
“What Does the Professor Want and Why?”: A View from the Reading/Writing Center on WAC Teachers’ Assignments

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Bonnie’s Story: Tutor as Teacher

Five years ago a student came up to me after a class I was teaching in freshman composition and said sheepishly, “I’m trying to work on the paper that’s due tomorrow, but I’m not sure what you want.”

It was my first year teaching. I didn’t say anything out loud, but inside I blamed the student for not reading the assignment closely and for not paying attention in class. I knew exactly what the assignment was about and why I had assigned it. Why couldn’t the student figure it out?

Now, five years later, as a tutor in the Reading/Writing Center, I’ve seen assignments through student eyes. I’ve seen what a difference stimulating and well-crafted writing assignments can make, not only for the students, but for us, the tutors. Good writing assignments make it easy for Lucie and me to be good writing tutors, this is, conduits for successful writing ideas and strategies that will transfer to future writing situations.

Our goal here is to describe some of the features of assignments we’ve seen that are, from our standpoint, particularly successful. Such assignments contain clear audience and purpose, and reflect the idea that writing is a process.

Bonnie and Lucie: Tutors in the Reading/Writing Center

We've found that students whose assignments have a clearly stated audience and purpose produce better papers, as in this assignment from Warren Mason's Organizational Communications course in PSC's Business Department. Here is one example from a list of twelve that students can write on:

Fax machines are the newest addition to the well-equipped office. Your insurance company wants you, a mid-level manager, to examine this product, and write a report on which of the many models would be best for your busy 100-person office. In addition to the cost of the machines, consider service and reliability of the product. Submit your report to the purchasing manager.

Students can easily identify the audience as the purchasing manager and the purpose as aiding the purchasing manager's decision about which fax machine to buy. Warren's concern for clear audience and purpose in communication stems from a tradition that began with Aristotle's *Rhetoric*; certainly, as writers, we make decisions all the time about shaping a paper (or lecture or memo) to suit a specific audience or to make a particular point. Yet in the Center we often see writing assignments where it's difficult or even impossible for the writer to imagine either *who* would be interested in reading the proposed text or what possible *effect* on that audience the text would have.

Such vagueness leads to frustration on the students' part because they are unable to imagine a situation where they would be called upon to write in *that way*. And it's hard for us to be good tutors as well, because we rarely have the time to both introduce and reinforce the principles of good writing—in this case, the principle that good writing almost always has a defined audience and purpose.

On the other hand, an assignment that defines a rhetorical situation by containing a clear audience and purpose makes it remarkably easy for us to be successful tutors. For example, last semester we worked with a student on Warren Mason's fax machine assignment. She talked while pointing to a thick and glossy stack of brochures and flyers on fax machines. Product X, she informed us, could fax two documents per

minute. Product Y could fax only one, but the faxed document was of higher quality. Then there was product Z. Its features . . .

We stopped her gently and said, OK, we're your purchasing manager and we're pretty busy. We know some things about the office, but not everything, so we need you to remind us—what does the office need a fax machine for? This raised the broader question of why insurance companies need fax machines in the first place, a question which the student had not researched. But she understood our nudge, made a phone call to an insurance company, and learned a very important rule—writers must shape their material to suit their audience and purpose. Even better, she did this with minimal intervention from us, because the assignment contained a strong rhetorical situation to begin with.

In Warren Mason's assignment the audience was one person—the purchasing manager. Another approach is to have the students write to different audiences. Here are some assignments from a course called *Writing in Physics*, designed by William Mullin, a professor at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst:

1. Write an essay explaining to a freshman Physics 141 student why an airplane flies. (Physics 141 is an introductory mechanics course without calculus.) Assume that the student has already seen the Bernoulli equation in class and now wants to know why it works.
2. Write a newspaper article for the Science Times (the Tuesday Science section of the *New York Times*) on the subject matter of Eugene's Golowich's talk (Golowich was a guest lecturer who spoke to the class about strings in elementary-particle theory.) Assume the audience is made up of college-educated non-scientists. The title of the essay should be a headline.

Assignments like these, in essence, ask students to teach what they've learned to someone else—to someone other than the teacher. They work by building on the idea that when you're able to teach a subject to someone who knows less than you, you've effectively mastered it. This approach also eliminates a major—and perfectly valid—complaint students have about assignments that they consider regurgitation: "The professor al-

ready knows this stuff, so why should I have to tell her?"

William Mullin's assignments could be played with further. For example, after the students write the second one for the *Science Times*, they could rewrite the article for a high school textbook, reshaping the material yet again in the process.

We do not wish to imply here that a formal business report presents a more "real" writing situation than a paper which asks for an analysis of, for example, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Academic writing does indeed contain a rhetorical situation; in the case of Morrison, for example, the audience is the community of literary scholars, and the purpose might be to convince the reader that *Beloved* builds on a tradition of slave narratives.

As we've tried to suggest, we believe helping writers find a clear audience and purpose is important, but our philosophy as tutors extends beyond that. Reinforcing the idea that writing is a process is also crucial. We all know that final products don't spring impeccably crafted, Athena-like, from the writer's head (word processor?), yet this myth about writing is so widespread students need the weight of the assignment's authority to combat it. Accordingly, as Toby Fulwiler suggests, a writing assignment ideally allows time for all the stages—thinking, incubating, revising with peer feedback and teacher feedback, editing, and proofreading.

Writing assignments can convey the idea that writing is a process in many different ways. Several faculty members here at Plymouth State have developed writing assignments that allow the early stages of writing to flourish, that is, thinking and incubating. Art Fried of the English Department has his students write down their reactions to that week's reading in a journal, which he reads but does not grade until the end of the semester, when students are required to revise four entries for a grade. Dick Fralick's students in biology write down major ideas from the reading in the beginning of every class. He then calls on students and uses their responses to organize his lecture. John Gregor of the Business Department uses a question box for all his classes, an anonymous and non-threatening way for students to communicate with him. All of these approaches show students that most good writing begins with what James Britton calls "expressive writing" (or "generative writing"), that is, writing

Writing assignments can also be designed to reinforce the revising and editing stages. Some teachers require one revision; others, like Bill Taylor of Social Sciences, allow students to revise their essays as many times as they want. Some professors, like Janice Kitchen of the Business Department, use peer feedback groups to help their students revise.

Even if faculty develop writing assignments replete with audience, purpose, and revision time, students still may have questions about what the results should look like. Showing them models of writing that successfully address the assignment can help. To this end, the Reading/Writing Center has started a file of "A" student papers collected from various WAC professors. The idea is to show students what successful writing is in a variety of disciplines. Some professors strongly encourage their students to visit the Center to read these samples; others also go over sample papers in class. This way students have the benefit of seeing exactly what, in fact, you're "looking for."

A side benefit of the notebook is that the staff of the Reading/Writing Center are able to review samples of good writing in different disciplines first-hand and to see that, for example, the style and conventions of a good physics article often differ from the style and conventions of a good piece of literary criticism.

Back to Bonnie: Tutor as Teacher

Lucie and I have been talking as if developing good writing assignments is a matter of applying a few simple rules. But of course it's not that simple. As Donald Murray comments to students in his textbook, *Write to Learn*, "Writing directions may be the most difficult form of writing there is. I certainly know I do it badly. I know what I mean, and it is hard for me to put myself in the shoes of a person who does not know what I mean." So he warns students, "Make sure you understand the purpose of the assignment, not just what you are expected to do, but why you are expected to do it. The reason for an assignment will often help make the assignment clear" (47).

I think Donald Murray's advice to students can help professors as well. I know I wish I'd had his counsel five years ago.

Works Cited

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