

Creating Effective Writing Assignments

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Many instructors experience frustration when they read students' papers, wondering if the students had any idea what the instructor was looking for with the assignment. Many times, it is true: students do not always follow directions closely. Sometimes, however, especially regarding paper assignments, the instructor does not make her or his requirements clear enough for the students, and students are therefore left to guess (for they certainly wouldn't make the trip to our office and ask about it!). Creating effective and clear writing assignments is one positive step to help students write the papers you hope they will.

Some things to keep in mind when you are developing writing assignments

An effective assignment

- is clearly worded and is given to students in writing;
- explains what topics are acceptable/unacceptable;
- is addressed to the student, using language the student will understand;
- explains terms and clarifies tasks that may be new or unfamiliar;
- suggests ways to begin an assignment;
- explains what the final product should look like (manuscript form, length, number and type of sources, citation style);
- makes students aware of deadlines;
- lets the student in on the purpose of the assignment—how it fits into the course objectives, how it prepares them in the discipline;
- makes the student aware of an audience;
- breaks complex assignments down into manageable stages;
- lets the student know how the assignment will be evaluated.

Not all of these criteria will be addressed with every writing assignment you develop. Much of the information may be conveyed via a course description and/or syllabus. However, if you have specific goals for your students regarding a writing assignment, being clear and specific in your instructions is the best way to help them get started.

Other ideas to help students produce the paper you are looking for

Once you have developed a clear, effective writing assignment, you can do other things to help students with the assignment.

- When possible, provide a sample paper from a previous term's student, letting your current students know why the paper received the grade it did.
- Remind students periodically that they should be working on their papers.

- Take a few minutes in-class perhaps once every one or two weeks and ask students if they have questions about their writing assignment.
- Provide a class period where students bring a working draft of their papers to class to exchange with one another and receive feedback.
- Encourage students to come and see you if they continue to have problems working on this assignment.

Sample Assignments to Evaluate

Now that you know what constitutes an effective writing assignment, look at the following actual writing assignments used in college classes. What problems do you notice with each based on the strategies previously delineated?

Physics

Pick five recent scholarly articles and write a summary of each. Due the last week of the term.

Art

Select three paintings and do an analysis of each. You may use illustrations. If you have any questions about this assignment, come and see me.

Journalism

Create an essay on any ethics of journalism topic of your choice. It is due the last day of class. Your paper should be typewritten, double-spaced and approximately 6 to 8 pages long. A two-page summary (outline) is due in class the week before.

English

For this class, you must write a term paper. You may write it on any topic of your choice. Your paper should be at least 10 pages long, include at least 6 different sources, and adhere to proper MLA format. Due the last day of class.

Generic

A 20-page library research paper is due the last day of class. Select a topic that interests you from the term's readings and lectures.