Teaching with Writing

In First-Year Seminar and General Education Courses

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Today’s Workshop

1) Concepts that aid in thinking about assignment design: course goals, writing to learn/learning to write, informal/formal, sequencing.

2) A structure for designing or revising assignments.

3) Activity: Design or revise an assignment using the structure.

4) Share in small groups and report back to large group.
FYS Goals: For Success in College (from CFT website)

- “To introduce students to the intellectual life of the University by helping them make the transition to college learning.”
- “To introduce students to appropriate ways of reading, writing, and studying the course materials.”
- “To introduce students to designing and following through on an original research project (inquiry-based learning).”
- “To bring students and a faculty member together for intellectual growth by forging a small community of learners focused on a particularly interesting and intellectually challenging inquiry.”
Considering program goals (GE)

- **Gen Ed Goals: For Success in College and in Life**
  (from CLAS website)
  - “To develop in every student enduring qualities that mark a liberally educated person:
    - Open-mindedness, tolerance, and the ability to question and evaluate one’s own attitudes and beliefs.
    - Sufficient general knowledge and proficiencies to adapt to new opportunities and vocations.
    - The ability to understand and to cope with the complexity and diversity of contemporary life.
    - A lifetime pursuit of personal intellectual growth and a lifetime practice of social responsibility”
Gen Ed Goals: For Success in College and in Life
(from CLAS website)

- “To develop critical thinking, analysis, and communication abilities by the effective use of oral, written, visual, and research skills appropriate to the liberal arts and sciences.
- “To develop formal and informal opportunities for improving understanding, interpretation, and use of the various languages of the liberal arts and sciences...
- “To teach research and inquiry skills appropriate to the discipline of the course as an integral part of the course content.”
Advantages of teaching with writing

- Students improve their writing abilities
- Students develop a more thorough grasp of course content and skills
- Students develop stronger critical thinking
- Student writing provides you with clear insight into how students understand and value course content
Opportunities for students to engage ideas from the course material, try out new vocabulary, learn various patterns of discourse, and gain facility with diction and syntax (generalizable and disciplinary).

Writing should not be limited to a demonstration of how well students understand the rules and conventions of academic discourse and Standard English.
Assignment design: Supporting your teaching and learning goals

Writing to learn and Learning to write
Typical task genres (and examples)

- **Writing to Learn**
  - Reading Responses (informal)
    - Freewriting, discussion points, journaling, microthemes, summaries, threaded discussions (ICON), blogs, one minute papers
  - Analyses of Text
    - Book reviews, literature reviews, rhetorical analyses, annotated bibliographies
  - Arguments from or about Sources
    - Position papers research papers, proposals and prospectuses

- **Learning to Write**
  - Professional Writing
    - Personal statements, résumés, letters of application, disciplinary forms like white papers
  - Reports of Empirical Research
    - Final course papers based on research results, conference proposals and presentations, articles for publication, thesis and dissertation prospectuses, and the theses and dissertations themselves
  - Application of Course Concepts to the Real World
    - “Act as if” paper, evaluation of the current state of the field
**Formal and informal assignments**

**Formal**
- Sustained focus
  - Students learn to sustain ideas and focus
- Higher stakes
  - Students learn to scrutinize their own writing
- Multiple drafts (w/feedback)
  - Students learn to revise and polish their writing
  - In workshops, students learn from their peers’ successes and mistakes; instructors learn from drafts what students do not fully understand about the content or the assignment

**Informal**
- More frequent
  - Instructors can see what content is and isn’t being understood
- Lower stakes
  - Students learn to explore and relate ideas
  - Can build toward formal writing
- Can occur inside class
  - Can generate discussion, increase participation
Assignment Sequencing

- When considering an overall course plan, think about your learning goals for students.
- Considering those goals, how can your assignments build upon one another? Students can generate knowledge and practice skills in early writing assignments that they can use in later writing assignments.
- Examples of FYS and GE assignments
Assignment Design: Structuring a writing prompt

One way to write an audience-focused writing prompt that communicates your goals and expectations to your students.
Elements of a Good Assignment

Title
Task
Discussion
Purpose
Grading Criteria
Formatting and other Minutia
Title of the assignment

- Model the practice of using compelling and original titles by titling your assignment prompt: A Dish that Grandma Prepared; Why do you Dance?; Why is Child Labor Difficult to Eradicate?; Is the “Culture of Poverty” a valid concept?

