
3 Designing Writing Assignments

For me, perhaps the hardest thing about designing assignments is to remember that I am writing about writing. Frequently it seems like my attention should be on what I want students to compose—research papers, persuasive letters, description, and so forth. It's easy to dive into details on things such as the length required, the kind of documentation to be used, or the various due dates involved. But that's the wrong focus.

I need to start with the basic questions any writer considers at the beginning of a writing project: What are my goals in this piece? and Who is my audience? The details of the assignment depend upon my audience—the students I teach—rather than the end product I want them to compose. To design an effective assignment, I need to begin with *my* rhetorical situation and allow that information to shape the rhetorical situation I frame for students.

If the students are struggling writers, they'll have different needs than honors, AP, and on-level writers have—even if all of these students are generally expected to do the same kind of writing. My goal is to

Three Goals for a Writing Assignment

Define the writing task

Explore the expectations

Provide supporting materials and activities

provide whatever group of students I am teaching with the customized information and support that they need to do their best work.

Fortunately, I can make some generalizations. Regardless of the specific audience or writing task, I need to design a collection of resources that achieves three goals: define the writing task, explore the expectations for that task, and provide supporting materials and activities. The particular details change from one group of students and writing activity to the next, but the overarching design always includes all three kinds of information.

General Writing Assignment Design

Defining the Task

Most of us begin the process of creating a writing assignment by deciding what task students will complete. Research on the characteristics of effective writing assignments tells us that as we define this task, we must strive to do the following:

- identify an authentic audience and purpose for the project
- position students as experts in their communication with that audience
- ask students to interact with (rather than restate) texts and knowledge
- give students choices in their work that support their ownership of the task

As I define a task for a group of students, I weave together information and options that will provide them with the raw materials they need. I try to go beyond simply describing the end product of the assignment and instead suggest steps in the process that students can complete, indicate different ways that students can work, and schedule multiple opportunities for students to write as they complete the assignment.

Exploring the Expectations for the Task

The difference between what a teacher says (or believes she has said) and what a student hears can be the difference between success and failure for a writing assignment. That's why an assignment sheet alone is never enough. To ensure that students comprehend the expectations for a writing assignment, we must also do the following:

- unpack the meaning of the assignment, as described by Jim Burke, by explaining the assignment to create a shared understanding of the activity
- provide model responses and demonstrate how to read and compose example texts
- share rubrics, checklists, and other resources that highlight the requirements and goals for the assignment

When I design an assignment, I prepare related models, checklists, and rubrics, and I structure students' work so that I can check their understanding at various points in the project. When I present the assignment to the class, I discuss both the task and the related expectations. Assessment starts at this early point, when we discuss the expectations as a class.

Providing Support and Explanatory Materials

Although the task and the ultimate expectations may be clear, students still need support to do their best work. An effective writing assignment provides additional resources that support and engage students throughout their writing processes. Designing an assignment involves creating and gathering an entire collection of resources:

- organizational structures and material that scaffold the writing process
- multiple opportunities to write for different purposes and audiences
- writing to gather and think through ideas
- resources that address the standard conventions of finished and edited texts
- opportunities and support for peer reading and discussion as well as student-teacher conferencing

As I create an assignment sheet, I refer students to the additional supporting resources that they can consult in the process of working on the task. For example, I point to people and other texts that can offer guidance. I might include specific details from different artifacts that students will share with me and with one another during the schedule for that assignment. I will also mention additional handouts and resources that will be available at later stages in the assignment, such as graphic organizers and peer editing sheets.

With such a broad range of materials in play, it can seem as if I am moving from designing a writing assignment to creating a unit or lesson plan. When I begin to feel overwhelmed, I remind myself that this information and support is all part of the task itself. I'm not assigning an end product that appears miraculously, but an activity that calls for thinking and exploring and that also includes a written text of some kind.

Putting It All Together

No two teachers create assignments in the same way. That's really no surprise since we know that no two writers ever follow exactly the same process. Sometimes I work through the process in order: define the task, write the materials to explain the expectations, and create additional supporting resources. In other instances, I create supporting materials as a way to help define the task. Having different students and different goals usually means that the order shuffles as well. The informa-

tion that students need may change while they are working on the assignment. In response, I might develop additional models, graphic organizers, or other resources.

