorical specifications. And, if these aspects of the assignment were given to the students orally, the ESL students in the class did not comprehend them.

Flawed Language

Many writing prompts contain problems for students because their language is idiomatic and/or culturally vague. That makes them especially challenging for ESL students. For example, in one economics class, the assignment stated: "The paper should be chosen in consultation with the instructor with a rough outline submitted by the 10th week of the course." ESL students misunderstood this sentence, thinking they should conference with the instructor only after they had written an outline and during the 10th week of class. Thus, they missed the early opportunity to discuss their topic with the instructor, alienated that instructor by not coming in for the early conference, and arrived at the conference in the 10th week of class with an outline (and, clearly, a chosen topic) in hand.

In the writing assignment below, the boldfaced words and phrases presented comprehension problems for ESL writers as well as NESs.

1. ***Second-Year Adult Education Course.*** This assignment was given during the first week of class, before students had learned about the instructor's expectations or about the content of the course. It was an ongoing assignment, to be worked on throughout the course and handed in at the end of the semester.

> Every member of the class identifies something that he or she wants to learn about this semester. The assignment involves (1) writing up a plan by which you will learn this new thing, and (2) keeping a diary as you go about the process of learning. (The diary should include insights you get about the **nature of learning** in general as well as specific thoughts regarding your own learning.) Write a descriptive statement (**of whatever length**) that summarizes how you believe you learn best when you have something you want to learn about.

Analysis. Although most of the students in this class were education majors, both NES and ESL students had trouble defining the "nature of learning," and they could not determine what length the final statement should be. However, initially, no student asked the instructor about the specifics of the assignment. As the semester progressed, and the sense of classroom community grew, students asked questions about the assignment and negotiated the specifics.

In a writing-across-the-curriculum survey of important criteria for course success (Leki & Carson, 1994), 91% of the ESL students rated "figuring out the assignment" 6th out of 25. Because effective writing assignments must be accessible to all the students in college/university courses, and because those students are becoming increasingly ethnically diverse, it is imperative that teacher-designers focus on precision in the language of writing assignments. For ESL students, the problem is more severe; they need more clarity of language, more background information, and more specified teacher expectations (Raimes, 1985; Reid, 1993; Silva, 1993).

ASSESSING NEWLY DESIGNED PROMPTS

Topics for large-scale writing tests are often widely pretested and evaluated one or more times to assure their viability as testing measurements (Conlon, 1980; Conlon & Fowles, 1987; Kroll, 1990; Stansfield, 1986). This rigorous process can be duplicated in a variety of ways on a smaller scale to assess the clarity, accessibility, and potential effectiveness of newly designed classroom prompts. Most formally, the teacher can collect writing samples on the new prompt from a population of students who are similar to the intended student-writers. For example, instructors at one campus can pretest a prompt from another campus as an in-class writing assignment. The instructor might ask students to respond to the prompt and then evaluate the prompt with those students: Did you understand the language of the direction and/or the prompt? Was it interesting? Difficult? Were you able to begin writing immediately? Were you able to finish? What would you do differently if you had more time? The purpose of such an exercise for the pretest class might be

(a) to increase students' knowledge of responding to prompts, (b) to evaluate student in-class writing skills, and/or (c) to teach students to evaluate prompts in light of specific academic purposes and audiences. Following this discussion, the instructor can pass along copies of the student essays and comments to the prompt designer on the other campus.

Specific guidelines for assessing a prompt's effectiveness in individual classroom assignments, for NES and ESL writers, include attention both to the prompt and to the written responses. Prompts that work well are likely to yield affirmative responses to the following questions:

- Did the prompt discriminate well among the "pretest population"?
- Were the products easy to read? Easy to evaluate?
- Were students able to write to their potential?

On the other hand, the following questions suggest ways to focus the analysis when it appears that there is some problem with the initial responses to the prompt:

- Is the context of the prompt
  - —irrelevant to the course and/or to the students?
  - —unreasonable, considering the students' capabilities and learning objectives?
- Is the content
  - —too broad to be accomplished within the assignment parameters?
  - —outside the expertise, experience, or research ability of the student-writers?
- Is the language of the instructions or the prompt
  - —too simple or too complex?
  - —culturally biased?
  - —too abstract or philosophical?
  - —unacademic or otherwise inappropriate?
- Are the responses
  - —trite?
  - —highly emotional?
  - —similar?
  - —misleading or confusing?

It is also possible to "pretest" a newly designed prompt intended for classroom use in less formal ways. Teacher-designers might ask their current classes to read, discuss, and evaluate the prompt, to begin to write the prompt as an in-class assignment (either individually or collaboratively), and then to discuss the strength and weakness of the prompt. Or the teacher might ask a colleague to write the assignment and then discuss the expectations about the prompt in light of the colleague's response. Or, most easily and perhaps more efficiently, teacher-designers might write a response themselves and then analyze the response:

- Did I accomplish what I expected my students to do?
- What problems did I encounter?

