

Writing Across the Curriculum

Formal Writing Assignments: Suggestions from Writing Studies Research

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What Does Writing Studies Research Say?

Bean (2011, Ch. 6) differentiates between formal and informal writing assignments: formal writing calls for students to hand in finished prose. Traditionally, these take the form of term papers; sometimes students identify a topic in a proposal. This approach assumes students are familiar with how to pose research questions and find appropriate evidence to explore those questions.

In contrast to the traditional term paper approach, Bean identifies “alternative” approaches which require students to answer research questions using concepts from course readings. Thaiss and Zawacki (2006) note that there are a variety of ways to create “alternate” kinds of assignments.

Alternative formats might include a personal vision statement, a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis, an interview with a scientist. Alternative arrangements of academic arguments might include presenting multiple perspectives through a personal narrative or posters in addition to a traditional report. A third kind of alternative text would allow for alternate syntax. One example would be to accept the work of non-native speakers of English without penalty for certain assignments. Alternate methods might sometimes be called for in a particular field. Modified ethnographical studies are one example; working on projects with community organizations might prompt collaborative writing opportunities.

Expert writers differ from novice writers because they go beyond “**knowledge-telling**” or standard responses to prompts and assignments and move toward “**knowledge-transforming**” or what we might associate with critical thought (Bereiter and Scardamalia 1987). Students making the move from outside a discipline (pre-university writing)

into a discipline (third or fourth year majors) need to make this kind of intellectual move. Instructors who want to work on this kind of intellectual goal for an assignment need to consider the complexity of this move for students.

Tardy (2009) argues that students in a discipline need to gain “genre knowledge” before they can write well in a disciplinary context. Genre knowledge includes language resources appropriate to the document, processes for composing, rhetorical knowledge (purpose and persuasion), and subject-matter knowledge. Student success on any particular assignment is a function of all of these components.

Suggestions When Designing Assignments:

1. **Include interactive components.** Brainstorming, feedback to drafts, WAC group writing tutorials.
2. **Pose a meaning-making task.** Pose a discipline-specific problem; pose a research question; ask students to support one interpretation or side of an issue or another.
3. **Clear explanations of expectations.** Be as clear as you can be about what kind of document you expect students to hand in. Include a copy of the scoring guide or criteria you will use to evaluate their work.
4. **Create a rubric for each assignment.** Assignment-specific rubrics can save time and energy and eliminate confusion among students.
5. **Begin by focusing on what you want students to hand in.** Start with a vision of the document you want students to write, and then work backwards to identify what they will need to do to create that document.

Implications For Instructors

Title	Cue the genre of the document you want to read
Task	<p>What is the intellectual problem that the student needs to work out? Choose your verbs carefully: they can suggest the kind of document you expect to read:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compare and contrast • Describe • Explore • Critically reflect • Summarize
Goal/purpose	<p>What is the goal or purpose of the document:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To persuade the reader to adopt a different position • To inform about a topic • To analyze the various attitudes towards a subject • To reflect on an experience in light of research on that subject? • To describe a sequence of events in detail
Audience	<p>If the audience is the instructor, characterize the instructor’s interests in the topic, the background of the instructor, the instructor’s initial position on the topic/subject. Explain what “scholarly” means and convey the values of the discipline—for citations, for evidence, for genre.</p> <p>If the audience is not the instructor, detail who that non--scholarly audience is and how the text students will create needs to be constructed to work for that audience.</p>
Genre	<p>Describe the work that the document needs to do to be successful. What questions should the document answer? What typical features mark this genre?</p>
Process	<p>How should a student go about getting started on this assignment? Are there steps that you recommend they take? Will there be opportunities for feedback before the assignment is graded?</p>
Format	Describe, in detail, how you want the paper to look when it is handed in to you.
Evaluation/grading	Identify the criteria you will use to evaluate the assignment. Attach a separate sheet or scoring guide/rubric.

References And Resources

- Bean, J. (2011). *Engaging ideas: The professor’s guide to integrating writing, critical thinking, and active learning in the classroom*. (2nd Ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Tardy, C. (2009). *Building genre knowledge*. West Lafayette, IN: Parlour Press.
- Thaiss, C. & Zawacki, T. (2006). *Engaged writers and dynamic disciplines: Research on the academic writing life*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Boynton/Cook.