

Part 2: Assigning, Teaching, Responding

Making Writing Assignments, Especially Formal Ones

Nothing has as much affect on the writing situation as the assignment itself. The quality of the assignment affects student success or frustration. It affects the ease with which you can respond to or evaluate writings. It even influences how likely plagiarism or other forms of intellectual dishonesty might be.

The most fundamental element of assignment making is to make all assignments in writing. Simply assigning something orally is an invitation to confusion—for both you and the students.

Another fundamental element is to think very carefully about what you want students to do and, then, try to make this as explicit as possible. There's a fine line between being helpful with a sufficiently detailed writing assignment and burying the students in so many pieces of advice that the task strikes both them and you as formulaic and uninteresting.

Remember that professors have internalized many features of academic writing that our students have not. As a result, we can use what seems like a clear shorthand to us but what strikes our students as mystical code. Consider, for example, that old standby “Discuss,” as in “Discuss the circumstances leading up to the situation in Iraq in 2003.” Few words are fraught with as much peril for our students. For students, “discuss” simply means “talk about,” which can include everything from “dump everything you know onto the page” to “summarize things from whatever sources you manage to find” to “share your opinions.” I suspect that if you asked a group of professors what “discuss” means, you'd encounter some initial puzzlement (“it means, well, discuss”) and then some variety of opinions. In the case of the task above, for example, take discuss to mean “explain some of the circumstances leading to the situation in Iraq in 2003, commenting on how each circumstance arose, how it contributed to the situation, and how it related to other things happening.”

If we're going to use words like “discuss” in assignments, we should explain what we mean by them. Examples would be words like explain, interpret, compare/contrast, or evaluate. For example, here are confusing shorthand words that we use, along with what I think we mean by them (and what I think we should tell students):

Analyze:	What are the constituent elements of the main point or argument that the author raises? What is the evidence he or she employs? What are the strengths and shortcomings of that evidence? What are the implications of this position?
Synthesize:	What are points of agreement and disagreement between two or more readings or sets of data? Develop a thesis statement that would encompass a point by one or more readings, and defend that thesis, using references to the texts.
Critique:	Make clear the weaknesses or unsuitability of a particular text or position. Do this by making explicit the position or arguments made and the evidence offered. Also make explicit the assumptions that underlie the position and explain any information or interpretations omitted or slighted. Explain why a different position or argument is at least as valid.
Argue:	Offer a position or claim, with logical reasons and evidence to support it. Include an explanation why this position is superior to other ones that may be held by intelligent people.

Any assignment has many potential “slots” that you can choose to fill explicitly or to leave unstated. These include topic, role, purpose, materials/sources, genre, audience, and conventions. Page 19 provides an overview of these slots. Consider the following assignments:

- 1A. Write a ten page paper on a topic related to this course.
- 1B. Write a ten page paper in which you argue for or against teaching Intelligent Design in high school science courses.

- 1C. Read the articles on the science of intelligent design by Smith and Jones, summarize their positions, and explain whose position you find more convincing and why.
- 1D. You are invited to speak to a group of people who believe Jones is right. You, however, disagree. Write the speech that you might give; your purpose is not to persuade them to agree with you, which would be asking an awful lot. Instead, your purpose is to have them understand why you're a reasonable person who has thoughtful reasons for believing as you do.
- 1E. Using your writings from the previous assignments, prepare a web page that contains resources that will be useful for someone trying to understand the issues involved in this topic. Write a two-page commentary that explains the choices you made and shows that you made them with care and diligence.

Assignment 1A leaves most of the slots unspecified. While it will give students lots of freedom, ostensibly to choose a topic of personal interest, this is the kind of assignment that leads to massive headaches for the professor when it comes to evaluation and that invites plagiarism. The degree of openness ultimately frustrates students, too. I'd counsel never to give an assignment of this form—or to do so only with massive amounts of steps involved, from proposals that you approve to interim drafts and so on. Assignment 1B is better, giving a focus to the task; it invites plagiarism, perhaps, and very canned information dumps. 1C is even more focused, and the fact that students are asked to use specific sources (which you've chosen very carefully, of course) mitigates against plagiarism. 1D goes even further, assigning students to a particular role. This kind of assignment can be very good at developing students' wider thinking on a particular subject, especially when they're asked to assume a role counter to the position they naturally inherit.

Following are some other ranges of assignments, for your consideration and discussion:

- 2A. Write a research paper on the topic of the current situation in Iraq.
 - 2B. Summarize and analyze the articles by Smith and Jones on the situation in Iraq.
 - 2C. The articles by Smith and Jones take different positions on the ultimate success of America's involvement in Iraq. Write a paper that explains which position is more accurate, based on a careful analysis and evaluation of each. Successful writers will need to research some of the claims that Smith and Jones cite, including the evidence they marshal—or ignore. Your readers are thoughtful people who will be more impressed by careful reasoning grounded in solid research than by grand assertions or labels.
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- 3A. Write a 700-word opinion piece on a topic related to psychology, addressed to a popular audience.
 - 3B. Write a 700-word essay suitable for *Psychology Today* in which you provide a brief overview of how different personality types can affect the workplace.
 - 3C. Write the review of literature section for a hypothetical article in a scholarly journal in psychology, an article that will report findings of a new study about personality types in work situations.
 - 3D. Using your knowledge from this class, write a review of Barbara Ehrenreich's depiction in *Bait and Switch* of the use of personality tests in hiring.