Designing a writing assignment is rarely a one-two-three process for me. More often than not, the three tasks overlap as I work on multiple aspects of the assignment at the same time. The assignment sheet that I write probably includes information that touches on all three general goals. As I create a graphic organizer to support the assignment, I may find myself defining the task in more detail at the same time. The important thing isn't how I put the information all together but that I assemble a collection of resources that will enable students to do their best work.

To demonstrate this technique, I'll use three vignettes to work through the thought process behind the design of three different writing assignments: an inquiry assignment, an expressive writing assignment, and a persuasive writing assignment. Each of these sketches uses first-person description of the thought process that led me to a decision about a writing assignment for a specific group of students. The style is similar to a think-aloud strategy in the way that it reveals the decisions behind the assignments that I planned.

As you read, notice that all three vignettes include details that define the task, explore the expectations, and provide supporting materials, but the way in which the goals are met is fluid and organic. Each consideration affects the design in different ways, depending upon the students, the kind of writing expected, and the specific goals of the assignment.

Designing an Inquiry Assignment

It's time for the class to complete an inquiry project to meet the curriculum requirements that call for conducting research and for learning to use a variety of computer-based and print-based resources to inform a writing task. These students have written research papers in the past and have demonstrated their ability to complete a basic inquiry. They're ready for a challenge, but I need to be sure that the assignment creates a situation that will engage them and improve their research abilities.

Telling these students to write a traditional research paper about something that interests them isn't going work. All I have to do is utter the words "traditional research paper" out loud and all the wrong ideas about the assignment will spring into their heads. I want them to go beyond the standard reiteration of facts that they gather. I could focus the assignment by choosing topic areas for the class that I hope will push

them into critical thinking and reflection, but making those choices may not be effective either. Instead, the topics I choose may limit students' ability to speak as experts—especially if I fall back on traditional topics such as famous historical figures or events, literary authors and periods, or controversial political or current events. From such topics, some students will find a focus that fits, but that assignment will not universally provide the best options.

I want to encourage ownership of the project by giving students more choice in what they write about. To position students as experts, I want them to choose a topic that they already consider themselves authorities on. Anything from soccer to NASCAR and video games to outdoor grilling will work. If students know about famous figures and events, those will make fine topics too. Nothing is excluded. I simply want students to focus on something that they are experts on.

There's more to choosing those topics, however. Without knowledge of their audience and purpose, students cannot position themselves as experts. In fact, depending upon the audience and purpose, students may not actually be experts. A student may consider herself an expert on soccer, but if the audience is soccer coaches, she may not be as confident about her knowledge. The assignment needs to provide more support and detail before students are able to choose their focus. I should help students identify a purpose and audience that will allow them to be authorities. I could assign both, but students will be more likely to maintain their position as experts (and will have more choice) if they identify their audience and goal for the project.

I still need to tackle the challenge of designing an assignment that pushes students beyond copying and rephrasing text from their resources. I have to shape the activity in such a way that students interact with the text and their subject knowledge rather than simply restate what they know. My solution for this class is to ask students to write FAQs (frequently asked questions) on topics that they choose themselves. The format will probably depart from the structure of the information that students will find in their research, and it will require them to reframe the information to meet the needs of a specific audience of readers.

Now that I've figured out the basic details for the assignment I want students to complete, I need to decide how to discuss the expectations for the assignment with the class and to make sure that I have all the supporting resources ready. Instead of passing out an assignment sheet to get things going, I'm going to ask students to identify their topics first by having them brainstorm lists of everything that they are ex-



perts in. In class I'll have them gradually narrow those lists and identify an audience of readers who would have questions about their areas of expertise. With that information determined, I'll share an assignment sheet that explains the project in more detail and points to additional resources. I'll create a rubric to guide assessment of the activity as well and then share this rubric with students when I pass out the assignment sheet. It's important that I make the connections between the assignment sheet and the grading criteria on the rubric clear from the beginning.

