



NOT YOUR USUAL 3- TO 5-PAGE PAPER

Students gain expertise as writers and speakers by practicing different sorts of communication activities in different contexts. Using some of the tenets of problem-based learning (PBL), instructors can develop assignments to help students learn to adapt information for various audiences and purposes and come to understand the differences among different genres of personal and professional communication. Instead of a steady diet of a single sort of writing or speaking (the term paper, the lab report, or the formal presentation, for instance), students should be challenged to be flexible across a range of situations. A variety of types of assignments can influence your students' thinking, learning, and communication processes.

ALTERNATIVE PAPER ASSIGNMENTS

While assigning a long research paper may not fit your course goals, shorter alternative assignments may, and they may provide your students with new opportunities for learning. You might have students assume a role (design engineer), write to a specific audience (a purchasing manager), use an unusual format (feasibility study), or write creatively (a poem). Any of these can encourage students to look at issues from new directions and consolidate their learning. As an added benefit, many students enjoy these assignments. The following alternative assignments can be adapted to various disciplines.

- Have students write a section in *Chemistry for Dummies* that gives a detailed explanation of the steps in a chemistry experiment. Emphasize two kinds of action in language: describing the steps and explaining the purpose of each step.

This pushes students to develop a very detailed understanding of the experiment.

- Provide students in an ethics class with a question to ponder as they study an assigned reading. Then ask them to write a one-page answer to the question. (This assignment is typical of writing-to-learn activities.)

This guides the students' reading and helps them see the significant issues.

- Ask students to write two explanations of a single event in American history, one for a class of third graders and a second for a roommate who is a computer science major.

This shows students that—to have control of the material—they need to be able to explain events at different levels of complexity. It also reinforces the importance of audience.

- Tell students that Copernicus will be visiting your physics class. In a 3-page paper, they must explain to him how and why his theory of X has been altered.

This has a two-pronged purpose. Students have to know the original theory and historical context, and they need to know what discoveries have forced the theory to be altered.

- Ask students in a cultural geography class to write an essay question for an upcoming test. Then ask them to explain why the question is a good one and why it is fair.

This forces students to think about the course as a whole and to develop a hierarchy of the important areas in the course. It also focuses their attention on gaining control of subject matter.

- Ask students in a comparative literature class to write a letter to the Nobel Committee nominating an author.

This requires students to know both the full range of a writer's work and its contributions to literature in general.



- Have students in a dietetics seminar translate a technical article about the value of calcium in a child's diet into language that is suitable for an article in a PTA newsletter.

This requires students not only to understand the article but also to be aware of audience.

- Have students in a cultural anthropology class define an important concept that they have studied and then illustrate the definition by applying it to a situation outside the classroom.

This encourages students to expand their understanding and start applying what they are learning to the "real" world.

- Have students in a genetics class write two news releases about Dolly, the first cloned sheep, one for *The New York Times* and a second for *The National Enquirer*. (This translates easily to almost any discipline in which there is technical and breaking news.)

This teaches both awareness of audience and the importance of key issues for each audience. It presumes that students know and can imitate the differences between tabloid reports and the (typically) more respectable standards of the Times.

- In an art history class, have students write a dialogue in which Gauguin explains to a friend how African art, particularly the Benin bronzes, influenced him.

This requires not only that students understand Gauguin's work but also that they can see how "primitive" art influenced the Fauvists.

- Have students in a consumer studies course respond to a letter of complaint (written by you) about a product.

This encourages students to wear the other hat and think about customer relations.

- In a linguistics or women's studies class, have students write two limericks about language and gender: one representing a masculinist point of view, the other representing a feminist point of view.

This encourages students to play with the language and also to look at opposing viewpoints. In addition, it can be a lot of fun.

- Have students in an American Literature class write a 2-page resume for a significant poet. (This easily could be adapted for almost any course in the arts or sciences.)

This encourages students to look at the entire life of the poet and to pick out his or her most significant achievements.

USEFUL SOURCES:

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

Young, A. "Writing Across and Against the Curriculum." *College Composition and Communication* 54.3: 472-484.

