

# A Model for Designing And Revising Assignments

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In one of the English Composition Board's first seminars on the teaching of writing, a faculty member explained with frustration, "I've been giving this assignment for five years, and my students still haven't gotten it right!"

Why did class after class — student after student — keep getting the assignment wrong? When we, the faculty member's colleagues, looked at his assignment, we realized we wouldn't have known how to "get it right" either. While he was clear in his own mind about what he wanted, his written assignment failed to convey those expectations to his students or us: unintentionally, he'd been getting what he asked for. His experience caused us to re-examine our own assignments which had failed to elicit writings we expected from our students.

In order to understand the assignment-making process better, we began to think about assignments as acts of communication between teacher and student. Our thinking led us to ask ourselves important questions: To what extent do students fail at writing assignments because we, their instructors, fail to communicate our expectations to them effectively? Are there criteria we can use both to evaluate our assignments and to revise them for greater effectiveness?

As we began to examine the assignment-making process with faculty and teaching assistants in writing courses across the curriculum, we saw that every assignment presents students not only with a complex set of demands but also with a series of opportunities to which they may respond — with explicit decisions or, as often happens, with unexamined assumptions. In order to make the assignment-making process a more explicit activity for us and for our students, we developed a systematic description of the elements of writing assignments as a basis (1) for revising our current assignments and (2) for designing new ones. We believe that as instructors make their expectations clearer to students, students' chances to succeed at assignments are increased significantly.

## Goals for Writing Tasks

We see three conceivable goals, singly or in combination, for any writing assignment. One goal is **discovery**: Students are asked to write in order to clarify their ideas or feelings, uncover new information, integrate new material, understand a process or relationship, or in some other way generate new learning. Journals and other ungraded work commonly occasion this sort of writing-to-learn, but this goal may also be primary in more formal assignments.

A second goal is **communication**: The task for students here is to organize and present their ideas or feelings appropriately and effectively for specific readers, either real or hypothetical. With this goal in mind, the instructor will specify elements of the students' rhetorical stance — perhaps creating for them a hypothetical persona, situation and purpose, perhaps aiming drafts of their writing at the real audience of their peers. The case study, which analyzes a situation and recommends a course of action to a real or hypothetical audience, is an excellent example of an assignment focussing the student on the act of communication.

The third goal — and the one students are most apt to assume unless there is explicit discussion between instructor and student to counteract that assumption — is **performance**. Students are keenly aware of this "hoop-jumping" aspect of assignments, and their anxiety about performance may block both discovery and communication. They may define performance in superficial ways — attempting simply to show that they did the readings, or to show control over surface errors while producing a shallow empty text — or anxiety about performance may also reach to the core of the writing task. Students trying wholeheartedly to engage their material may feel blocked by awareness that their writing will be judged by readers more expert than they. Writing to what James Britton calls the "teacher-as-examiner" is a task unlike any found in the world outside of school: Students are expected to write as if they were experts writing to peers, while in fact they are novices trying to impress experts. Convinced of the implausibility of discovering and communicating ideas new to an expert reader, the student most often hopes to merely impress the expert instructor by avoiding error.

Instructors may alleviate these problems in at least four ways:

- (1) *by defining some writing tasks as private writing, outside the range of evaluation,*
- (2) *by setting up writing tasks which allow students to generate information that is in fact new to the instructors,*
- (3) *by directing students writing to an either real or realistic audience other than the teacher, and*
- (4) *by evaluating students' success explicitly in terms of their discovery or communication.*

Even as instructors alleviate students' problems by carefully defining the purposes of assignments, they must vary the criteria with which they evaluate those assignments; for example, if an assignment generates a series of leading

questions about relevant topics, or if it conveys a particular view of the course material, to an appropriate audience, the student writer can be said to have performed well on the assignment.

### **Product**

While instructors often remain silent about their goals in a given assignment and about the rhetorical stance those goals may entail, they almost always specify some of the features they want in a final product: "Compare and contrast X and Y in 3-5 pages," "Examine the causes of A," or "Discuss the use of P and Q in the work of Z." And so on. Like a contractor's specifications for a bridge or highway, these specifications tell student writers what the finished product must contain or must be able to do. "Compare and contrast X and Y" directs decisions about subject (which must be comparison/contrast). In addition, this example gives minimum and maximum lengths for the product (3-5 pages). Such an assignment expresses the instructor's desire for the students to master a particular method of organization or body of material, and it also enables the instructors, in evaluating performance, to measure a given paper against an ideal three-to-five-page comparison and contrast of X and Y.

