Designing Effective and Purposeful Writing Assignments

What constitutes effective and purposeful writing assignments?

Alison W. Stromdahl and Asao B. Inoue

Writing is not a process by which students “think, then write,” but think as they write. This view of writing encourages students to discover ideas, concepts, and beliefs; explore, develop, and think critically about them; challenge traditional modes of thought; and increase students’ engagement with subject matter (Bean 29, 33). With the steps suggested in this book, increasing writing in your course will not require “rapid, complete makeovers.” It can be as simple as integrating a few new activities into your current curriculum (14).

I. Common Misconceptions About Integrating Classroom Writing Assignments (Chapter 1)

- Takes time away from Class Content: When thinking about content coverage, consider how much information a student can meaningfully process over the course of a quarter. Is breadth or depth more important in your course? If you prioritize depth over breadth, or wish students to think more critically about material, integrating writing (even if only short bits of writing) is one way to help students engage more deeply with the course content (11-12).

- Writing is unsuitable for my course: Frequently, teachers in quantitative or technical courses don’t view writing as an effective means of teaching subject matter. Facts, concepts, or algorithmic procedures “must be committed to memory” before application. However, short formal tasks and metacognitive assignments can, indeed, encourage disciplinary inquiry and analysis even in the early stages of learning a subject. These kinds of assignment are exemplified and discussed further in the Bean book (12)

- More writing assigned means more grading time: When teachers think about assigning writing, they logically realize that this means more grading. However, this is not always the case. There are a number of ways to streamline and reduce grading load and time, depending on how you assign and what you do with the writing. In the end, assign only the number of writing assignments that is manageable for you (12-13).

- I don’t know enough about writing or grammar to guide students in feedback: Teaching writing is mostly about helping students to focus on ideas and inquiries, explore questions in appropriate ways, and develop drafts that meet disciplinary conventions related to the course. Because you already write in your own fields, you have knowledge you can offer (13).

II. Designing Formal Writing Assignments (Chapter 6)

- Three Features of Effective Assignments (97)
  - Interactive components: Writing is best taught with a variety of interactive processes between readers and the writer, including brainstorming activities, drafting activities, feedback from peers and instructor, multiple revisions, and conferencing.
  - Meaning-constructing tasks: These tasks present students with disciplinary problems and ask them to formulate their own problems. They also encourage critical thinking about concepts that take into consideration the writer and his/her intended audience.
  - Clear explanations of writing expectations: This is a presentation of expectations directly to students, identifying tasks, processes, products, and clear expectations and goals for the assignment. This should include the purpose for the assignment and its relationship to course goals.

- Two Heuristics for Designing “Meaning-Constructing” Tasks
  - Role, Audience, Format, and Task (RAFT)
  - Task as Intriguing Problem (TIP) (98-100)
III. Designing Writing-to-Learn Assignments (Chapter 7)

- Common Misconceptions about Exploratory Writing: Instructor and Students
  - *Writing-to-Learn activities take too much time:* Exploratory writing can require no extra teacher time because often the objective of this kind of writing is getting students to think, question, and explore. Students hold on to these writings and use them as building blocks or inspiration for later concepts and assignments. To keep students engaged, collect materials once in a while and make only a comment or two (123), or use them for class or group discussions if possible.
  - *Students view writing-to-learn activities as busywork:* Some students are “closure oriented” or “grade oriented” which leads them to resist exploratory tasks. A way to avoid this is to directly tell students why you assign each task, its purpose or place within the learning of the course, or use it to guide/lead classroom discussion (123-24).
  - *Writing-to-Learn tasks are junk that encourage “bad” writing habits:* Because this kind of writing does not often require organization, structure, or even grammar/mechanics requirements, some believe it might reward “junk” writing. It is more appropriately seen as “sketches” or thinking that will later be pieced together more formally. Present it as such. It is proven that in these early stages of writing, when discovery and problem solving is key, attention to formal details (grammar, mechanics, error, organization, etc.) can hinder critical thinking (124-25).