- What can I predict will be difficult for my students?
- Will I be able to fairly evaluate a set of class essays on this topic?

CONCLUSION

This article uses the many stages in the process employed by writing test developers to select prompts for administration to large numbers of students as a backdrop for discussion of general and specific guidelines for developing and evaluating writing assignments (prompts) in individual courses. In a large-scale examination, there is little or no room for negotiation of the content, wording, or format of the prompt. Therefore, test developers must closely control all six of the critical variables we have identified (contextual variables, content variables, linguistic variables, task variables, rhetorical variables, and evaluation variables). Although classroom teachers have more room for negotiation of the prompt with their students, to be fair to their students and to provide them opportunities to both learn from their writing experiences and demonstrate knowledge and understanding of material, teachers should be no less rigorous in their preparation of course writing assignments.

School-assigned writing is performance-based testing. Teacher-readers who are honest in viewing the intentions of their classroom-based writing assignments understand that, in broad terms, they assign writing for the underlying **purpose** of testing the student at one or more levels. If most formal school writing is a form of testing, then the assignments for such writing should be as carefully designed as any test. And given the "mainstream" approach to college/university teaching in the U.S. (i.e., having NES and ESL students in the same classes), particular attention to prompt design is essential for success of ESL (and other ethnically diverse) students (Clarke, 1994). Given the importance that writing tasks can have for the student-writers, the casual assigning of an essay within the framework of a course may therefore be as irresponsible as thoughtlessly pulling a math or science multiple-choice test from someone else's file and hoping that it "works."

Presumably, teachers in composition classes help to train their students to go through a number of stages to complete the writing assignments they receive (e.g., oral discussion, library research, thinking, reading, outlining, drafting, collaborating, revising, and editing), and teachers across the curriculum expect their students to be "fluent" in those steps and processes that will serve them best in completing writing assignments for their courses. Yet, unless all writing assignments are carefully designed, both NES and ESL writers face frustration and wasted effort as they prepare those assignments, and teacher-evaluators may encounter disappointing results. In short, "wherever writing is integral to instruction, both teaching and learning across the subject areas stand to benefit from the careful design of writing assignments" (Brand, 1992, p. 156).

NOTES

1. We have underlined key words and phrases that we use in our analysis of writing prompts later in this article.

2. In the following example, from the third-year agriculture course hour-long examination, students are cued (in boldface) to organize and present their material and ideas; the cuing words provide organizing principles for student-writers and suggest a sequence of tasks that will result in the expected product.

> As a manager of a cattle operation, you have found Brucellosis in your herd. **Explain** the means of eradicating this disease and **describe** the ways of preventing its recurrence. **Explain how** each of these is effective.

3. Note that the teacher assessment of in-class test writing differs somewhat from evaluation of assignments that are prepared outside of class; in general, grading criteria are based more on the demonstration of assignment content and less on rhetorical specifications (Popken, 1989).

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Appendix A

Textual Features Evaluation Criteria

Assignment-Based Criteria
- fulfills the goals stated for the assignment __________
- looks like the assigned writing (summary? research? report?) __________

Content-Based Criteria
- substantive __________
- shows understanding of key concepts __________
- includes original insights and synthesis __________

Presentation/Organization-Based Criteria
- paper follows through on what the introduction sets out __________
- paper is sequenced in a clearly discernible and appropriate way __________
- parts of the paper are well-connected to each other (coherence) __________
- source materials are cited appropriately and integrated with the text __________

Language-Based Criteria
- grammar and usage __________
- sentence structure and variety __________
- vocabulary __________

Evaluation Cover Sheet for Advanced Composition Course

Essay Title: ______________________________

	Strengths	Problem Area
Purpose and audience		
Focus		
Development		
Organization		
Grammar/Sentence Structure		

Suggestions for revision:

Writer's plans for revision:

APPENDIX B

Problem-Solving Evaluation Criteria for Undergraduate Critical Reading and Writing Class

	Points	Earned (+ comments)
Problem: Show that a problem exists and needs attention. This may involve identifying the causes for and the effects of the problem. Be specific. Include details, examples, and facts.	20	
Solution: Propose solution(s) for the problem. This is your chance to convince your audience that you know what will solve or reduce the problem. Justify your solution(s) with reason and evidence. Remember to give details, facts, and examples.	30	
Key Elements: Use at least one of the following where appropriate: • Evaluate alternative solutions • Show that your solution meets certain criteria: feasibility, cost, effectiveness, legality • Answer possible objections • Suggest implementation or call for action	25	
Overall Effectiveness:		
• Creativity, style, and audience-voice agreement	10	
• Organization. Essay should be four pages, including an introduction and a conclusion	5	
• Mechanics: correct grammar, spelling, and punctuation	5	
• Pre-writing: include a rough draft with comments from the drafting workshop	5	
Total	100	**Final Score** ________