### **Process**

Such an assignment does not tell students how to develop that written product. The benefits of a carefully crafted assignment may be lost by students who dash off their papers later in the night before they are due, making only a few typographical changes in the first draft. Help in development may come through the processes the assignment specifies — the activities the students must complete as they work on their papers. Specified processes might include pre-draft conferences, outlines, preliminary thesis statements, group discussions, or required revisions. If students are required to submit a first draft, either to instructors or to peer readers, and then to make substantial revisions of those drafts, they must reflect upon their ideas as well as the form they have given those ideas. Specifying processes such as these in an assignment requires that students abandon the quickly-written "first-draft paper" in favor of the more carefully developed one.

### **Revising and Designing Assignments**

Whether or not instructors speak to each of these elements of an assignment, students must make decisions or act on assumptions about them all. They must envision a goal or purpose for writing (often performance) and a rhetorical situation (often that of novice trying to impress expert reader — a difficult situation in which to perform); they must decide on subject and structure (often these elements are determined by the teacher, at least in broad terms); and they must use some process to create the paper (too often combining the techniques of avoidance, of staring blankly at an empty page, and of filling up the blank page with last-minute desperation). Considering the decisions students must make, the instructor may want to revise assignments to guide those decisions more carefully — not necessarily

by specifying every element, but so as to make clear which aspects of this complex interchange are fixed by the instructor and which are left open for students to decide.

The instructor may choose to design a sequence of assignments which, throughout the term, systematically vary the elements about which students must decide. One such sequence might move from teacher control to student control. Initial assignments might be tightly structured by the teacher, with purpose and rhetorical situation specified, subject and structure defined, and check-points built into the pre-writing, drafting, and revision of a paper. Such assignments would make students aware of the elements with which they must deal and would demonstrate both the freedom and the constraints implicit in those elements. Later assignments might progressively turn over to students more and more decisions about a writing task. The final assignment in the sequence might require students to devise a rhetorical situation and purpose. To specify a subject and a process of composing, and then to meet the requirements that those specifications demand of them.

Alternate sequences of assignments might be designed around other models of development. Richard Larson suggested at CCCC, in March, 1981, that an assignment sequence should move students from the private and concrete to the public and abstract. The journal assignment below, taken from the writing course that one of us teaches on the Vietnam War, represents private and personal concrete writing that would be most appropriate at the beginning of such a sequence:

*Divide your journal into three sections, the first of which is your reading log. Draw a line down the middle of each page of the reading log; label the left column "Passage" and the right column "Response." As you read the assigned readings, use the left column to describe any passages which puzzle you, intrigue you, anger you, or elicit some other response from you. Use the right column to set that response down.*

*The second section is your writer's sketchbook. Use it for any informal writing you do in class, and for times outside of class when you want to reflect on the discussions or readings and their connections to your experience. Ideas you set down in your sketchbook may be beginning points for more formal writing you do in the course. I will read material from this section only if you ask me to do so.*

*The third section is for letters. Each week I expect you to write me a letter at least a page long about your involvement in the course; each week I will write a letter in response to yours. You can use your weekly letter to discuss the issues of the course, to discuss problems in a paper you're working on, to suggest changes in the class, and of course to respond to issues I raise in my letters to you. This letter exchange is one way for us to extend discussion between us beyond what our time in class allows.*

The final assignment in this course on the Vietnam War is a research paper — developed through draft and revision — whose real audience is both other students in the course and students who will take the course the following year. Whereas the journal writing is personal and concrete, the research paper is aimed at a public not fully known to the student writers, and it demands that they answer a research question by constructing an argument — by supporting generalizations with concrete evidence. Specified processes vary as students move through the assignments in this sequence.

It is of course essential that each instructor evaluate student work in accordance with what assignments require. In those

areas where assignments are most specific, instructors should indeed ascertain students' ability to meet expectations. But instructors must also recognize that areas left open for students' decisions may pose more complex problems and may lead to unanticipated choices. The entire interchange — from the instructor's first speaking or writing the assignment to the students' finally submitting the finished product — is a process wherein teachers and students together can negotiate the assignment's meaning. The more clarity that instructors can bring to this process of negotiation, the more able students will be to form a personally meaningful conception of the assignment and its potential.