- Or simply nutshell the essence of the assignment: Rhetorical Analysis, Analyze a Poem, How Your Spending Patterns Relate to Your Social Relationships
Tasks:

- Use language that states the task explicitly; *tell students what they must do* in the very first sentences of the prompt.

Use action verbs: Describe, trace, analyze, critique, evaluate, explain, compare, contrast, synthesize from sources, narrate, argue, persuade, connect, link.
Gender and Violence, Service Learning Essay Assignment

Please write an essay that:
1) describes what you learned in your training session and service work
2) links what you learned to at least 5 points made in the class readings. (Cite readings as noted below.)
3) answers the following questions: Did the service learning training or experience make any points from the assigned course readings more meaningful to you? Did the readings make the service learning experience more meaningful? Explain as completely as you can.

I am happy to discuss the assignment in class or in my office hours.
Discussion:

- Provide all of your expectations. Use bullet-points for numerous requirements.

- Offer students guidance about how to use a process for approaching the tasks. Use active verbs that direct the students’ efforts (e.g. select, prepare, read, critique, compare).

- Avoid ambiguous and conditional language like “you may want to” or “consider including.”

- Include here any information required to “set the stage.”

- Make the discussion as long as in needs to be to make all of your expectations explicit. But keep it as short as possible!
What you DO NOT want to do for the analysis of this play is either of two things: 1) Do not simply summarize any aspect of the play. Don’t tell me “what happened” but why features of the play are significant in contributing to meaning and the play’s effect on the audience. 2) Do not reproduce the arguments of other critics. You may note an argument someone else has made, but if so, you’ll need to provide a clear citation.
Tell students what you hope they will be doing trying and learning. Repeat the tasks from above and connect them explicitly to your intended learning outcomes.

For example: By analyzing multiple perspectives in the controversy about prescription drug abuse, you will gain an understanding about a pressing issue in public health. You will also develop your skills of evaluating published research and thinking critically. Finally, this assignment will help you think and write like a health professional.
Grading criteria:

List your criteria or provide your rubric on the assignment sheet. Doing so will help you to cross check in order to determine whether your grading criteria match your learning objectives and the purposes of the assignment. Grades should be determined primarily by the students’ performance on the stated tasks and purposes of the assignment.
GROUP AND INDIVIDUAL GRADING ON MAJOR ASSIGNMENTS 3 & 4

Each of these assignments (script and performance) counts 15% toward your final grade.

Each student’s grade will be an average of a group and individual grade.

In the case of the performance grade, 50% comes from the ensemble performance of the dialogue and 50% comes from your own performance as a character in the dialogue.

In the case of the script grade, 50% comes from the script as a whole, and 50% comes from your written responses to the four-part writing assignment that is to accompany the group script (log, thoughts on the question, audience description, annotated bibliography).

Please discuss with me any concerns you have about this grading scheme AS SOON AS THESE CONCERNS DEVELOP.
Formatting and other minutiae:

If you require specific margins and line spacing or a specific citation format, put it at the end. The assignment should be structured in a hierarchy of importance with the most important information at the top.
Example of formatting language:

- **Formatting and Citations**
  - Your essay should be 5-7 pages in length, double-spaced type, with 1-inch margins all around. Font must be the equivalent of 12 point Times Roman – the font used here. (My eyes are too poor to read small font.).

- There is no need for you to include a bibliography or reference list at the end of your essay. When you discuss content from the papers that we have read, you need to cite them. Simply reference them within the text as follows:
  
  Several authors point out that violence against women is often not reported to the authorities (B. Jones, 2005; N. Jones, 2005; Connell, 2003; People and Jenkins, 2007).

  Connell (1997) first developed the concept of hegemonic masculinity.
Breaking up long assignments:

For writing projects that require multiple steps to complete, consider designing smaller assignments that build toward a final, cumulative assignment.
Thank you for listening. Please send us your questions or ask us for feedback on your assignment drafts:

writing-center@uiowa.edu

Also please visit the “Resources for Teachers” page at our website:

www.uiowa.edu/~writingc