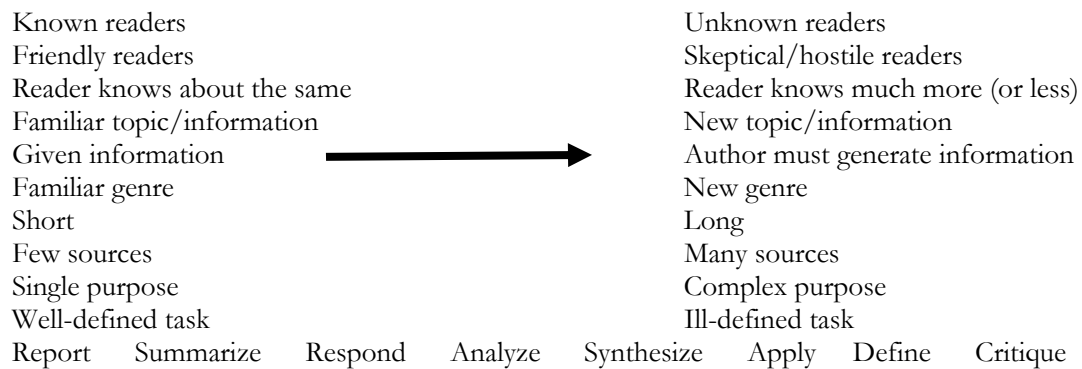## Sequencing Writing Assignments

The ancient Greeks believed, with some good justification, that writing and speaking skills were best developed by having students perform a particular sequence of tasks over the course of their educations, from retelling a fable to arguing a thesis. It would be desirable to discern and implement a similar sequence for students today, but the incredible variety of schools and students today makes the prospect unlikely, not only in the realm of K-16 but even during the undergraduate years. It may be possible for individual majors whose courses are highly sequenced to stage types of writing that students do as sophomores, say, vs. as seniors— and if your department has an interest in doing so, please contact me.

If the prospect of a well-integrated vertical sequence of writing assignments developed over several semesters is unlikely, however, there is consolation in the ways that individual instructors might sequence assignments in their courses. The concept is simple. Design writing assignments so that later ones can build on skills practiced in earlier ones. Consider the dimensions of what make some writing assignments easier or harder.

Spectra of Difficulty in Writing Situations

Known readers	Unknown readers
Friendly readers	Skeptical/hostile readers
Reader knows about the same	Reader knows much more (or less)
Familiar topic/information	New topic/information
Given information	Author must generate information
Familiar genre	New genre
Short	Long
Few sources	Many sources
Single purpose	Complex purpose
Well-defined task	Ill-defined task

Report   Summarize   Respond   Analyze   Synthesize   Apply   Define   Critique

For example, if a writer is summarizing a familiar topic (say a TV show), for a friendly reader (say a roommate) who also watches that show, in a familiar, brief genre (say an email), that writer will have a much easier task than if he or she was analyzing a new topic (say a play by Moliere), for a skeptical reader (say a professor) who knows the play (and its criticism) backwards and forward, in a lengthy new genre (an article suitable for submitting to a professional journal). If that second task were the ultimate goal of my course, I'd try to divide the assignment into some smaller pieces, beginning with easier ones, and lead students through them. For example:

- You might first have students draft part of the paper for a friend, then have them revise that draft for a professor.
- You might have students write a summary and analysis of one source, then have them write a summary and analysis of a second source, then write a synthesis of the two papers, then move into the longer research paper.
- You might give students a few key sources that they must use in the paper, then have them do some additional research to add a few more sources of their own.
- You might have them do "translation" assignments. Take a piece that was written for an expert or scholarly audience and have them put in into language that a nonexpert would find clear and interesting. Or take a piece that appeared in a popular venue and have them do the kind of research and revision that would make it more suitable for a scholarly one.
- You might have students turn in some brainstorming of several ideas for a paper. Then they might select an idea and write a proposal. Then they might write an annotated bibliography, if the paper calls for sources. Then they might write some part of the paper, a "middle" piece. Then they might draft the whole thing except the introduction. Etc.