

Fall 2013 – FSEM Faculty Development Workshop

Developing Effective Assignments

Megan O'Neill

*This assignment asks students to identify a central or highly significant **paradigm of their discipline**, describe how it functions to create problem-solving strategies, and describe the paradigm that it has replaced, gathering information from both interviews and library sources.*

*Show me that you know how to design an original, basic experiment on a **psychological topic**.*

*The purpose of this assignment is to use what you have learned to judge whether **memory mechanisms are accurately portrayed in popular media**. View any two movies dealing with memory (e.g., “Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind”), and find the important principles of memory presented to discuss in your paper.*

The reader of this paper is an alien who recently landed on Earth for the first time. On the alien’s planet, there is no such thing as gender, gender norms, or gender-related behavior. After hearing about the two sexes, the alien said, “I think I understand what males and females are, but do they act the same way?”

NOTES



THINKING ABOUT THE ASSIGNMENT

- Why should students write in your class? State your goals for the final product as clearly and concretely as possible.
- Determine what writing products will meet these goals and fit your teaching style/preferences.
- Note specific skills that will contribute to the final product.
- Sequence activities (reading, researching, writing) to build toward the final product.

I. Purpose

- A. Explain the purpose of the writing assignment.
- B. Make the format of the writing assignment fit the purpose (format: research essay, position paper, brief or abstract, lab report, problem-solving essay, etc.)

II. The assignment

- A. Provide complete **written** instructions.
- B. Provide **format models** where possible.
- C. Discuss sample strong, average, and weak drafts.

III. Revision of written drafts

Where appropriate, peer group workshops on rough drafts may improve the overall quality of student writing. For example, have students critique each others' drafts one week before the due date for format, organization, or mechanics. For these workshops, outline specific and limited tasks on a checklist. These workshops also give you an opportunity to make sure that all the students are progressing satisfactorily on the project.

IV. Evaluation

On a grading sheet, indicate the percentage of the grade devoted to content and the percentage devoted to surface level writing skills (expression, punctuation, spelling, mechanics). The grading sheet should indicate the important content features as well as the writing skills you consider significant.

Checklist 1:**Have I**

1. written out the assignment so that students can take away a copy of the precise task?
2. made clear which course goals this writing task helps students meet?
3. specified the audience and purpose of the assignment?
4. outlined clearly all required sub-parts of the assignment (if any)?
5. included my grading criteria on the assignment sheet?
6. pointed students toward appropriate prewriting activities or sources of information?
7. specified the format of the final draft (including documentation, headings or sections, page layout)?
8. given students models or appropriate samples?
9. set a schedule that will encourage students to review each other's drafts and revise their drafts?

Checklist 2:

1. Is the assignment written clearly on the board or on a handout?
2. Do the instructions explain the purpose(s) of the assignment?
3. Does the assignment fit the purpose?
4. Is the assignment stated in precise language that cannot be misunderstood?
5. If choices are possible, are these options clearly marked?
6. Are there instructions for the appropriate format? (examples: length? typed? cover sheet? type of document?)
7. Are there any special instructions, such as use of a particular citation format or kinds of headings? If so, are these clearly stated?
8. Is the due date clearly visible? (Are late assignments accepted? If so, any penalty?)
9. Are any potential problems anticipated and explained?
10. Are the grading criteria spelled out as specifically as possible? How much does content count? Organization? Writing skills? One grade or separate grades on form and content? Etc.
11. Does the grading criteria section specifically indicate which writing skills the teacher considers important as well as the various aspects of content?
12. What part of the course grade is this assignment?
13. Does the assignment include use of models (strong, average, weak) or samples outlines?

Sample Strong Writing Assignment:
Article Summary and Brief Critical Response

Corresponding Course Goals:

- to become a critical consumer of psychological research
- to learn and practice basic principles of APA-style writing

Audience:

- a college professor who has solicited your help in deciding whether or not this article should be included in a required reading list for her Research Methods course

Due Date:

- October 22nd, in class (hard copies only, with all pages stapled together in this order: your paper, the PsychInfo abstract, and the article)

Assignment Description:

- A. Use PsychInfo to find an abstract for a short journal article about either 1.) a psychological experiment involving random assignment of participants to conditions or experimenter manipulation of one or more variables, or 2.) a correlational study. (Do not choose a meta-analysis, literature review, or theoretical paper.) Print the abstract and the article. If the article cannot be downloaded, you will need to locate it in the library and photocopy it.

