Designing an Effective Writing Assignment

▪ **The purpose of the assignment.** State the purpose or overall goal of the assignment, including how the assignment relates to the goals of the class. You will also want to explicitly state the type of writing required in this assignment, indicated by a verb: *describe*, *explain*, *reflect*, *analyze*, *evaluate*, *summarize*, *argue*, *narrate*, etc. For example:

> Your assignment is to write a researched argument. The purpose of a researched argument is to <u>argue</u> a position on a narrowly-focused topic, and to support that position with outside sources. The goals of this assignment are to learn how to (1) locate and evaluate sources, (2) read sources closely, (3) synthesize and document sources, (4) and present an effective argument.

▪ **The audience of the assignment.** Explain who the intended audience is of the assignment, including the level of familiarity the audience has with the subject matter, and to what extent background information on the subject will need to be provided. If the audience is someone other than yourself, the instructor, you will want to identify who this audience is.

▪ **The genre of the assignment.** Explain the genre in which students will be presenting their writing, and the conventions or parameters of this genre. Here are some examples of genres*: report, argument essay, researched argument, researched report, case study, ethnography, proposal, letter, blog, abstract, etc. If students are, for instance, writing a researched argument in the genre of the traditional research essay, you will want to include the major features of this type of writing, such as the content, organization, style, research, and formatting of this type of writing. For example:

- *Content*: What should be the central focus of this genre—analysis, argument, reporting, narrative, evaluation, reflection, explanation? What kind of evidence or support should be used in this genre? Should personal experience/narrative, facts, statistics, expert testimony, analysis be used as support in this genre? What questions, if any, should students be thinking about?
- *Organization*: What are the main parts of this genre and how should they be organized?
- *Style*: Is the style formal or informal? Should the first person or third person be used?
- *Research*: How many sources are needed? What types of sources are required? How should sources be cited (MLA, APA, Chicago)?
- *Format*:
  - What format should students use to format their assignment (MLA, APA, Chicago)?
  - Citation: What citation style should be used (MLA, APA, Chicago)?
  - What is the required length of the assignment?

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*<u>Note</u>: If you are assigning a "research paper," it's helpful to define the type of writing you are looking for—whether that is an argument, an analysis, a report, an evaluation, a narrative, etc.—as each of these types of writing are different and require students to think and write in specific ways.

The deadlines of the assignment and where to submit. **<u>Note:</u>** Scaffolding the writing process by assigning smaller pieces of a writing over a period of time that culminate in a larger writing assignment leads to more effective writing. For example, here is how you might scaffold a larger writing assignment with deadlines:

Sept. 1: Topic brainstorming, submit to dropbox

Sept. 14: Research due in the form of an annotated bibliography or literature review, submit to dropbox

Sept. 21: First draft, submit to dropbox

Sept. 28: Writing Center assignment (submit first draft for feedback), submit to dropbox

Oct. 5: Final draft, submit to dropbox

How the assignment will be assessed. See handout on designing an effective rubric.

Tips to keep in mind when designing an effective writing assignment:

- **Provide written instructions for all writing assignments.**
- **Be as explicit as possible**—don't assume students will do something unless it's explicitly stated.
- **Don't be too brief or too wordy**—no less or more than one to two complete pages.
- **Use headers, white space, and bullet points to organize and clarify key elements**—i.e., purpose, audience, etc.
- **Use bold and italics to emphasize select information.**
- **Organize similar information together**—such as all information about "formatting."
- **Describe key terms**—for example, if you are assigning a "sociological analysis," describe what a sociological analysis is.
- **Provide clarifying examples—**such as an example of an effective thesis statement for this particular type of writing.
- **Cross-reference, when possible, to other materials in the course**—such as providing page numbers in the textbook of an explanation or example related to the assignment.
- **Provide model assignments.**
- **Use consistent formatting of assignment sheets throughout semester.**
- **Always go over written instructions with students, explaining components of the assignment and answering any questions**—don't just hand out to students without explaining.