Workshop on Designing Effective Writing Assignments
from CETL and the South Campus Writer’s Center
Wednesday, February 9, 2011
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Reflect:

Your level of satisfaction with students’ writing skills: High Medium Low

Importance of writing skills in your students’ future professions: High Medium Low

Number of class days/amount of class time you spend teaching/modeling writing: ______

Percentage of your students’ grades determined by formal writing assignments: ______

1. Incorporating Discussion and Instruction on Writing

• Create and use a “writing interview” to learn more about students’ academic backgrounds, concerns
• Connect writing in your course to writing in work force / students’ majors as often as possible
• Use class time to teach writing skills and facilitate writing-in-progress
• Provide plenty of low-stakes writing opportunities early on
• Always provide formal, written instructions for major (and even minor) writing assignments
• Integrate topic options with course readings/lectures in meaningful ways
• Workshop/model student topic idea and/or paper during class time
• Schedule class time for group brainstorming and peer reviewing activities
• Share/model academic/professional writing in the discipline
• Ask/require students to subscribe/respond to online sources of professional writing in the discipline
• Place professional publications and helpful materials on reserve in library or Writer’s Center

Your suggestions?
2. Creating Written Assignment Sheets

On Assignment Instructions: Remember that students will need to be told, shown, and taught the conventions of writing in your discipline. We should never assume that students will intuit the proper approach (which we ourselves probably only learned through years of trial and error!). Set forth “the rules of the game” in your course syllabus and/or the individual assignment sheets you give.

Include explicit but concise written instructions on as many aspects as necessary, for example...

Topic Options
Purpose (to inform? to persuade? to entertain?)
Focus / Thesis Statement Parameters
Audience
Tone
Point of View
Level of Formality
Verb Tense
Guidelines for Organizing Paragraphs/Sections
Types of Acceptable Evidence/Materials
Research Expectations
Documentation Style
Formatting Requirements/Exceptions
Length (word count vs. page length)
Due Date and Submission Rules
Learning Objectives
Revision/Feedback Opportunities
Assessment Standards/Methods

Additional Suggestions for Assignment Sheets:

• Clearly state what students must include / cover to display the expected learning outcomes.
• Include criteria that are observable, measurable, and directly related to language of grading rubric.
• Clarify any discipline-specific vocabulary or academic lingo that we as instructors take for granted.
• Consider the implications of, and use accurately, terminology taught in composition courses (e.g., summary, paraphrase, critique, review, analysis, evaluation, thesis, edit, proofread, etc.)
• Keep your tone positive/instructive rather than negative/punitive, no matter your level of frustration.
• Try to keep assignment sheets to one page; use rubric to break down grading scales and variables.
• Save the more tedious details of formatting, submission standards, deduction policies for the syllabus.
• Organize assignment sheets to emphasize substance, thinking, and learning over formatting rules.
• Share assignments with those outside the discipline to get help making implicit assumptions explicit.
3. Responding to Student Writing

Peer Feedback:
- instructor-created forms for paired readers (good for focusing peer review on specific SLOs)
- read-aloud reviews in groups of 2 or 3 (good for generating thinking, discussion, and comments)
- anonymous “fast” reading / marking of multiple papers (good for audience-sensitive topics/arguments)
- ranking others’ drafts in groups of 3 or more (good for helping students understand and apply criteria)
- scripted, open-ended statements for reader to complete (good for keeping students focused on task)
- questions-only readings (good for keeping reader focused on global concerns rather than editing)
- reverse sentence-reading (good for detecting grammar/style issues in individual sentences)

External Feedback:
- Writer’s Center tutors
- Smarthinking services

Instructor Feedback:
- Intervene early and often!
- Collect and briefly comment on proposals, annotated bibs, discussion board posts, early rough drafts
- Conference in person when possible, making students bring draft and questions
- Ask for students to send drafts in the body of email; reply with global comments--limit direct marking

Your Written Comments:
Check that your comments reflect the kinds of thinking and learning you’re hoping to promote!
Distinguish higher order from lower order concerns (global vs. local)
Mark directly the specific areas or sections needing attention
For non-native English speakers/writers, label language errors more specifically when possible
Write questions for clarification rather than rewriting students’ words or fixing errors yourself
Draw a line, literally, at a certain point and stop marking repeated problems/errors
Ask student to consider “potential audience reactions” rather than arguing your own personal views
Always include positive feedback, especially at beginning of final comments

Your Assessment/Grading Practices:
Vary rubric forms to change/reduce marking and break down/clarify grading criteria
Assign values to letter grades (B+, B, B-) to counteract nit-picky tendencies exacerbated by numeric grades
Experiment with SafeAssign and online marking of rough and/or final drafts
Require student response/reflection on the graded writing assignment
Allow rewrites of some essays based on your written comments (average the two scores in the end?)

Reflect / Share