

Creating writing assignments to promote student success

Notes for CCI instructors, adapted from the University of Maryland University College
Annemarie Hamlin, Culinary Writing Instructor, Assistant Professor of English

How often have faculty members lamented the poor writing we get from our students? Why can't our students write an essay? a paragraph? a sentence? Sure, as a nation we are grappling with increasing numbers of underprepared students, but maybe our students aren't entirely to blame. In a discussion of student writing, author and teacher Donald Murray says,



“A principal cause of poor writing received from students is the assignment...far too many teachers blame the students for poor writing when the fault lies with the teacher's instructions—or lack of instructions.” (98)

So how does one write a good assignment that helps a student to be successful? Here are some general principles:

Provide and explain all assignments in writing

Students need to have a thorough description of the task they will complete and why they are completing it. In addition, provide as much information as possible about format requirements, length (in pages or word count), weighting of the assignment in the course, and grading criteria. (See also my handout on creating rubrics.)

Assignments should be described in your syllabus or provided as a separate handout. Elements suggested here can appear in any order that makes sense to you.

Link writing assignments to specific course objectives

In the description of the assignment, explain how this assignment relates to and helps students achieve specific course or daily outcomes.

Example

This week you learned about bisques and chowders and their thickening agents. In this assignment, you will record, analyze, and compare your experience creating these two foods in a brief essay.

Specify the purpose and audience of the assignment

The more “real” the writing assignment is for the students, the better they will be able to understand its usefulness and see its application to their learning. This information can also increase critical thinking by asking students to analyze what their audiences already know or need to know and how to present the information in their writing.

The purpose might be to explain, to analyze, to persuade, to summarize, to compare...

The audience might be instructors, student peers, professional chefs, home cooks, potential employers...

Examples

Your essay should analyze the visual presentation of information on a restaurant menu for an audience of your fellow second-year students.

Your paper should explain and compare two methods of creating brown sauce in language that will be clear for home cooks with relatively little experience in the kitchen.

Specify the assessment criteria

If you have already created a grading rubric, provide that to your students before they begin the assignment. If you have not yet created one, provide a short list of those elements on which you will base the grading rubric, describing for students what excellent work would look like. Below, I've included a generic set of criteria you may want to consider, but it is always good to tailor the language to your specific assignment (as you'll note in the sample assignment sheet included here).

Example

Successful (A-level) assignments will

- Address the assignment as written and applies course content in an original, unique, and creative way
- Provide a thorough discussion of all elements as required by the assignment instructions
- Provide a level of detail that is appropriate and clear for the audience and purpose of the assignment
- Provide responsible, thorough and accurate documentation of any sources used for the assignment
- Use clear, cogent writing that is free of sentence-level errors
- Meet all assignment sheet specifications for format, page or word-length, preliminary (process) assignments, etc.

Items in a list like this are normally ordered in order from the most important (or most heavily weighted) to the least.

Also include any statements that indicate a standard below which assignments will not be acceptable.

Examples

- Papers on topics not approved by the instructor will not be accepted.
- Papers not meeting the minimum length requirement will be returned ungraded
- Papers containing plagiarized material (whether intended or unintended) will receive a 0.

Try out a variety of kinds of writing assignments (short v. long, informal v. formal)

Writing assignments do not all have to be formal, lengthy essays to be effective for student learning. Consider using several shorter assignments, such as paragraphs, journal entries, or short essays. The shorter the assignment, however, the more focused it should be.

Examples

Write a 300-word paragraph for an audience of your peers in which you compare good v. bad bacteria in the process of drying and ageing meats.

Write a 500-word journal entry evaluating your successes and/or failures in creating a crème Anglaise. Include a discussion of what you would do differently the next time.

Note: 300 words is about one page of text in a paper that is double spaced with 12-point font and 1" margins on all sides.

Remind students that paragraphs should be well constructed around a main idea (typically presented in a topic sentence) and should contain enough detail to illustrate or support the point being made.