- B. Write the body of your paper.
 - a. After reading the abstract and the article, summarize the main idea of the article in three sentences or less. A *summary* should communicate to your audience what the article is generally about, and it answers the question, “What is the significance of this study?” A summary does not include a personal opinion or critique, and it must be in your own words.

 - b. Critique the method described in the article. Name at least several things the researchers could have done differently in order to improve the study, and explain why you think these changes would have been improvements.

 - c. Recommend that the article be included or omitted from the professor’s required reading list, and explain your position. Do you believe this article has educational value? Does it merit inclusion on a required reading list in a Psychology course? Why or why not?

- C. Format your paper using basic elements of APA style.
 - a. Create an APA style title page for your paper, as you have learned in class. The title of your paper, “Article Summary and Critique,” will appear on your title

page as well as centered at the top of page 2. You should create an appropriate page header and running head. Your page header will appear at the top right corner of every page, including the title page and reference page, and it should look identical on each page except for the page number. There is a sample title page on RamCT in the folder called “Out-of-Class Writing Assignments.”

- b. Create an APA style reference page for your paper, as you have learned in class. The reference page will include the page header in the upper right corner, the word “References” centered at the top of the paper (under the page header), and then one reference (the article you read). See your class notes and the sample reference page posted on RamCT (in the folder called “Out-of- Class Writing Assignments).
- c. Within the text of your paper, appropriately acknowledge your source by citing (referring to) the original article. For this paper, include one in-text citation at the beginning of the paper. APA style citations include the names of the authors in the order that they appear on the article, followed by the year of publication. Also, please remember that everything in APA style is double-spaced, and indent your paragraphs by five spaces.

Sample Strong Writing Assignment:
Designing an Experiment

Corresponding Course Goals:

- to acquire a basic understanding of the use of the scientific method in psychological investigations
- to learn and practice basic principles of APA-style writing

Audience:

- Dr. Gingerich. Show me that you know how to design an original, basic experiment on a psychological topic of interest to you.

Due Date and Specifics:

- This paper is due in class on Wednesday, November 12, 2013.
- Your paper should be typed and double-spaced, and should include an APA style title page as well as an APA style reference page (see below).
- You are expected to turn in a hard copy of your paper on the due date, with the pages stapled together. E-mailed papers are not accepted. Ten points per day will be deducted for late papers.

Resources:

- Module 2 of the text
- Stetson Writing Center:

Assignment Description:

- A. Create an APA style title page. Choose an appropriate title for your paper, along with an appropriate running head and page header. Your title should also appear on page 2, along with the page header.
- B. Include these components in your paper. Make sure there is a logical and natural “flow,” and do not omit any of these elements. Remember that papers with high grades are those in which the writing is clear and thorough, with good development (explanations) of ideas.
- the general behavior of interest, and how or why you became interested in it
 - your hypothesis
 - identification of the independent and dependent variables in your experiment
 - operational definitions of the I.V. and D.V. (how they will be defined and measured)
 - how you would assign participants to experimental and control conditions, and why you would choose that method
 - the advantages and disadvantages of the experimental method, including the strengths and limitations of your specific experiment
 - why this would be an important and/or interesting study
- C. Include one in-text citation in which you refer to a point made by your textbook author in Module 2. Do not plagiarize. In other words, do not include any direct quotes from Module 2. Rather, paraphrase an idea from the module (put it in your own words) and give credit to your author with the in-text citation.
- D. Create a reference page in which you cite your PSY100 textbook (since you are referring to it in the body of your paper; see “C” above). In class, you have learned how to write a reference for a book. I have also posted my power point slides about this (from Monday, November 3rd) as well as a link about how to write in APA style (the Online Writing Lab at Purdue). This link will walk you through any aspect of APA style writing: title pages, in-text citations, references to books and journal articles, etc.

