**Where to Begin?**

**Basic Considerations for Writing Assignments for First-Year Studies**

---*Consider shorter (2-5 pages), focused, analytic essays in response to critical reading* *of a text or texts*. This will give you the opportunity to teach and assess critical reading along with essay and argument structure. Students can learn a great deal in fairly simple, straightforward assignments about how to marshal evidence, how to create a focused thesis, how to organize paragraphs, and how to conclude a paper.

---*Frequency of writing assignments does matter (consider biweekly assigments)* *because learning to write in college is, in a sense, an “enculturation” process*. Students are apprenticing themselves to you (as an expert writer in your field) to understand how to communicate in college courses in general, and your discipline in particular. This is best learned over time with frequent feedback on form, structure, content, and quality of process.

---*Consider gathering information about students’ writing processes*, *not just their final products.* Some professors ask for writing logs or cover sheets where students explain their approach. Comment on (but do not grade) these. Suggest new approaches to try in future assignments.

---*Encourage revision or rewrites to improve grades, not ungraded drafting*. Responding to ungraded drafts may mean that you expend more thought and energy than students do. Instead, offer opportunities to revise and resubmit work. To ensure that students thoughtfully consider your feedback, assign cover letters for revised papers. Ask them to explain what your feedback was, how they applied it, how the revised version differs from the original, and what they learned about the revision process.

---*Worry less about being creative in assignment structure and more about giving sustained practice* *in the same type of writing over time.* It is better that you change topics but not structural expectations from one bi-weekly writing assignment to another. That way they can practice and apply the feedback you give about processes and structure; you can reward students for growth over time if the structural expectations are similar from one assignment to the next.

---*Reconsider the end-of-semester long, research paper* *or, at least, reconsider weighting it heavily in the course grade.*  Why? We have a linear conception of first-year student development. We like to think that they are continuously growing along an upward trajectory. The reality is—especially in this first tumultuous year of their college experience—growth is sporadic, unpredictable, and difficult to see if you are looking for it from one assignment to another. Freshmen will often submit a good paper followed by a particularly bad one that leaves you scratching your head. The quality of their work usually has less to do with skill or knowledge and more to do with how much sleep they got on a particular weekend, how homesick they were, if they fought with their roommates . . . . In other words, these students have a lot to think about, and they have not yet developed the tools to focus and concentrate. Remember, many had parents who “focused” them before they came here. Learning to focus—even when life around you is chaotic—is an adult skill. This particular dimension of the college transition shows up in the quality of writing (vs. quizzes, tests) more often because writing assignments require creating something from nothing (no study guides or end of chapter reviews) and require focusing over time (vs. “cramming” for a test or quiz).

Faculty who assign end-of-semester major papers do so often with the assumption that students will demonstrate in these assignments some form of cumulative knowledge gained from experiences in shorter writing assignments. They, therefore, weigh these projects with more credit. Students should have learned and be able to perform at their best on these projects—or so the thinking goes. In reality, the end of the semester may be the worst performance time for first-year students. Often, first-year students are writing at their best around mid-term. By the end of the semester, they are just worn out. They have yet to learn how to pace themselves over a college semester. Consider, instead, spending the last third of the course on a writing project that is not cumulative, but has a different rhetorical structure and set of expectations than the writing they did early in the semester. And consider weighting it less in your grading system.

For instance, consider shorter or more frequent research exercises or mini-papers in which students take up one aspect of a major research paper that helps to teach research skills—such as creating an annotated bibliography or summarizing and commenting on a series of articles.

---*Consider your assignment language carefully and be sure to put your expectations in writing.* Do you really mean “response papers”? Are you looking for relatively free-form response or are you looking for short, critical essays? Do you mean “discuss,” do you mean “argue,” or do you mean “explore”? Such clarity is especially important for first-year writers. Put your assignments in writing, carefully identify and discuss the purpose or goals of the assignment, clarify what resources the student can or should use, provide structural “tips” that you find especially important and that could affect your judgment or grading (some do this in the form of rubrics, others as checklists, most just as lists of considerations), or provide a model if the tone or structure is new or creative or tricky in some way. Discussing a model or models is the best way to clarify expectations. Consider creating your own model of your own assignments. This is the best way to learn what is potentially confusing or where students might need more support.

---*Consider writing exercises or informal writing as well as formal essay assignments*. Writing exercises could include: brief identifications (what is this and why is it important); summaries of arguments or points of view in the reading; identification of evidence through quotation and paraphrase. Other possibilities: assign written summaries of class discussions, activities or debates, where they use their notes as a way to conclude class. Assign a written “thesis statement” to describe what was covered in a discussion. In other words, think through all of the sub-tasks involved in writing one of your 3-5 page assignments and do guided practice with them in class or on-line.

---*Create one-on-one opportunities to give guided feedback to writers*. In my syllabus, I cancel a class or two to do one-on-one conferences. At least one of these conferences focuses on discussion of a draft (not a brainstorming or idea generating conference). I usually read aloud the draft, commenting as I go, sharing my reactions and questions as a reader. Students learn a great deal from hearing your interpretations of their writing in this way. They begin to understand what is necessary to clarify their complex ideas and to make their writing stronger. It is tempting to meet with students before they write to help them generate ideas. We always worry about getting them started right. I encourage adding to your syllabi rewrite or revision conferences where you are working with a draft together. You will learn a great deal about your students as writers from these moments and be able to give personalized advice, while they will be complimented by how seriously you read their writing and consider their ideas (even if you are very critical). Conference feedback often has more lasting effect than written feedback. I suggest giving both over the course of the semester.