- Why Exploratory and Write-to-Learn Tasks Are Valuable (121)
  - “*Think piece assignments continually present students with higher order critical thinking*” and create a classroom environment geared toward low stakes problem solving and complexity.
  - “*They change the way students approach course readings*” in that it encourages them to engage with the text through summary, analysis, and conversation with ideas in the reading. It inspires the act of “believing and doubting” (Elbow).
  - “*They create higher levels of class preparation and richer discussions.*” When students use these assignments to prepare for class, they are interested in sharing these ideas with others and seeing other students’ thoughts. It promotes the sharing of alternative viewpoints.

IV. Example of a Writing-to-Learn Assignment and Discussion

- See Exhibit 7.1 (127-28). As we read this together, note the following elements about the assignment:
  - goals or objectives of writing assignment (as expressed in the instructions)
  - expectations that appear to be held by the teacher (or Bean)
  - the differences between this kind of an assignment and a formal writing assignment

- What does this kind of writing assignment offer formal writing assignments if they are scaffolded together? How might this assignment prepare students to do a formal writing assignment?

V. Small Group Activity

- Take out your materials for your writing assignment. Using some of the ideas we’ve discussed, spend some time now and write down a sketch of a writing-to-learn activity that might help students write a more formal paper or document later, or a stand-alone writing-to-learn activity that has its own goals.
  - You may refer also to Bean’s list of exploratory writing assignments (or writing-to-learn assignments) to help you (131).

- Share and discuss our ideas.
VI. Assessment

- How do we assess such writing-to-learn activities? Does Bean’s section, “Evaluating Exploratory Writing” (142-144) offer you ideas?
- How can our assessment processes be ones that match the assumptions of the writing-to-learn activity?
- Do we always need to grade?

VII. Annotated Bibliography


Dan Melzer analyzes and discusses his findings on the over 2,100 writing assignments he collected from undergraduate sciences, social sciences, business, and humanities classrooms across the country, primarily focusing on writing-to-learn and writing-in-the-disciplines. The work also emphasizes the importance of more closely aligning writing assignments to rhetorical situations, genre concepts, and discourse communities teachers can help to create more effective products and learning situations by doing so.


As its title might suggest, this writing-across-the-curriculum inspired text focuses primarily on how teachers can use writing to teach and how these assignments, in turn, aid students in writing to learn. Leist discusses techniques for implementing writing to teach and writing to learn strategies and how both generative and structural heuristics (heuristic" means "helping to discover or learn; guiding or furthering investigation" or finding the solution to a problem) are key to this process. The author concludes with helpful suggestions on how to then evaluate this kind of student writing. There is also useful appendices that include checklist, rubrics, and sample writing assignments.


Mary Soliday explains and uses genre theory to discover what parts of writing are general (able to cross situational boarders) and what parts of writing are strictly discipline or social specific. In considering these concepts and using the scholarship of Gee, the premise of the book revolves around writing as an “enculturation into social practices through scaffolded an supported interaction with people who have already mastered the Discourse” (6). Teachers are those who have mastered said genres and should take this knowledge into consideration when teaching writing in their classrooms. Writing is the practice of “enacting” opposed to “giving” assignments. As such, writing cannot be taught in a short amount of time, certainly not in a single class or FYW program and should be considered an ongoing process that highlights these complexities.


Frequently, when writing assignments it is sometimes difficult to construct ones that most effectively incorporate collaboration. One point Speck tries to make throughout the work is that all writing is in fact collaborative and can be used as a pedagogical tool for active learning. Collaboration here is two fold; it means to work with others in a group to produce a final product and it means to work through stages of writing with collaborative feedback from others. This book offers insight into the pedagogical support needed for collaborative writing, fostering collaborative writing opportunities,
how to construct collaborative writing assignments, the formation of student groups and empowerment of students as effective collaborators, and the grading of such projects.


This book is designed for anyone who might be new to using rubrics to grade written assignments. Rubrics help shorten grading time, streamline standards, and convey feedback. This book help teachers understand what a rubric is, how and why they are effective tools, and explain how to go about constructing one. It also offers a number of example rubrics and explains who to vary rubrics from one assignment to the next.


This is a wonderful online resource that presents users with a compilation of useful formal and informal writing assignments, activities, and ideas with links to academic readings associated with that form of writing. These entries have been collected by Young for over 20 years in an attempt to help faculty who want to incorporate writing into their classrooms to do so with guidance and less burden.

http://wac.colostate.edu/books/young/small_genres.pdf