Sample Strong Writing Assignment: **Memory and Popular Media**

The purpose of this assignment is to use what you have learned to judge whether memory mechanisms are accurately portrayed in popular media. View any two movies listed below, and find the important principles of memory presented to discuss in your paper. Your paper should include the following:

- A SHORT synopsis of each movie (you may assume your reader has seen the film)
- A detailed description of the memory mechanism(s) at play
- Your evaluation, using appropriate terminology from the book, lecture, etc., of how the movies accurately or inaccurately portray the memory mechanisms in question, based on what you have *read and learned in class* (NOT based on movie reviews or what it says on Wikipedia). From what you know about memory, develop several criteria against which to evaluate the accuracy of the movie.
 - Possible topics for discussion in this section would be, but are not limited to (use your book and lecture notes!): memory processes (consolidation of

memory, durability of long-term memory), emotion and memory, parts of the brain and memory, forgetting or loss of memory

- A discussion of whether the movie/book enhanced your understanding of the topic. Did it raise any questions? Did you research any topics further to enhance your paper?

(Fairly) recent memory-related movies:

- *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, 2004
- *50 First Dates*, 2004
- *Paycheck*, 2003
- *Finding Nemo*, 2003
- *The Bourne Identity*, 2002
- *The Majestic*, 2001
- *Memento*, 2000
- *Big Fish*, 2003



SEQUENCING WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

Faculty can improve the quality of student writing by designing assignments that build upon student skills as an assignment unfolds (Lindemann). Breaking up a writing assignment into a series of steps or stages can dramatically improve student performance. At a minimum, intervening during writing prevents students from turning in last-minute, poorly considered papers and gives students feedback—whether from you or from other students—at useful points in the development of their papers.

Sequencing assignments can be as straightforward as establishing official checkpoints as students develop their drafts. You might require them to submit a thesis and plan for your approval and commentary, followed by a rough draft one or two weeks before the final draft. This checkpointing guarantees that students won't write the whole paper in one sitting, giving them time to let their ideas develop. Additionally, if you see students heading towards plagiarism, you can show them how to correctly use, paraphrase, and cite sources.

A related form of sequencing, called **scaffolding** (see below), launches students on fairly simple assignments and moves them gradually through more difficult cognitive tasks as they build expertise in your discipline. Using guidelines such as Bloom's taxonomy (see below), you can identify specific activities and develop successive assignments that draw on increasingly complex thinking skills.

There are several other benefits of sequencing assignments:

- Provides coherence for the course, helping students align their writing with the aims of the course. Writing assignments no longer appear to be stand-alone activities.
- Promotes complex thought through progressive focusing, revising, and attending to different points of view.
- Mirrors the staged and sometimes collaborative way work is often done in the professional world.
- Uses your responding/grading time more effectively. Since you may stage and respond to a thesis, plans, sections, or full drafts, you will be familiar with the end product. Because students have heard from you (or peers) throughout, your grading of the final draft can go more smoothly and efficiently.

WAYS OF SEQUENCING ASSIGNMENTS

Sequencing writing assignments allows for a wide range of options in any discipline.

- When introducing the assignment, have students spend five minutes **prewriting**—freely writing about the topic. Just one unexpected idea buried in a messy prewrite may become the germ of the paper.
- **Encourage planning** activities, especially visual diagramming of one sort or another. Lists, idea trees, tables of what is known or not known, and concept maps can all work well, too (see Flower).

