

Assignment Design

General principles in writing assignments to elicit better student writing

Think about desired outcomes of assignments

- What kind of thinking do you want students to do? What do you want them to learn from the assignment?

Encourage students to engage problems/questions, not topics

- Works toward focus on thesis-governed argumentation
- Providing rhetorical context (purpose, genre, audience, etc.) may help
- Take-Home Essays: shift from ‘Discuss...’ prompts to prompts in the form of question
- Term Papers: shift from language of choosing a topic to developing a research question

Encourage or require revision: writing as ongoing, changeable process

- Required first draft (with in-class or online guided peer review)
- Outlines

In-class activities toward successful writing

- Synthesize course content with developing writing skills
 - With a class reading, ask students to make an outline individually or in groups (argument structure, outlining)
 - With a set of class readings, ask students to write multiple different thesis statements taking a position on them, connecting readings (thesis statements, critical thought about course material)
 - Students have to summarize reading in writing and present to a partner at start of class, without looking at reading (critical reading, summarizing, paraphrasing)
- Take a prompt from previous semester; as a whole class or in small groups ask students to outline answers (organization, outlining, argument in response to question)

Grading criteria

- If using a rubric, hand out/post rubric with assignment
- If not using a rubric, talk about how assignment will be graded

Detailed procedural/logistical directions

Scaffolding: Building up to longer papers

- Use smaller assignments to develop substance, ideas, and skills for larger paper
 - Also encourages revision/development of writing and may work against plagiarism
- Possible mini-assignments: research question; annotated bibliography; literature review/summary of a debate the student is intervening in; prospectus (specify what is included); preliminary thesis statement and outline; draft of introduction; first draft of paper (paired with guided peer review); exploratory essay/narrative of research process

Plagiarism-proofing assignments?

- Scaffolding – various assignments can work against plagiarism
- Ask students to submit a cover letter to the final assignment or some other piece of writing where they have to describe the research and writing process (does not have to be graded!)

Self- or peer review for assignment design

EXHIBIT 6.6

Questions for Collegial Peer Review of an Assignment Handout

- Is the assignment clear? How might a student misread the assignment and do something not anticipated?
- Does the assignment focus on an “intriguing problem”—either directly or implied?
- Does the assignment specify a rhetorical context for the writer (that is, a purpose, audience, and genre)?
- Are my grading criteria clear? Does my rubric adequately explain criteria to students? Is my rubric too sketchy or too detailed?
- If you were a student, would you find the assignment interesting and challenging?
- If you were a student, how difficult would this assignment be? How long do you think it would take?
- If the assignment is quite difficult, could it be preceded by a simpler “skill-building assignment” that would serve as scaffolding?
- To what extent does this assignment stimulate critical thinking? Does it cause students to wrestle with key concepts or key thinking skills in the course?
- Is the purpose of the assignment clear? Does it seem to tie into my course goals? Would it seem like busy work to some students?
- Are the mechanics of the assignment clear (due dates, expected length, single versus double spacing, manuscript form, documentation style, and so forth)?
- Is the process students should go through as explicit as possible?
- Should I build more “interactive components” into the assignment to keep students productively on task? Some possibilities:
 - Class time for brainstorming
 - Submission of a thesis, title, and introduction
 - Mandatory conference
 - Annotated bibliography
 - Opportunities for rewriting
- How easy will it be for me to coach and grade this assignment? What problems can I anticipate?

from John Bean, *Engaging Ideas*, 2nd ed., p. 106

Sample Term Paper Assignment A (adapted from Bean, *Engaging Ideas*, 2nd ed., pp. 89-90)

Choose a topic related to the course that interests you, and write a 10 page research paper that includes at least five sources we did not read in class. I will approve your topic area in advance.

Submit a research proposal by [date]

[formatting, length, citation, due date details]

Sample Term Paper Assignment B (adapted from Bean, *Engaging Ideas*, 2nd ed., p. 110)

In your final paper, make a research argument of 10 pages on a question that is related to the course and that interests you. Early in the process you will identify a problem within your topic area that will require you to form a contestable thesis statement supported by your own critical thinking and research-based argumentation.

The introduction to the paper ought to engage the reader's interest in the problem or question, showing why it is debated and significant, and contain a thesis statement that makes a specific argument in response. The main body of the paper should involve your own contestable response to this question or problem, one that makes a persuasive argument in support of your thesis through argumentation, analysis, and evidence.

[sources, formatting, length, citation, due date]

Timeline for question development

Note that while you are working on developing your paper, your focus and approach can (and likely will) change to some extent.

Failure to turn in a mini-assignment will result in 10% off the grade for the term paper for each missed assignment

- [date]: Research question
- [date]: Annotated bibliography of x sources
- [date]: Prospectus: explanation and focus of question; tentative thesis; one page literature review establishing the problem you will be engaging
- [date]: first draft (or introduction + first x pages) due; in-class guided peer review