Models are very important to this assignment because I'm challenging students to compose a research paper in a genre that is probably new to them. I need to provide them with concrete examples of what the genre looks like. I'll search for example FAQs online, in books, and in brochures. Students will be encouraged to add examples to the class collection. I'll take time not only to look at the kind of information included in the models but also to talk about the grammatical structures and point of view in the questions and answers. We'll compare the models with the rubric for the activity to demonstrate the assessment criteria for the assignment.

Designing the supporting materials for this assignment means identifying models, creating a rubric, and pointing to grammatical details in the class handbook. When the due date approaches, we'll also complete a peer review activity, so I'll need to create a sheet of instructions to guide students' interaction. Some of this work I can do in advance, such as creating a cheat sheet that points to pertinent grammatical information in the class handbook. Other items, like the rubric, will grow from class exploration and discussion of examples and the assignment. I can sketch out the general categories for the assessment, but I'll wait until after we explore the genre in class before I make a final version.

The last thing that I'll probably do is finish the assignment sheet. I'll have a working draft early in the design process, but many of the final details depend upon other resources that I need to gather or create. I want to suggest the different kinds of writing and steps in the writing process that students should complete, and I'll use the assignment schedule to provide that scaffolding by indicating on it when the class will visit the library, when we'll look at the models, when students will share their drafts with each other in class, and when a draft is due for peer review. To tie things together, I'll probably include an FAQ section on the assignment sheet itself that deals with logistics like due dates and specific requirements, as well as provides resources such as details

in the class handbook that students may want to consult as they write. I'll also point to the assessment rubric that I'll use to evaluate students' FAQs.

Once I have everything planned, I'll look back over the assignment resources to make sure that I have included everything necessary for a good assignment, using the "Three Goals for a Writing Assignment" to guide my analysis:

Defining the Task

- The FAQ format is asking for *critical thinking and interaction* with a text.
- Students are choosing topics and audiences that allow them to work as *experts* and that give them an *authentic* reason for communicating.
- The assignment asks students to *choose* the topic that they'll cover as well as the information that they will include about the topic in their FAQs.

Explaining the Expectations

- The assignment includes *models* and discussion of the *expectations* for the assignment.
- The *rubric* makes the criteria for the assessment clear.

Providing Support and Explanatory Materials

- The class will complete *peer review* and use a related *rubric* to focus on the requirements for the activity.
- The schedule included on the assignment sheet points out tasks for students to complete that will *scaffold the writing process* for them.

Designing an Expressive Assignment

Because I am teaching a writing course, I want students to spend time thinking about the decisions that they make as writers. The assignment I have in mind will focus primarily on expressive writing. I want students to explore their feelings as writers, reflect on their composing experiences, and share their thoughts on the way that they write.

A writer's log is a natural starting point. Many students read and write blog entries, using tools like Facebook, MySpace, and LiveJournal; all of them are curious about these writing spaces. I want to tap their interest in this kind of expressive writing, but I need an activity that will encourage them to identify and explore the challenges that they face as writers. I want them to move beyond restating what they've done as writers to thinking critically about their composing processes and strat-

egies. I will compose a list of reflection questions that students can use to think about their writing. Students can respond to any of the questions, so there's plenty of choice for them. We can review the list and add questions as necessary later in the term.



This list of questions alone isn't a full writing assignment though. I need to provide more structure and support for the kind of writing I want students to do. Often a writer's log is read only by the writer and possibly by the teacher; however, I'd like students to interact with each other by reading one another's reflections. Publishing the logs online as blogs will make it easy for students to share their reflections, without the complication of making copies or attempting to pass around notebooks in class. The blog forms that students must fill out for their entries will also help ensure that all the basic requirements of the genre, like a title and the date, are included.

I check my district's acceptable use policy to see how the guidelines will affect the activity that I'm designing. The different software programs meet the basic requirements, and we can configure friend or buddy lists so that everyone in the class can read the entries, but people outside the class won't be able to access the information. In addition to providing a safer online experience, limiting the access also tightens the audience for the entries. Students will be writing only for themselves and for those of us in the class. Since we'll share background knowledge, students can focus on describing their individual composing experiences rather than on explaining the details of the other assignments they're discussing in these blogs.