- Expand the student's writing process by **requiring multiple drafts**, which can include any of the following suggestions:
 - Encourage students to write a *zero draft*, one designed to help them generate ideas – both good and bad – as they develop their focus or working thesis. The beauty of a *zero draft* is that no one else has to see it.
 - Ask students to submit a *thesis draft* with a working thesis, rough outline, and rationale.
 - Alternately, require a *document prototype*—a planning document mapping the purpose of the report, intended audiences or users, major sections, line of argument, main issues treated in each section, and visuals that slot into various sections (tables, graphs, diagrams, photos).
 - Another draft could be a *first full* (or *conference*) *draft* that receives your quick responses to its content (or students submit written questions about the content and scope of their projects after they have completed their first draft). After receiving direction from you, students revise for unity, support, and coherence or to tighten up an argument, for example.
 - This *revised draft* could then be reviewed by students in writing groups. Peers not only help each other, but also they see strengths in other papers that suggest further revisions.
 - In an *oral draft*, the student presents the core ideas of the paper orally either to the class or in a small group. Preparing for the oral presentation can help show a student where ideas may still not be clear. Further, written evaluations (from you, the class, or a small group) may suggest additional points of view or questions that may be worth incorporating into the final draft. Having two or three students volunteer to present oral drafts will help them with their work and provide an example to other students.
 - An *editing draft* can also be used to launch sentence-level editing. Students should not fuss over grammar and punctuation in early drafts when they are likely to be deleting sections, adding support, or reorganizing material. After global revisions have been made, they can focus on style and grammar. That completed, they proofread and turn in their *final draft*.
- **Set up small writing groups** of three to five students each. They can meet in or out of class to critique one another's drafts. If you use WebCT or other technology tools, group members can post questions about their writing process or their drafts and respond by given dates.
- **Use a jigsaw approach**, where students do initial sections of research and writing as determined by their group and then connect their pieces to those of their group mates. Or, if groups can meet in a computer lab, students bring in drafts and collaboratively integrate them into a single paper. Stress the difficulty and importance of blending contributions from team members into a seamless document.
- **Use a logical sequence**. Create a sequence of shorter assignments that build to the final written project. In technical or scientific projects, students would initially create a proposal. One or more progress reports would follow. Finally, students would write the final document itself. Alternately, students might first develop a topic bibliography, then annotate it, then write a literature review on the basis of the bibliography, then write a paper synthesizing what is known into an argument for what research ought to be done.

- **Write parts of the whole.** Students submit segments of the final paper—literature review, methods, results, tables, bibliography, etc.—throughout the term with time to integrate the whole at the end. The introduction might be the last piece submitted with the whole draft.
- **Encourage conferences** well in advance of due dates. Invite students to confer with you, a TA, or someone in the Writing Center throughout the semester about works in progress. For example, you encourage them to attend conferences prepared with three specific questions or with copies of sources.

SCAFFOLDING ASSIGNMENTS

Students who are excellent writers in one field such as history can appear to be poor thinkers or novice writers when they encounter entirely new disciplines such as physics or biology. They are prepared to play checkers. However, by semester's end, you want them thinking and writing at a higher level, prepared to play chess.

Using a scale such as **Bloom's taxonomy** (shown below), you develop assignments introducing your students to your discipline at a level where they can have early success and then develop their critical thinking and writing skills. Bloom's categories chart growing cognitive complexity. Activities associated with the simpler skills are more accessible to novice learners than those associated with analysis, synthesis, or evaluation. As students develop greater understanding of the subject matter and problems, you can add progressively more cognitively difficult assignments. For an excellent discussion of scaffolding, visit the Colorado School of Mines website, which provides the chart below and course-specific examples of scaffolding.

Bloom's Taxonomy

<u>Know</u>	<u>Comprehend</u>	<u>Apply</u>	<u>Analyze</u>	<u>Synthesize</u>	<u>Evaluate</u>
repeat, list, name, cite, relate, tell, <i>define</i> , etc.	translate, report, describe, retell, explain, discuss, <i>summarize</i> , recognize, etc.	apply, show, solve, simulate, operate, experiment, <i>calculate</i> , etc.	interpret, test, examine, <i>differentiate</i> , distinguish, investigate, etc.	predict, plan, <i>hypothesize</i> , incorporate, invent, propose, formulate, etc.	judge, assess, revise, measure, <i>recommend</i> , criticize, evaluate, determine, etc.

