

Backward-Planning Template: Scaffolding a Major Writing Assignment

Adapted from Bean & Melzer's book Engaging Ideas, Ch. 4. This document pairs with the Designing Effective Writing Assignments guide.

1 START HERE — The final assignment.

What will students ultimately produce?

Task & genre:

What thinking must they have mastered to succeed?

Due date (end of semester):

2 What must students already be able to do?

Tick the skills your final assignment requires. These are the skills students most often lack, and each one is a candidate for a scaffolded task leading to the final assignment.

- ☐ **Ask a discipline-appropriate research question**
- ☐ **Understand rhetorical context** (purpose, genre, audience)
- ☐ **Find sources in your field** (beyond generic library database searching)
- ☐ **Use sources purposefully** (support a claim, not to simply prove reading was done)
- ☐ **Integrate sources mechanically** (quoting, paraphrasing, attributive tags etc.)
- ☐ **Take smart notes** (summarizing arguments, recording their own responses)
- ☐ **Cite and document** in your discipline's style
- ☐ **Other:**

3 Work backward.

For each skill you ticked, design an earlier low-stakes assignment that lets students practice it before the stakes are high at the end of your course.

Skill to Practice	Scaffolded Task	Approximate week

4 Sequence across the semester.

When planning this sequence of scaffolded tasks, ask: Does each task feed the next, or do they just accumulate? Does the sequence build toward the final assignment? Is anything the final assignment needs still unpracticed? Are these early tasks low stakes, so students can risk getting them wrong?

Week X → Task:

Week X → Task:

Final Assignment (Week X)

WORKED EXAMPLE: *This example allows you to see the backward-planning template in action. It pairs with the Before and After Assignment Prompt Makeover.*

1 The final assignment.

Task & genre: A 1,000–1,200-word *strategic recommendation memo* where students advise Maybelline’s VP of Marketing whether to match or differentiate against Glossier, defending one specific recommendation with evidence. (See the Before and After Assignment Prompt Makeover for the full prompt).

What thinking must they have mastered to succeed? Take a contestable position on a strategic problem; find and use evidence; write for a skeptical professional audience; write in memo form.

Due: Week 14.

2 What must students already be able to do?

- ✓ **Ask a discipline-appropriate research question**
- ✓ **Understand rhetorical context** (purpose, genre, audience)
- ✓ **Find sources in your field** (beyond generic database searching)
- ✓ **Use sources purposefully** (support a claim, not to prove reading was done)
- ✓ **Integrate sources mechanically** (quoting, paraphrasing, attributive tags)
- ☐ **Take smart notes** (summarizing arguments, recording their own responses)
- ✓ **Cite and document** in your discipline’s style
- ☐ **Other:**

3 Work backward.

Skill to Practice	Scaffolded Task	Approximate week
Establish rhetorical context and find sources	One-paragraph pitch: name the company pairing you’ll analyze and one source about each.	6
Use sources purposefully and integrate them	Evidence exercise: take one campaign data point and write a paragraph using it to support a claim.	9
Rough draft of whole memo	Peer review 2 other classmates’ memos using the peer review worksheet.	12

4 Sequence across the semester (*start earlier than week 6, if necessary!*)

Week 6 → Source pitch; Week 9 → Evidence paragraph; Week 12 → Peer review; Week 14 → Final assignment due.