As I begin creating an assignment sheet to explain this ongoing activity, I describe the basic goals and requirements of the entries and outline the logistics. In their comments, I want students to work together to analyze the techniques they try and to find new strategies. They can work as cheerleaders as well, encouraging one another throughout the semester. I'll add a section to the assignment sheet that describes this additional requirement for the writer's log: students won't just write entries but also read and respond to one another's entries. The commenting function in the blogging software will make this process easy, but I'll need to provide a lot of technical support in addition to explaining the writing requirements.

I have a good idea of the additional resources that I'm going to have to provide for the students now. They'll have the list of reflection questions, and they'll need access to computers and the Internet. I'll point to tutorials and documentation that explain basic HTML markup and the blogging site that we're using. These resources are comprehen-

sive, but it may be hard for some students to find the information that they need. I'll design a blogging cheat sheet that will give students the basic details on how to use the site, and I'll also include a sheet that describes how to apply some of its special features, like adding an emoticon for the writer's mood or linking to the music that the writer was listening to while composing.

This assignment will be a bit different from a typical one because the end result won't be a polished paper. Feedback will be ongoing and informal, so I am going to limit the assessment materials to a checklist that outlines the basic requirements. I'll plan time in class to go over the checklist and talk about how it relates to the sample reflection questions. Students will naturally be experts at this activity—after all, they know more about the ways that they write than anyone else—but they will need a bit more information about what well-written blog entries look like. I'll share some model writer's log entries with the class and use those pieces to discuss the kinds of details and critical thinking that are expected for the entries and the related comments.

To expand the assessment for this activity, I'll also plan time to talk about blog comments and interaction as part of the assessment process. I want students to comment and interact as they follow one another's writing processes. It's likely that a number of students will be familiar with the process of commenting on a blog, but I can't assume that everyone knows how comments work. Even if students understand the technical process for adding a comment, they may not have considered what makes a comment effective. I'll create a list of sample comments for the class to discuss, and we'll work from that list to create some online discussion guidelines that will help them get started. I'll frame this discussion as formative assessment that involves the entire class in the evaluation process.

With these decisions made, I can review my plan to see if I've met the requirements of an effective writing assignment:

Defining the Task

- The list of questions encourages students to *think critically*, rather than simply reiterating the writing tasks that they have completed over the course of the week.
- Students will write for one another and use blog comments to respond to what they read, giving them a *clear audience of authentic readers*.
- Students will work as *experts*, since they know their own experiences well.

- The assignment includes a range of questions that students can *choose* among as they reflect on their writing experiences.

Explaining the Expectations

- A *checklist and models* will provide additional information on the requirements for the assignment.
- *Ongoing feedback* will be shared in the blog comments, which will increase students' understanding of the expectations and encourage them to improve their writing while also participating in the assessment of one another.

Providing Support and Explanatory Materials

- Cheat sheets and online resources will provide the *technical support resources* that students need for the activity.
- The format of the blog software provides some *scaffolding* for students by serving as a simple graphic organizer that ensures they include all the necessary parts for each entry.

Designing a Persuasive Assignment

I'm spending a few weeks on persuasive writing with this class, and it's time for students to shift to a more challenging persuasive message. We've written short persuasive paragraphs in class, but this will be their first full-length persuasive piece. I've noticed in these paragraphs that they need a strong sense of audience to write effectively in this genre, so I want to come up with an assignment that makes the relationship between the writer and the reader clear.

At the same time, I want the assignment to focus on standard persuasive strategies. These students need to strengthen their persuasive writing skills, which they'll be tested on later this term. I don't want the assignment to be too unusual, but I need to come up with something special to highlight the audience for the finished text. I would consider a number of options:

- Students could persuade readers to accept their point of view on a local issue in the news by writing letters to the editor or composing oral or video position statements for the local radio's public comment feature or for local public access television. Students could also publish their opinions online in podcasts or streaming video.
- Students could create brochures that persuade readers to take up a new hobby, visit a particular place, or adopt a specific point of view.
- Students could tackle editorials by writing columns for the school newspaper that persuade readers to change something about the school.