Scaffolding breaks up a complex cognitive task into manageable tasks. Note that each of the terms characterizing the mental act (e.g. *define, summarize, calculate, differentiate, hypothesize, recommend*) can also serve to define a purpose for writing. Each is an active verb, something students would be asked to do in writing. For example, a geophysics instructor might assign a project with four successive writing components: problem definition, audience analysis, interpretation of results, and final problem-solving evaluation. You can scaffold assignments in any of the following ways:

- Maintain a consistent rhetorical task, but continue to **increase the difficulty** of the readings.
- Challenge students to **investigate gradually more complex subjects**. A succession of brief reading or writing tasks may be connected to a single subject, offering students conflicting points of view or competing interpretations. Ultimately, students might define a problem, then interpret current research, propose solutions, and, finally, synthesize competing perspectives into an integrated argument.
- **Vary the audience**. Students take core information and write it up for different audiences for different purposes, moving from the familiar to the less familiar (beginning with nonmajors, to fellow majors, to professionals in your discipline). Each change would require different tasks, more extensive knowledge, and control of the language of the field.
- **Alter the genre**. Here, writing assignments progress from simpler to more complex modes of discourse (students might begin with a personal response in their journal, to formal definition, to comparison; or from field data, to summary, to research article). To streamline grading time, the earlier papers could receive a few points or check/check plus/minus, with the final paper earning the major points.
- **Reflect on learning** through the term. Early on, students summarize their understanding of key topics. They revisit this later, reconsidering their early thinking based on deeper understanding.

USEFUL SOURCES:

Bean, J.C. *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking; and Active Learning in the Classroom*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001.

Flower, L. *Problem Solving Strategies for Writing in College and Community*. New York: Harcourt, 1998.

Lindemann, E. *A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers*, 4th ed. New York: Oxford University Press. 2001.

Sequencing in general/ developing assignments:

<http://www.dartmouth.edu/~writing/materials/faculty/forum/assignments.html>

<http://web.mit.edu/writing/Faculty/createeffective.html#sequencing>

Retrieved from the WAC Clearinghouse:

<http://writing.colostate.edu/gtpathways/assign/assignmentbank.cfm>

Responding to Student Writing

Handout compiled by Maggie Herb, Writing Center Director

What Research Tells Us

- Students often skim our comments or do not read them at all.
- When we write extensive marginal comments, we may unintentionally give contradictory advice.
- Developing writers have difficulty determining which teacher comments are most important and will often only make the revisions that seem easiest to complete.
- Teacher comments can cause students to lose sight of their own purposes, leading them to focus only on what the teacher wants them to do.

Best Practices

- Build revision into assignments. Use your comments on drafts as teaching opportunities.
- Respond as a reader. Ask questions, describe your reactions to the text, explain your understanding of the subject. Avoid “rubber stamp” comments like “awkward” or “unclear.”
- Focus on 2-3 key recommendations. Frame recommendations in terms of what students should do next time, rather than what they did not do.
- When responding to a grammar or punctuation issue, mark a representative sentence or paragraph. Do not line-edit.

Specific Suggestions

- When students hand in their papers, ask them to include a cover letter in which they reflect on their work. Use this to help guide your response.
- Wait to write comments until you have read the entire essay.
- Write an endnote/summary comment to each student that addresses him or her by name. Include positive feedback in this note, in addition to your recommendations.
- After handing back papers to students, ask them to write about their understanding of your comments.

Sources

Gillespie, Paula, and Neal Lerner. *The Allyn and Bacon Guide to Peer Tutoring*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 2003.

Lindemann, Erika. *A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers*. 3rd ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.

Sorcinelli, Mary Deane, and Peter Elbow. *Writing to Learn: Strategies for Assigning and Responding to Writing Across the Disciplines*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997.

Using Small Group Conferences in Writing Intensive Courses
Joel Davis

Potential Benefits of Small-Group Conferencing

- **Comprehension Checking**
- **Repair**
- **Active Learning**

Strategies for Realizing the Potential of Small-Group Conferencing

- **Frame the Discussion**
- **Focus the Discussion**
- **Turn Discussion into Action**

See here for additional material:

<http://www.bridgew.edu/WAC/TeachingWithWriting/SmallGroupConferencing.cfm>