FOCUS ON WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

IT'S ALL ABOUT DESIGN
PRESENTERS: WRITING LEARNING SPECIALISTS
Diane Flores-Kagan AND Wendy Rider
GOOD DESIGN IS ALL AROUND US
GOOD DESIGN STARTS WITH AN IDEA OR OBJECTIVE IN MIND

I feel a need for speed..... and comfort.
GOOD DESIGN IS UNIFIED AND INTERESTING TO LOOK AT
THE DESIGN OF WRITING ASSIGNMENTS: WHY IT MATTERS

Aids learning and understanding

Enhances thought processes

Encourages student independence

Gets the results you want
WRITING: THE LAST LANGUAGE SKILL WE LEARN

performance based
Design related to courses and assignments: What does it involve?

**GRAND DESIGN**
- Department Standards
- Course Outlines
- Curriculum/course content/pedagogy
- Assessment
- Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs)

**PRODUCT DESIGN**
- Assignments
- Heuristics (underlying thought processes)
- Bloom’s Taxonomy/Critical Thinking Skills
- Discipline-specific conventions and pedagogy
- Evaluation
Genre (as a composition term): “a mode of written communication that shares characteristics (linguistic & rhetorical) as dictated by social convention” (108).

Examples:
• letter of application
• abstract
• essay
• research paper
and more....

“I think that learning to write well is not discipline specific.”

Coe College Professor of Mathematics

“Basically, we are trying to teach them how to write for the discipline as opposed to just writing for writing’s sake.”

Coe College Professor of Biology
Writing assignments:
a performance oriented, text genre
Dr. Irene Clark, Cal State Northridge

presumably, performer or student can understand seemingly explicit cues about format, language, and style (genre familiarity)

implicit assumptions re: performance (genre familiarity)

constructing an acceptable response is at stake (little or no genre familiarity)

GROUP ACTIVITY: READ A WRITING ASSIGNMENT AND BE PREPARED TO ANSWER THE QUESTIONS BELOW

1. What cues/signals does the instructor give regarding format/arrangement of the assignment?

2. What cues/signals does the instructor give regarding the use of language?

3. What cues/signals does the instructor give regarding style/distinctive way of writing?

4. What is implied in this writing assignment?
Many college students

• have little understanding of the “situation” the writing assignment intends them to address
• read assignments without understanding the performance expected of them
• are unfamiliar with the community/audience toward which their essays should be addressed
• may be non-specialists in the genre
• may misinterpret the written instructions
• may not be aware that they are expected to play a role

• do not think of themselves as scholars (DFK)

Dr. Irene Clark
What instructors can do to raise student awareness of performance, according to Dr. Irene Clark

- Avoid writing prompts that ask too many questions
- Make implicit assumptions explicit
- Define terms
- Provide sample papers
What instructors can do to raise student awareness of performance (continued)

• Call attention to the use of technical language that may seem familiar but which has a specialized meaning within the genre

• Discuss purpose, format, audience, and the role the writer must assume

• Compare the essay genre to other genres with which they might be more familiar
WRITING ASSIGNMENTS CAN BE FORMAL AND INFORMAL

Examples

- Abstract
- Annotated Bibliography
- Essay
- Essay Exam
- Lab Report
- Proposal
- Research Paper

Examples

- Free Writing
- Mind Mapping
- Peer Reviews
- Response Paper
- Summary
- Journal
“THE QUALITY OF STUDENT WRITING CAN SOMETIMES REFLECT THE QUALITY OF THE ASSIGNMENT.

“CLEAR, MEANINGFUL ASSIGNMENTS” can lead to insightful responses and student investment.”

“VAGUE OR CONFUSING ASSIGNMENTS” may frustrate students or distract them from the course’s objectives, thwarting growth and achievement (17).”

Carbajal Van Horn, M. *Teaching with Hacker Handbooks.* Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2010
WHAT KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS DO YOU WANT YOUR STUDENTS TO DEMONSTRATE IN WRITING?  
Bloom’s Taxonomy
WHEN DESIGNING ASSIGNMENTS

CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING:

1. Academic writing task (purpose for writing)
   - Does the assignment fit /meet your course objectives?
   - Will you choose the topic or let students do so?
   - Will you allow practice time for the writing process?
   - What skills are being assessed (Bloom’s)?