Any of these possible assignments would work, but I'm not sure that they provide the kind of message that would be right for this group of students.

Editorials and letters to the editor often have rather general audiences—everyone who reads the newspaper or listens to the radio station. That audience is so broad that I don't think it's the best starting place because this group of students needs a stronger, more specific group of readers. Persuasive brochures could work. Each student could focus the message on a specific group of people who fit the purpose of the brochure (e.g., someone who's never tried the hobby, who hasn't visited the place recently, or who either hasn't chosen a position or has the opposite point of view). I'm worried about choosing too many challenges in the assignment though. Students are not familiar with the nuances of brochure design, and I'd rather they focus on how audience affects persuasion than on learning a new format.

A persuasive letter is probably the best idea. The standard letter format will make the audience for the message clear, and the connections between the letter writer and the readers should be obvious to students. I just need to choose a kind of letter that has a stronger, more defined audience than a letter to the editor does. I'd do a little bit of research to gather possibilities: applications, requests and queries, recommendations, and endorsements.

Any of those options could work, but an endorsement letter may be best for this class. Students can work as experts by choosing a product or service that they use and then attempt to persuade readers to buy the same product or service for themselves. An endorsement letter would still follow a basic persuasive structure, but it would also provide the strong presence of the audience that this particular group of students needs. In addition, students have a lot of choice with this option, since they can select any product or service they want (within reason, of course). The activity should focus on critical thinking as well. Students won't be able simply to list product characteristics or features of a service: they'll have to do some critical thinking about the product or service to persuade their readers. Endorsement letters it is!

Now that I've identified the right task for this group of students, I'll have to determine the additional information they'll require to understand the expectations and complete the activity. They'll need lots of examples. Fortunately, we can include celebrity endorsements as we discuss the activity, and they'll be quite familiar with those. I'll add some sample endorsement letters as well. I'd like students to go through the examples and create a class list of the characteristics of the letters as well



as the features that make some endorsements stand out as more convincing than others. To guide the assessment of the letters, we'll shape that class list into a checklist and rubric together, so I won't create those final documents in advance. I will go ahead and brainstorm a list for myself though, so that I can make sure that students catch all of the significant features as they review the letters.

As I compose the assignment sheet, I want to forecast the activities that we'll complete in class as we work on the assignment. We'll talk about the products and services a bit in the beginning to gather details that can be used in the endorsements. There will be a peer review day, when students will exchange letters and compare them to the characteristics on the class-generated rubric and checklist. I'll need to make a peer review sheet for that day. I'll include the page numbers to the section on letter writing in our class handbook as well, so that students know where to look up information on the format. We'll also use a persuasive writing graphic organizer so that students have a chance to think about the information in their letters in a context outside of the letter's format.

I think I've decided on all of the things that I need to provide for this lesson, so I will go through my notes one more time to make sure that I've included everything necessary for an effective writing assignment:

Defining the Task

- Writers will need to present the information in their letters so that readers are convinced to give the product or service a try. They won't be able simply to list details. They'll have to do *critical thinking* about the details, and they'll have to structure their letters so that those details are as persuasive as possible.
- The assignment has a *clear audience and purpose*—convincing people who might be interested in a product or service but who do not currently use it to try the product or service.
- Students will endorse products or services that they already use so that they communicate with their audience as *experts*.
- Students can *choose* any product or service to recommend, as long as it's appropriate for the classroom, and they can *choose* any level of formality that fits their audience and purpose.

Explaining the Expectations

- The class will explore a variety of *models* for endorsements from a range of different media (e.g., letters, radio/TV ads, websites).
- Students will compile lists of characteristics that we'll shape into a class *rubric* and *checklist*—that process will take care of

unpacking the meaning of the assignment itself in addition to providing a statement of the expectations that will guide the assessment of students' letters.

Providing Support and Explanatory Materials

- The assignment sheet will include a schedule that suggests *steps in the writing process* that students can complete.
- The *peer review sheet* and discussion in class will provide additional structure for the writing process and focus extra attention on the importance of audience and purpose in this assignment.
- *Pointers to the class handbook and graphic organizers* will give students extra support as they work on their drafts in class and at home.