

ASSIGNMENTS IN THE SYLLABUS

Principles, Types of Learning, Examples

I. WRITING CONSTRUCTS¹

While it's widely agreed that writing enhances learning, it's not clear that more writing is better. Research shows, rather, that effective writing assignments not more writing assignments are responsible for "deep approaches to learning." Additionally, when students pursue effective writing assignments, they perceive increased gains from the course.

Here are **3 general PRINCIPLES AND EXAMPLES** for writing assignments that lead to maximal benefits in student learning.

Rather than provide a few static assignments, I've summarized concepts and principles that can inform effective assignments. In this way, you can tailor assignments to your specific needs and courses.

I.

Interactive Writing Processes. These occur when student writers are asked to communicate orally or in writing with one or more person. Ideally, the meeting would occur between receiving an assignment and submitting a final draft, with the goal of developing ideas. The person might be the professor, another student in the class, a tutor or teaching assistant.

For example:

"After writing your research proposal, you will be conferencing with your Teaching Assistant to receive feedback on it. You will also want to use this time to discuss valuable research for your essay."

"After you have written your first draft, please attach a letter in which you address the following questions: What idea(s)/assumptions did you rethink as you wrote this essay? What do you want your reader to

¹ These constructs and their success were derived from 29,634 surveys of first year students and 41,802 surveys of seniors from 80 bachelor's degree-granting institutions across the US. (Anderson et al, "How to Create")

understand, most of all? If you had more time to work on this essay, what would you continue to develop? What did you most enjoy about writing this essay/what was the most challenging?"

II.

Meaning-Making Writing. When students are asked to engage in some form of integrative, critical or original thinking.

For **Example:** The following language might appear as stages of a writing assignment, or even as individual response papers:

Summarize a reading

Analyze a reading

Describe your research process

Argue a position using evidence and reasoning

Write in the style and format of a particular genre in the field

Apply a concept learned in class to an artwork

Relate knowledge learned in another (required) class to knowledge in the current class

Support a contestable claim with evidence

Evaluate a methodology.

III.

Clear Writing Expectations. When professors provide students with an accurate understanding of what they are asking students to demonstrate in an assignment and the **criteria by which the professors will evaluate the students' submissions.** While these can seem obvious or apparent, students can often be uncertain and thus misguided about assignments and key goals. Such clarifications can arguably sustain the intellectual challenge of the assignment without 'giving the answer.'

II. KINDS OF LEARNING

There are three types of deep learning that can be achieved through writing assignments. Here are the **TYPES along with EXAMPLES** of possible assignments.

1. Higher Order Learning

EXAMPLES

- Analyze the basic elements of an argument; examine [a particular example/ argument] in depth and consider its steps.
- Synthesize and organize your ideas (researching, experiencing visiting/viewing a work of art) into new more complex interpretations and relationships.
- Make Judgments about the value of research, arguments, or methods, such as: Examine how [this scholar] gathered and interpreted research and assess the soundness of [his/her/their] conclusions
- Apply theories to: questions, new artworks, problems in the field.

2. Integrative Learning

EXAMPLES

- Integrate ideas or information from various sources.
- Include diverse perspectives (race, religion, gender, political belief)
- Integrate ideas or concepts from multiple courses
- Discuss ideas from readings/class discussion with faculty members outside the class. (For example, students might be encouraged to meet with another faculty member as part of their research for an essay)

3. Reflective Learning

EXAMPLES

- Examine the strengths and weaknesses of one's own views on a topic. (This might occur in a brief (1 page) in-class response paper that students write upon completing an essay, where they identify the strengths and weaknesses...of their essay)
- Try to better understand someone else's views by imagining how an issue looks from his/her/their perspective. (Students might be encouraged to do this when reading past scholarship, when assessing depictions of similar subjects across history, or when describing scholarship that disagrees with their thesis).
- Learn something that changes how the student understands an issue or concept. (This can happen when students are encouraged to show, in their writing, how research and analysis moves their thinking; When students are encouraged to explore topics they care deeply about)

III. MAKING CONNECTIONS

Research on undergraduate writing shows that students can more successfully complete their assignments--and by extension approach expertise in the field--when they understand the connection between diverse assignments.

When the relationship between reading and writing assignments is discussed, when the relationship between assignments within a course and across courses is clear, students can more easily transfer the totality of their coursework into their writing and thinking.

