Designing Effective Writing Assignments

When designing an effective writing assignment, faculty should consider three different dimensions of design: the process, the characteristics, and the product of design.

Process of design: integrating writing into the course

Clarify the goals: It's critical to understand the goals of your course and to match writing assignments to those goals. So, begin by asking yourself: do you want students to engage with specific course concepts? Do you want them to learn professional types of writing and knowledge production? Or do you want them to do both? This video further discusses reverse course design.

Consider the possibilities: After clarifying your broad goals, it's important to consider the kinds of writing that might help you do that. Frequently, we reach for the 'essay' or 'research paper,' but writing comes in many forms, and some support specific goals better than others. If you want student to engage with specific concepts or materials, a writing-to-learn (WTL) provides a better framework. If you want students to learn professional types of writing (and core concepts), a writing-to-communicate (WTC) framework will work better. In using a WTC approach though, you should ask yourself: what kinds of writing do professionals in the field use to work with the type of knowledge we are developing: a research report, a proposal, a white paper, a vision statement, an email, or something else?

Design backwards: After considering the goals and the type of writing you want to assign, it's important to consider how the assignment helps students work toward them. Research on writing development repeatedly shows that students invest less time and effort into assignments that aren't integrated into the ongoing activities and materials of a course. So, think about how the writing assignment asks students to engage the assigned course materials, what skills need to be supported to complete the assignment successfully, and what scaffolding or resources will support those skills?

Characteristics of design: meaningful writing experiences

Interactive writing processes: High-impact writing assignments should include interaction between students and course materials (e.g., model assignments, rubrics), peers (e.g., small group discussion of models, peer review), and faculty (e.g., whole class discussion of models, feedback).

Meaning-making tasks: Research on assignment design shows repeatedly the benefits of connecting assignments to students' lives, applying them to 'real world' contexts, or using them to help students envision their future (professional) selves. Writing assignments tend not to work well when students are asked to simply repeat information. Consider prompting students through scenarios that ask them to use knowledge in context. RAFT design works well for this.

Clear expectations: Students need to know what faculty expect of them and how they will be evaluated. This information should be communicated in a variety of ways: through grading criteria, assignment instructions, model assignments, and interactions in class. It is also important to talk about key words that define the writing task and to demonstrate what those mean through modeling. Some of these words might be 'evidence,' 'organized,' 'analyze,' 'originality,' or 'voice.'

Product of design: communicating the assignment

Effective assignment sheets should convey specific information to help students begin understanding the writing task and know important dates and criteria. This information should include;

- the learning goal(s) of the assignment
- the purpose of the writing task
- the type of writing and its conventions
- major due dates
- grading criteria

This linked handout models an approach to formatting this information. The University of Wisconsin also has another model that you might find useful.

Further reading

Anderson, P. et al. (2017). "How writing contributes to learning: new findings from a national study and their local application." https://www.aacu.org/peerreview/2017/Winter/Anderson

Bean, J. C. (2011). Engaging ideas: The professor's guide to integrating writing, critical thinking, and active learning in the classroom. John Wiley & Sons.

Eodice, M. et al. (2017). "What meaningful writing means for students." https://www.aacu.org/peerreview/2017/Winter/Eodice

Gardner, T. (2008). Designing writing assignments. https://wac.colostate.edu/books/ncte/gardner/

National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment. (2020). Assignments library. https://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org/ourwork/assignment-library/

Prompt: A Journal of Academic Writing Assignments. https://thepromptjournal.com/index.php/prompt

University of Michigan's Sweetland Center for Writing. (2020). Sequencing and scaffolding assignments. https://lsa.umich.edu/sweetland/instructors/teaching-resources/sequencing-and-scaffolding-assignments.html

WAC Clearinghouse. (2020). What is writing-to-learn? https://wac.colostate.edu/resources/wac/intro/wtl/

WAC Clearinghouse. (2020). What is writing in the disciplines? https://wac.colostate.edu/resources/wac/intro/wid/
Sample WTC or WID assignments are available here:
https://wac.colostate.edu/resources/wac/intro/wid/widassignments/