2. Audience
   - How can the audience be expanded figuratively?

3. Formal and/or informal
   - Will the writing task be thesis driven? A take-home assignment? Outside sources used? Will the task be performed in class?

4. Role of the student
   - Well-informed scholar?

5. Format
   - Discipline specific? A particular organizational pattern?
   - Have you specified documentation style (MLA, APA, CMS, etc.)?
MORE TO CONSIDER

6. The process to be followed
   Have you clearly outlined the steps in the task from beginning to end (due date)?

7. Presenting the assignment to your students
   How much time will you spend on this? How will you explain the task?
   What will you emphasize? Have you given enough information about gathering and using sources?

8. Criteria for evaluation
   Will the process be graded? Will only the final product be graded? How will you assign grades? Do you need to create a rubric?

9. Plagiarism
   Have you reviewed your assignment in terms of how plagiarism can be avoided?

**clear expectations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Generic Essay</th>
<th>Subject content</th>
<th>awareness of issues</th>
<th>critical thinking</th>
<th>Takes a position</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EXCELLENT</td>
<td>a comprehensive grasp of the subject matter is demonstrated, including an in-depth consideration of the relevant concepts, theories, and topics related to the topic addressed</td>
<td>an awareness of differing viewpoints is demonstrated, and a rigorous assessment of the evidence is conducted</td>
<td>an ability to think critically is demonstrated in the analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of relevant information</td>
<td>a thoughtful statement of position is presented and supported through logical arguments and evidence. The writer provides evidence that is specific and timely.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SUPERIOR</td>
<td>a thorough grasp of the subject matter is demonstrated, including an in-depth consideration of the relevant concepts, theories, and topics related to the topic addressed</td>
<td>an awareness of differing viewpoints is demonstrated, and a rigorous assessment of the evidence is conducted</td>
<td>the paper goes beyond the discussion of interpretation, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation</td>
<td>a position is adopted and logically argued; appropriate supporting details are supplied</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SATISFACTORY</td>
<td>a basic grasp of the subject matter is demonstrated, including an in-depth consideration of the relevant concepts, theories, and topics related to the topic addressed</td>
<td>an awareness of differing viewpoints is demonstrated, and a rigorous assessment of the evidence is conducted</td>
<td>the paper goes beyond the discussion of interpretation, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation</td>
<td>a position is adopted and logically argued; appropriate supporting details are supplied</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

![Image of a person saying, "Whaddya mean all my facts are wrong?!?" and holding a piece of paper with "I copied everything straight off the internet!!"]
DESIGN SHOULD HAVE VISUAL APPEAL

Whether the assignment is given to students in print or online or both (preferably), consider the following:

• Make it eye appealing and easy to follow:
  - bold headings, sections, underlining, bullets, graphics, color, shapes, tables, etc.
• Try not to have too much text; leave some white spaces.
• Provide one page (most desirable) or two pages maximum.
• Include your contact information on the assignment.
• Mention the Writing Center.
GROUP ACTIVITY: COLLEAGUES WILL CRITIQUE AN ASSIGNMENT BY ROLE-PLAYING AS STUDENTS

Instructions:

1. If you brought an assignment, consider pairing up with another colleague.

2. Groups will be provided sample assignments to review and discuss.

3. Among yourselves, answer the questions on the handout. Note-paper is available or you may make notes in the margin of the handout.

4. If time is available, groups can rotate assignments.

5. Designate a member of the group to report back to participants as a whole.
WRITING LEARNING SPECIALISTS OFFER SERVICES TO FACULTY AND STUDENTS

Diane Flores-Kagan
Learning Center, Room 109
661.722.6300, ext. 6018

Wendy Rider
Learning Center, Room 107
661.722.6300, ext. 2981

Ask us for a list of resources related to today’s topic.