For example, when course readings are mined for the relationship between writing strategies and critical insight (i.e. the interrelationship of formal analysis and historical context, the role of examples, the tone of the writer as she engages other scholars, the difference between the introduction and conclusion), students not only come to see how Art Historians think but also gain a repertoire of choices for their own writing, choices that model advanced thinking/writing in the field.

DESIGNING COURSE ASSIGNMENTS WITHIN THE SYLLABUS

The goal of assigning the research paper is to teach students to become self-directed, curious, advanced thinkers, able to contribute to lively conversations within the field. But student writing is often disappointing: research essays can be disjointed and repetitive, informative more than exploratory.

The following provides specific practices for helping students invest in academic inquiry and pursue real undergraduate research.

SCAFFOLDING ASSIGNMENTS

One pedagogic approach for improving student writing is to scaffold assignments, or provide short assignments that help students practice their researching and writing skills early in the course (or in introductory courses). Students can then build on this work/these skills, to produce longer more advanced writing later in the course (or in junior/senior seminars).

One way to think of this is that students will have to progress through different STAGES of writing, in order to progress from:

Freshman Outsider → Disciplinary Insider

STAGE 1:

Generalized academic writers concerned with stating claims, offering evidence, respecting others' opinions, and learning how to write with authority (PWR1, PWR2 courses)

STAGE 2:

Novice writers able to approximate particular disciplinary ways of making knowledge. [Introductory Courses]

STAGE 3:

Writers capable of expert, insider prose [Advanced Courses in the Major]

WRITING THE SYLLABUS, BACKWARDS

One way to integrate a research essay into a course syllabus is to work backwards in the assignment sequence for the course. If the final written assignment is a research paper, the sequence of assignments leading up to and including it might look like this.

Note: The following shorter assignments might take the place of 'response' papers. They can lead to improved final essays since they ask students to demonstrate and practice specific skills to be used in the essay. Also, TA's can provide guiding feedback on these assignments to help students improve those skills, from the start of the course. Still, these assignments might remain ungraded, or count for a percentage of the grade upon completion

Stage 1. 1-2 'Thinking Pieces'

- Ask students to enter into a specific disciplinary debate (that you explain/provide). What is your take...?
- Ask students to consider a provocative or enigmatic work.

Stage 2. Skill Building Research Assignment

- Write a short essay in which the student argues X or not X, incorporating the views of one Argument source (that you provide). Ideally, have students revise the essay given the feedback they've received.

Stage 3. Proposal for a Major Research Paper

- Submit a 1 page Proposal that answers the following questions:
 1. What interpretive problem or question do you intend to address? Explain the problem, showing how it arises from your chosen work.

2. What makes your problem problematic? What disagreements among scholars, gaps in knowledge, or complexities or inconsistencies in the work itself characterize that problem?
3. What's at stake in addressing this problem? Why is it significant? To whom does it matter? How will solving it advance the conversation? How does your small problem connect to some larger problem?
4. In addition to your chosen artwork, do you envision using any other artworks?
5. Attach a preliminary bibliography of peer-reviewed scholarly articles or books that seem relevant to your interpretive problem. Some of these may serve as 'argument' sources in your final paper (the network of other voices in the conversation that you are joining).

Stage 4. Exploratory Essay

- Write an essay in which you narrate in first-person chronological order the evolution of your thinking as you studied your chosen artwork(s) and investigate what other scholars have said about your interpretive problem. Summarize the arguments of at least 3 scholars and explore your responses. At the end, you may or may not have found the thesis for your final argument.

Stage 5. Major Research Essay

- Write an 8-12p essay that addresses a significant question related to any of the artworks we have looked at this quarter. The introduction to the essay should pose the question or problem that your essay will address and engage your reader's interest in it. Within your essay, you must join in conversation with other scholars who have addressed (directly or indirectly) your interpretive problem. Your insight into this problem will serve as the thesis statement of the essay. Imagine this essay will be delivered at an undergraduate conference. Assume your audience will attend your conference session because your title hooked their interest.

SPECIFIC EXAMPLES OF SCAFFOLDED ASSIGNMENTS

1. MEANING-CONSTRUCTING RESEARCH ASSIGNMENTS

Ask students to bring their own critical thinking to bear on specific research sources within the context of an authentic problem demanding analysis and argument rather than information. Such assignments provide, then: both a particular problem and research context for students.

