**Tips for Writing Assignment Structure for the FIYS Course Syllabus**

Most of what may seem to us as poor high school training or lack of ability is related to misconceptions about what is necessary to write well at the college level and lack of sufficient strategies for tackling writing projects. Consider the design of your writing assignments as some of the most important work you will do for your first-year writers to prepare them for success at the College.

**Generating the topic:**

Think in terms of basic rhetoric when designing a good writing assignment. What is the context—to whom? For what purpose? In what form? As an instructor, it is important that you have clarity about the answers to these questions. Why this form? How does this form fit this purpose? If you are writing to the instructor, why is the instructor reading it—for what purpose? It is helpful to **explain the key writing expectations in terms of the goals of communication.** Your goal as a writer /teacher here is to clarify the following for the student: (1) the subject of the question (2) its purpose (why are they writing this in this course right now) and (3) the form of the response (essay, annotated bibliography, summary paragraph, definition, speech, debate outline).

It is important to think about each paper you assign as challenging students on several levels: content, form, and audience. **Students can only handle so many challenges well at once.** Content alone—the ideas from your lectures and the readings—will be challenging enough for first-year students. If you add creative form and audience expectations, then you increase the challenges on all fronts.

Consider the challenges in the following two assignments:

Example: Write a 3-5 page essay arguing for or against one key aspect of Obama’s Race to the Top plan. Use facts presented in the text and in class lectures and your personal experience as a student in K-12 schools to substantiate your argument. To develop your argument, you will need to consider and address counter-arguments to your position. The purpose of this assignment is to assess your understanding of how to critically read a policy document, such as the Race to the Top plan.

Example: Write a response to X’s education blog at the *Washington Post* presenting your position on Obama’s Race to the Top plan. Use facts presented in the text and in class lectures and your personal experience as a student in K-12 schools to substantiate your argument.

These are not the same assignment although one may seem to be a more creative version of the other. Indeed, the second example is much more challenging because it is responding to a different audience and a different set of rhetorical conditions. You may want to wait to assign the second assignment later in the semester.

**Consider carefully the wording of your writing assignments:**  In other words, spend some time clarifying in writing your logic, hopes, and dreams for the kinds of writing they will produce. Students will find this comforting and inspiring. They will not remember what you say about a writing assignment in class. They will depend on what is written on the assignment sheet. This is more true of confused, overwhelmed first-semester students than it is of more experienced students.

**Is it clear?** Ambiguity leaves room for false starts and confusion and ultimately frustration. Given the picture I just painted of the fluency problems with first-year writers, frustration levels are really high before they even read your assignment question.

1. Are you comfortable with all of the possible responses your question or focus might elicit? If you have more narrow expectations than your question or assignment implies, be transparent about that. First of all, be honest with yourself. What are you really looking for?
2. Are all of your terms and concepts familiar to the students? Do you agree on the working definitions of key words in the assignment, including words like “analyze” and “define”?

**Simple is best**. Complex, creative approaches may distract from the goal of initiating students to academic discourse, which is one of the goals of First Year Studies. Complex assignments may confuse and confound rather than provide students with much-needed practice in writing argument. Examples of simple yet serious writing assignments:

The summary. Different types of summaries:

 ---Sequential gloss or plot summary

 ---An account of the author’s central argument and evidence

 ---Identification of the underlying assumptions use to build an argument

 ---Description of the structure or organization of the text

Definition papers. Of basic terms or concepts.

 ---Identification of a key concept by considering what it is and what

 it is not

 ---Use of appropriate examples where the concept is applied

Observation and Description

 ---Field and lab notes

**Choice is less motivating than you may think.** While independent thinking is certainly valuable, first-year, first-semester writers need enough structure for them to take your assignments seriously. Open-ended assignments will remind them of their high school experience in dangerous ways. Structure and detail about your expectations in your assignment sheets is much preferred to open-ended, “write what interests you” assignments.

**Consider length carefully**. Frequent, short, focused assignments can offer a great deal of practice for first-year students while reducing frustration for all.

**Be as explicit as possible about form, purpose, and process** to guide first-year writers. Consider the difference in the following two assignments. Which better provides first-year writers with the guidance they need to start the writing process?

1. Write a 3-5 page commentary critiquing one key aspect of Obama’s Race to the Top plan. Use facts presented in the text and in class lectures and your personal experience as a student in K-12 schools as evidence for your argument.
2. Write a 3-5 page commentary critiquing one key aspect of Obama’s Race to the Top plan. Use facts presented in the text and in class lectures and your personal experience as a student in K-12 schools as evidence for your argument. The purpose of this assignment is to assess your understanding of how to critically read a policy document, like the Race to the Top plan. Your goal in this critique is to suggest ways that the plan could be better developed. You should assume an editorial style: a personal (use of “I” and “We” are acceptable) but not informal tone. In structuring your commentary, consider what we discussed in class about critical reading. Before you start to write a draft, plan your response by considering the following: Why is Obama addressing this issue now? To whom (what groups of people) or to what is he responding? What problem(s) is he hoping to address? What is his perspective? What might he be missing/under-emphasizing/ over-emphasizing? What does he not fully take into account or understand? DO NOT answer each and every one of these questions in this order and consider your writing complete. Begin this writing assignment by using these questions to provoke your thinking and organization of your ideas.

**Consider the Order of Assignments: Consider your writing assignments as a sequence of writing challenges, one building upon another.**

1. Simple to complex: Summary to analysis; experiential/responsive to theoretical/abstract. Consider how one assignment is laying the foundation for the next.

2. Repetition in structure/form to measure progress, provide practice and opportunity to apply your feedback from one essay to the next.

**A cautionary note about research papers as culminating assignments in a FY studies course.** Be sure that if you assign a research paper that you have taught and students have experienced all of the sub-tasks involved in doing a good research project. If you are engaged in all of the types of discussion and text- based learning required in a FYS course, this may not be the case. Research papers are relatively easy to design, but are difficult for first-year students to time-manage and accomplish (because they don’t have sufficient understanding of the field), and usually difficult, and disappointing to grade. Consider research exercises or projects instead. Consider a final paper or project that allows students to finally—after all of this controlled analysis and response to the thinking of others—to express their perspective within this conversation of authorities on the subject. Or a project that allows them to make use of or apply meaningfully all of the skills you have taught them without expending energy on learning new skills or attacking new types of texts at the end of a course.

First-year students start to burn out early in the semester, right around Thanksgiving. The rest of the semester is survival mode, and they need one course on their schedule that can be flexible and responsive. To the extent that you can consider the last third of your course application of or practice in what was learned in the first two thirds, do so. Research projects with heavy grading weights usually weigh down good students’ grades.

**Reading, Discussing, Presenting, and In-Class Informal Writing:** Once you decide on writing assignments and their sequence, then think about ways to do “prewriting” as part of class discussion to lead up to the papers. Having students lead class discussions, informal writing, summaries of material, debates. They can reference this material and gain confidence from it later when they write. In other words, think about the reading and oral exercises that you do in your course design as supporting writing projects and try to make this explicit to your students so that they value/see the connection as well. Remember fluency is a big issue for first-year students. If they think they have written something they can build on, this will help.