Developing Writing Assignments

I quickly learned that the more detail and attention I put into the writing assignments, the better students' writing was.

--Traci Gardner, National Council of Teachers of English

Clearly defining the purpose of the assignment--and making that clear in the prompt itself--goes a long way in building student engagement. As Katherine Gottschalk and Keith Hjortshoj write in *The Elements of Teaching Writing* (Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004): "Think of assignments as *your* writing for the course" (29). Getting students to understand *why* they are writing helps them understand the importance of the task. And that all starts with your assignment prompt.

> ➢ Questions to consider: What learning goal will your assignment help your students achieve? How can you make the purpose of the assignment clear in your prompt?

Clearly defining the writing task helps students understand the genre you expect them to use. Writing looks different across campus; each discipline has its own norms and expectations. Yet most students have a hard time coming to terms with the fact that not all essays look the same. To help students adjust their writing to meet your expectations, Traci Gardner suggests in *Designing Writing Assignments* (NCTE, 2011) that "as we define [the writing] task, we must strive to do the following: identify an authentic audience and purpose for the project; position students as experts in their communication with that audience; ask students to interact with (rather than restate) texts and knowledge; [and] give students choices in their work that support their ownership of the task" (36).

> ➢ Questions to consider: What do I hope this writing will look like? Even if I think that I, as the professor, am the main audience for the writing, what larger group do I represent as a reader? How can I create multiple entry points to the assignment so that students from a variety of backgrounds can engage with it?

Breaking the assignment into a few smaller parts helps prevent procrastination, helps students build their idea over time, and encourages revision. As Edward M. White and Cassie A. Wright write in *Assigning, Responding, Evaluating* (Bedford/St. Martin's, 2016), "Students will write better if they are required to think systematically before they turn on their computers or put pen to paper" (13). Consider assigning 1-2 short pre-writing activities for homework--or offer such activities in class.

> ➢ Questions to consider: What do students routinely struggle with when I assign writing? How can I design a pre-writing activity that helps them work through difficult concepts or ideas before they begin writing?

Sequencing your assignments so that they build on each other helps students achieve writing goals over the course of a semester. Gottschalk and Hjortshoj offer these tips: students ought to write short papers before long papers; students should respond to one course author before responding to multiple course authors; students do best when they summarize before they analyze/interpret/criticize readings; pushing students to explain a course author's argument before they develop their own argument can help them build ideas and distinguish their own beliefs from authors' beliefs (41).

> ➤ Questions to consider: How does this assignment connect to your last one--and help build toward future writing in the course? If you know you want students to complete a complex task at the end of the semester, what sorts of smaller, simpler assignments do you need to create earlier in the semester so they will be ready for the more complex one?

Providing students with mentor texts can help them learn course content while also learning to write in your discipline. As Kelly Gallagher writes in *Write Like This: Teaching Real-World Writing Through Modeling & Mentor Texts* (Stenhouse, 2011): "It is critical that my students be able to move beyond simply telling me what a text says; I want them to begin to recognize how the text is constructed" (20). Reverse outlining a course reading with your class can be a great way to help them understand the rhetorical moves you expect them to make in their writing--provided your writing assignment calls for the type of writing you're asking them to do, of course. If you don't assign any texts that look like the sort of text you hope your students will produce, you might think about doing so--or you might think of offering student examples (anonymously, of course). How else will students know what you're looking for?

> ➤ Questions to consider: Can I reasonably expect that students have written in the genre I am assigning, for the audience I am proposing, and for the purpose I have defined, before? How can I integrate discussion about how course readings are constructed into larger conversations about what they say?

Creating time in class to discuss the assignment with your students helps eliminate confusion. White and Wright argue that "effective discussion of an assignment should include both learning objectives of the assignment—which you may want to consider placing on the assignment sheet—and a review of how the assignment will be assessed" (10). This means introducing an assignment with ample time for questions— not just in the last 5-10 minutes of a class period.

> ➤ Questions to consider: What do I need to explain so that students understand what I've written in the prompt? As I introduce the prompt, how can I engage students in discussion or activities so that they engage with the assignment?

The Center for Writing is here to support you as you develop writing assignments. Director Laurie Britt-Smith and Associate Director Kristina Reardon are available to consult at any stage of the assignment writing process. Email centerforwriting@holycross.edu to book a 20-60 minute appointment.