For **EXAMPLE:**

You are a Film Studies scholar who has been asked to contribute an essay to October magazine, an essay that responds to the Spring 2014 issue. Read the introduction by Michael Turvey as well as 2 other essays in this issue and then take a position on one of the following questions: (1) Is there a return to classical film theory; If so, why? (2) Why now? (3) Even if there isn't, what is the significance and value of classical film theory today? (4) Does classical film theory offer modes of theorizing ideas and arguments that are absent in 'contemporary film theory'?

Or:

You are one of the curators at the new Anderson gallery. You have been asked to write the wall texts for the following images: --. As you write, take into consideration the work itself, the goals and function of wall texts and your particular audience. After you have written the accompanying text, write 1-2 pages explaining/justifying your rhetorical choices. You will want to reference the content of specific wall texts in museums off campus.

Skills Developed: Engaged Critical Thinking, Bringing Research Findings to Bear on an Authentic Problem, How to Establish a Rhetorical Context (Audience, Genre, Purpose), More Engaged Learning and Growth

2. MODULATING DIFFICULTY LEVELS

Stage 1: For an early Research Assignment, design a fairly easy research problem and supply students with all the research sources.

Stage 2: A second short assignment might give a similar problem but send students to the library or library course guide to find their own resources.

More generally, here is a possible HIERARCHY of ASSIGNMENTS:

- Professor gives all students the same problem (Introductory courses)
 - Provides all the sources
 - Provides some of the sources and asks students to find one or two more on their own
 - Asks students to find all the sources

- Professor asks students to choose their own topics (which they must convert into a research problem) and find their own sources. (Advanced courses)

Skills Developed: How to Ask Discipline Appropriate Research Questions, How to Find Sources (developing sophisticated research), Why to Find Sources (moving beyond sources that inform)

3. A TWO-ASSIGNMENT SEQUENCE OF SHORT MEANING-CONSTRUCTING RESEARCH TASKS

Stage 1. Provide a specific problem and context for students; ask students to write in a particular genre within the field (academic essay). You might point to specific readings that model the structure/thinking you'd like them to approach. Provide sources but ask students to review and select only those that are valuable for this assignment. Require an annotated bibliography in which students explain the value of the source for the writing assignment.

Stage 2. All of the above within the same genre but students are given a new problem/context and are asked to do their own research.

Skills Developed: Students Must Think Intentionally about Research Sources while also Applying to a New Problem the Skills of Critical Analysis they are Learning from Lectures and Course Readings, How to Integrate Sources into a Paper, How to Take Thoughtful Notes, How to Cite and Document Sources.

4. HOW TO JOIN AN ACADEMIC CONVERSATION

Stage 1. Ask students to summarize an argument and speak back to it, analyzing the text's rhetorical strategies or by asserting their own ideas in response to the text.

Stage 2. Summarize two or more critical texts, analyze similarities and differences among their claims, their methods, their theoretical perspectives, or their uses of evidence.

Stage 3. Literature Review. Summarize scholarly works that take competing points of view on a disciplinary problem, then stake out a claim that: (1) supports one side in the controversy but adds something new, (2) synthesizes positions, (3) reframes the debate.

WRITING HELP

Writing and Oral Communication Support Tutoring for Students Workshops for Courses

1. HUME CENTER FOR WRITING AND SPEAKING

Encourage students at any stage of their writing or oral presentation to visit Stanford's Hume Center for Writing and Speaking. All students can benefit from half hour to hour-long tutorial sessions in Building 250, on the quad. Here, tutors help students get started on assignments; discuss student concerns about their writing in relation to the assignment; address and overcome writer's block or performance anxiety; learn strategies for revising, editing, and proofreading; understand academic conventions in their field. Oral communication tutors can also film students in individual tutorials in order to help assess diction, visual media, clarity, voice.

Open:

Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday: 10:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m.

Thursday: 10:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m.

Friday: 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.

Sunday: 1:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m.

2. WRITING SPECIALIST

Tutoring.

Encourage students to sign up for my Art History office hours (via email gmoyer@stanford.edu), **Tuesday/Thursday 9:00-9:30a and 12:30-1:30**. I am available to help with any stage of writing or speaking, for undergraduates and graduates both.

Workshops

I'm also available to give writing workshops for students during class time (the research essay, the oral presentation, etc) as well as writing workshops for Graduate student TA's (grading, syllabi, feedback, conferences, writing assignments, grant applications, job applications).

Depending on the amount of time given, I can tailor workshops to your specific course content and its assignments.

Syllabi. Pedagogy

And, of course, would be very glad to meet with you, the professors, to discuss ways of weaving together content and assignments.

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Bibliography

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