Journal entries are typically low-stakes assignments in which the audience is the writer and the instructor. Candid and thorough discussion of the assigned topic are typically the bases for grading in journal assignments.

Longer assignments are normally more formal and often incorporate outside sources of information (from research or interviews). Anytime sources are used, students should be expected to document them in an accepted academic format (of your choice).

Organize longer projects in stages

Students in writing classes learn to work on their writing as a process, but once they get to non-writing classes, they sometimes begin an assignment the night before it is due and revert to the one-draft-is-plenty approach to writing.

Consider asking students turn at least some their process work in. You might ask for an outline or a draft a week or two before the final assignment is due. You do not have to grade these, but can give them a quick glance and check mark in class or you could ask students to spend 15-30 minutes of class time offering feedback on each other's work. Providing a few points of completion credit helps the student see this as an important stage of the assignment. (Note: I find that bonus credit does not usually work for these kinds of assignments, as too many students opt out of bonus points for such tasks.)

Provide examples of successful work

Whenever possible, show student work (for which you have permission to share) completed by previous students that demonstrates a successful assignment. Post them as a PDF in Blackboard, or show one on the screen in class. Discuss with your students what made this assignment successful as well as anything that could make it more successful.

Teaching this assignment for the first time? Tell your student you will be looking for model papers to use for future classes, and when you see one, ask the student's permission to share it at a later date.

Sample assignment

Menu design comparative analysis

CCI 999: Advanced Restaurant Design

Instructor: Melissa Kelly

Description and purpose of this assignment: In order to help you successfully meet course outcome 7: “Students will be able to describe and critique components of a successful restaurant menu,” this assignment requires that you analyze and compare two menus from local restaurants. Choose dinner menus from two local restaurants that are comparable in style and price. (Obtain the physical menu so that you are able to discuss elements like size, shape, and paper quality in addition to format and content.) Write up your analysis in essay form (introductory, body, and concluding paragraphs).

Content/detail: Your essay should discuss in detail the following elements of each menu: format of menu (including size and quality of paper and casing—if applicable); layout/placement of information on the page (including restaurant name and logo, courses, dish names and descriptions, price, etc.); readability of type (including style, font size, margins, line spacing); quality, clarity, and accuracy of the writing (including spelling and grammar); and any images presented with the menu. End your paper with an evaluation of which menu is more successful and why. (Note: You may not be a “fence-sitter” and suggest that both are successful or unsuccessful; you **MUST** choose one that is better than the other and defend your claim.)

Audience: Your paper will present your ideas to an audience of your peers who have also learned the principles of menu design.

Specifications:

- Papers should follow MLA format (which includes being double spaced, in 12-point Times New Roman, with 1” margins on all sides; last name and page number should appear in the upper right corner)
- Papers should be 1,000-1,250 words in length

Due dates (all assignments due at the beginning of class):

Monday, May 5: Physical menus collected and brought to class

Monday, May 19: Rough draft of at least 750 words (papers will be used in class on this day)

Monday, May 26: Final version of paper

Grading: This paper is worth 10% of your final grade. Successful (A-level papers) will demonstrate the following:

- Addresses the assignment as written, offering an original critical analysis of both menus, including an evaluation of which is more successful.
- Provides a thorough discussion of all elements of the menu design as listed in the assignment sheet and discussed in class lectures
- Provides a level of detail and language that is appropriate to the audience—restaurant design students
- Responsible, thorough and accurate documentation of any sources used for the assignment (including your textbook, course handouts, additional readings, but not the menus)
- Clear, cogent writing that is free of sentence-level errors and is formatted according to assignment sheet specifications

Additional notes:

- Papers that are off topic or that do not meet the minimum length requirement will be returned ungraded.
- Papers containing plagiarized material (whether intended or unintended) will receive a 0.

Questions?

Please don't hesitate to stop by during office hours or make an appointment with me to discuss your questions or ideas about this assignment in more d