

TEACHING WITH WRITING

THE OREGON STATE UNIVERSITY WRITING INTENSIVE CURRICULUM (WIC) NEWSLETTER
Published in the WIC Office, Center for Writing and Learning, Waldo 125, 737-2930
Vol. 2 #1, Fall, 1991

MAKING FORMAL WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

Mention the words "writing assignments," and many of us immediately picture a huge stack of ungraded (and, we fear, not-very-well-written) papers: it's an academic "Maalox moment." With that vision in mind, no one is eager to think about making more writing assignments. But if we side-step this worst-case parody for a few minutes, we may be able to devise other, better scenarios.

PRODUCT

We know that we assign writing because we want students to engage in some specific and ambitious intellectual tasks; we want them to do some careful, extended thinking. In short, it's an *activity* that we're assigning, and we mean for it to yield a specific product. Yet when it comes to actually making the assignment, many times all we give students are a set of specifications for the finished product: your paper should be this long; it should contain these sections in this order; it should use this method for citing sources; it will be graded in these ways; and so on.

Specifying the end product *is* important, and we ought to do it in writing. Students get many differing sets of specifications: for example, the standard documentation format in psychology differs from the one used in history. So students need us to be clear and precise about our own expectations. But

being clear about formats will not, by itself, necessarily make for better student writing.

PROCESS

In fact, if we want students to engage in certain kinds of intellectual activities--if that's why we assign a report or a critical book review or a research paper--then we need to be as clear about the thinking processes we want to encourage and provoke as we are clear about the product we want handed in. What kinds of intellectual activity will help students move towards that product? What constitutes an efficient way to proceed?

It's not that students lack study skills, it's just that they don't have experience doing exactly what the course asks them to do. Students may not know the fruitful ways to begin; they might not know, for example, that confusion is a predictable, often necessary part of the process. We can help students understand these concerns; in fact, we are uniquely qualified to talk about how we might actually complete our own assignments. No one knows our courses or our assignments as well as we do.

READERS

So "making a writing assignment" means being clear about the product, and it means discussing (or assigning) a process--a series of useful intellectual moves. But besides product and process, there's one

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more factor to consider, and it is audience--readers. When as academics we are faced with our own writing assignments--the memo that needs to be written, the grant proposal or conference proposal that is due next week--we know our readers and we understand how they will use or judge what we have written. We use this knowledge to fashion our memos or proposals or reports so that they might give us the responses we seek--action, publication, funding, fame.

Unfortunately, since college students have lots of experience writing only for their teachers, they may no longer think much about audience; they think about "what we want." When students argue for higher grades, they often do so using the "what you wanted" tactic: "This is just what you said you wanted," or "You never said that is what you wanted."

We can side-step some of these confusions by specifying quite clearly what we want. And we can further reduce these confusions by naming an audience that would actually need or be able to use the assigned writing. Case-study assignments, for example, can give writers a more realistic sense of audience. Business classes at many levels have used case studies for years, but the method can fruitfully be extended to other disciplines.

Sometimes asking students to role-play will give them a useful sense of who their readers are. Thus in a policy course, students might be asked to take on various advocacy roles in order to persuade those who are undecided. And sometimes writing assignments can specify other students as the intended readers: summarize this chapter (or lecture) for a student who was ill and so missed class.

All "real-world" writing arises in context. If we can create and make clear

the contexts for our writing assignments, we'll help our students and ourselves.

SEVEN VARIABLES

Specify these variables and use class time as appropriate to support the writing/thinking process, and you will reduce stomach acid.

1. What is the intellectual task itself?

What do you want students to do? How does this fit into the course overall?

2. What constitutes the criteria for success? What factors will make for the best--"A"--example? What questions will help students evaluate their own work and therefore revise effectively?

3. Who is the audience for this writing?

Who are students writing to? What information do these readers need, and why do they need it? What documentation format do these readers expect and require?

4. What length and format are required?

How long/short should this be? What special format requirements should be met?

5. How much time do students have?

When is this due, and what are the penalties for lateness?

6. What process could/should students follow?

How could (or should) students start work on this? What expectations should they have as they work? What pitfalls should they avoid (and how can they avoid them)? What stages should they expect to go through as they work on this assignment and do this thinking?

7. What resources can/should students draw on?

Who can help students as they do this thinking and writing? What books or other resources might be useful?

WRITING CENTER OPEN NOW

As writers ourselves, we sometimes ask colleagues to critique a draft of particularly important writing because we know that a new pair of eyes can often see gaps or problems that we simply can't spot. OSU's Writing Center (Waldo 123) brings writers and readers together for thirty minute, one-to-one consultations. Appointments are strongly recommended, and regular weekly appointments are available. Students can make appointments at the CWL main desk, Waldo 125, or by calling 7-2930.

The Writing Center is staffed by trained writing assistants who are themselves students. Writing assistants won't proofread or copy-edit; they will work with your student writers in order to help them revise effectively. **If you want to make a writing center consultation mandatory, you can do so by telling your student to request a "blue slip" at the end of the conference and staple it to the paper turned in.**

The Writing Center can also send you copies of the Faculty Referral Form which you can use to communicate directly with the writing assistant who works with your student. If you'd like copies of the referral form, or if you'd like to discuss requiring your whole class to use the Writing Center, call Jon Olson, the Writing Center Coordinator, at 7-3712. He is also happy to arrange in-class presentations about the Writing Center and how it can help students.

FALL '91 WRITING CENTER HOURS

Monday 8:30-4:30; 6:30-8:00pm
Tuesday 8:30-4:30; 6:30-8:00pm
Wednesday 8:30-4:30; 6:30-8:00pm
Thursday 8:30-3:30; 6:30-8:00pm
Friday 8:30-3:30pm

WIC PROPOSAL PROCESS CONTINUES

Are you teaching an upper-division course that already asks students to do significant amounts of writing? If so, you should consider talking with your department chair and colleagues about the possibility of proposing it as one of your department's WIC courses. Since the WIC requirement is a part of the Baccalaureate Core, it's the Baccalaureate Core Committee's charge to determine which courses meet the criteria.

In general, WIC courses ought to offer students three features, each of which is reflected on the WIC proposal form:

- regular opportunities to use informal writing as a tool for learning;
- significant exposure to one or more professional or near-professional writing situations (ie formal, graded writing);
- and useful guidance about the writing and thinking process, including opportunities for feedback and revision.

Proposal forms were sent to departments last year; for additional copies, call the CWL main desk at 7-2930. If you have questions about the WIC designation or about the proposal process, call Lex Runciman at 7-3711.

Teaching With Writing is written and published by the Oregon State University Writing Intensive Curriculum Program, Center for Writing and Learning, Waldo 125, Corvallis, OR 97339.

