

Tips for Developing and Responding to Writing Assignments

Why Invest in “Writing and Communicating Across the Curriculum”?

“Academic disciplines are constituted by their discourses, and it is one of the tasks of writing across the curriculum to initiate students into the particularized discourse communities of the academy. *Many problems of student writers stem not from cognitive or linguistic inadequacies but from their unfamiliarity with the thought processes of the disciplines they are trying to join.*”

--John Bean, *Engaging Ideas*

Understanding the Student-as-Writer and Rethinking Goals

- The goal of writing assignments should be to develop students’ critical thinking and understanding of content, and to build their experience with writing that is valued by their (and/or other) disciplines. (O1)
- Many students in many programs will not ultimately need to communicate in the style of academic articles. If you’re committed to “long-form writing,” be sure you can articulate how this genre serves *your* goals. (O1, O3)
- Many of the features of writing—and thinking—that you may consider to be “universally” good are often quite specific to your discipline, training, or classroom. Students will be more likely to succeed if you take time to thoroughly explain your expectations and your orientation to writing. (O3, O5)
- For *most* writers, the process of writing is a way to refine ideas (rather than merely a way to convey fully-formed ideas). Assignments that don’t explicitly build in or encourage a drafting process are likely to show a student’s first thoughts about the topic. (O4)
- Realize that grammar/mechanics is just one aspect of good instruction in writing. Additionally, “Weak writers seem to make more progress in generating ideas, improving fluency, and organizing and developing ideas than they do in sentence correctness. It may well be ... that competency in editing and correctness is a late-developing skill that blossoms only after students begin taking pride in their writing” (Bean, 54). (O4, O5)
- Research shows that student error increases as the complexity (or unfamiliarity) of the writing task increases. As a student becomes clearer about his/her *thinking*, often the sentence-level errors improve as a result. (O3, O5)

Things to Avoid

- *Assignments written to the audience of “teacher-as-examiner.”* These place students in one of the least common contexts for the writing that they’ll do outside of college, and often do not allow students to consider a broader context for their writing. (O1, O3)
- *Too much or too little feedback on a writing assignment*—each can be equally counterproductive. Focus on specific elements of the students’ thinking and writing, and provide concrete steps for improvement.

Tips for More *Effective* Writing Assignments

- Clearer assignment prompts, with more scaffolding, often produce better final drafts. One framework for creating writing assignments is to provide information about the task, the writer's role and audience, the format, process expectations, and the criteria for evaluation. (O1, O3)
- Not all your writing assignments need to follow a formal framework. A lot of good learning can come from informal writing assignments, like journals, pre-discussion writing, "muddy points" writing, reading notes/notebooks, short "issue responses," emails, short surveys, and "invention" assignments to help students generate research questions. (O1)
- Helping students *read* disciplinary articles and other texts is a good way to build students' attentiveness to the features that matter. For example, encouraging students' close attention to the structure of article introductions can help them understand how your field identifies and sets up problems worthy of study.

Tips for More *Efficient* Writing Assignments

- Longer writing assignments may help achieve the goal of better *thinking*, but not necessarily the goal of better *writing*. Often, shorter, more directed assignments may produce better, clearer, and more lasting gains in *writing*. (O1, O3, O4, O5)
- Not every writing assignment has to be fully graded or commented. For example, you can use assessment of a class set of responses to provide general feedback.
- Similarly, exploratory writing and talking doesn't always have to be graded, but can help students work through initial thought processes.
- For graded assignments, developing a rubric/checklist when you write the assignment description can help you match grades up to your implicit and explicit expectations, and it can help you provide faster and more targeted feedback to the student.
- It's often useful to have students be first readers and reviewers of one another's work. This is often as useful for the reader as for the writer, since it allows a student to see how another peer is approaching the task.
- Reading as a *reader*, rather than as an *editor*, is a way to help you focus on ideas rather than errors, make your comments more effective, and reduce time correcting mechanical or grammatical errors.
- Consider asking students if they would like comments on final papers: if they decline to pick them up, don't spend time commenting.