

## Constructing Effective Writing Assignments Across Disciplines: Some Tips

*“If we want students to produce meaningful writing, we must design meaningful assignments, tasks that encourage students to use writing to act.” --Erica Lindemann*

1. Consider separating procedural aspects of the assignment sheet from the “promising” section of the assignment sheet.
  2. Use directing verbs precisely. For example, use “analyze” if you want students to break down a concept into component parts for the sake of understanding the whole and that verb only. Remind your students about the differences in meaning between and among: discuss, survey, compare, evaluate, summarize, explain, etc. Writing is a cross-curricular act so don’t feel like “teaching” about writing is not your job.
  3. Remember that writing is a heuristic, a unique and powerful means of learning. Ask yourself as you construct a writing assignment what you want the students to learn. Prewrite about that. Then design the assignment toward that end. Remember writing not only shows an instructor what students have learned but also provide an opportunity for students to learn more.
  4. Remember that an essay may not be the most effective way to encourage students to learn; consider other genres and forms of discourse such as letters, memorandums, reports, case studies, newspaper articles, annotated bibliographies, plays, T-shirts.
  5. Consider building a publication component into the writing assignment. Remember publication means sharing with the public, so final drafts can be shared on Blackboard, anthologized in a class publication, posted on the web, submitted to a journal, etc. Remind students about e-portfolio postings. Hunt out venues of publication for your students; guide them into a sharing mode.
  6. Let students know when various stages of the assignments are due. For example,
    - Prewriting due \_\_\_\_
    - First draft due \_\_\_\_
    - Final draft due \_\_\_\_
    - Oral presentation \_\_\_\_
- In other words, sequence writing assignments carefully; provide feedback on the various stages. Help students along the way. In addition consider in-class peer reviews; construct effective peer review guides (another workshop!)
7. Clearly explain the length, font, formatting, etc. expectations on the assignment sheet.
  8. Provide models as part of your assignment explanation. Some instructors think it is a good idea to provide at least three models so students don’t think there is only one way to construct the assignment.

9. Construct audience-centered writing assignments; for example, if you are teaching first or second year students, be aware of where they are at in the GSW trilogy. Ask yourself if your directions are compatible with or at cross purposes with what students are learning in ENG 110, 111, and 112.

10. For undergraduate writing assignments, keep in mind the writing, synthesizing, and research skills students have learned in General Studies Writing. Build on those skills if possible. Be familiar with the handbook used in GSW.

11. For graduate students and international students, be aware of the various learning experiences they have had, so you can build on those or distinguish them from US academic writing conventions and expectations.

12. Make time in class to explain the assignment; ask students if they have questions. Remember that an assignment sheet is not only a set of directions but can be a way to reinforce learning.

13. If you seek to make your course more writing-centered, make opportunities for group work or collaboration about the writing topics and projects; remember that knowledge can grow out of collaboration and dialogue.

14. Be specific about the formatting system you want your students to use. Avoid assuming too much about students' familiarity with formatting systems. Ask them what they know. Schedule an appointment with the Writing Center staff to provide a workshop on APA or another formatting system. Be familiar with the university supported RefWorks.

15. Present assignment sheets in the spirit of extending an invitation or a call to submit a paper.

16. Consider ways to engage student writers as citizens and members of various communities. Remember who students speak or write *as* is as important as whom they are speaking or writing to.

17. Strive to make the writing assignment real; struggle to make it relevant and meaningful. Be on the lookout for ideas for engaging writing assignments. Remember just as writing is a process so is constructing writing assignments a process. When you've completed your assignment, have pride in a job well done!

18. Contact the Writing Center for feedback on any stage of constructing the assignment- from inception through final draft. Contact the Writing Center for adjacent aspects of writing assignment such as peer review guides and rubrics.

***Some useful links:***

[RefWorks](#)

<https://www.refworks.com/Refworks/login.asp?WNCLang=false> .

[FAQs about RefWorks](http://www.bgsu.edu/colleges/library/refworksfaq.html) <http://www.bgsu.edu/colleges/library/refworksfaq.html>

[BGSU Writing Center Handouts](#) available at

<http://www.bgsu.edu/offices/acen/writerslab/handouts/index.htm>

[Janet Emig's essay "Writing as a Mode of Learning"](#) available at

<http://www.citeulike.org/user/lblanken/article/421824>.

["Effective Writing Assignments"](#)

from The University of Maryland University College (UMUC)

<http://www.umuc.edu/ugp/ewp/design.html>.

[Writing Across Borders](#) Web Site

<http://cwl.oregonstate.edu/wab/>.

["Toward Understanding E-Prime"](#) by Robert Anton Wilson

<http://nobeliefs.com/eprime.htm>.