

Bridging the Gap: Accounting for Key Assignment Variables

When we design writing assignments that do not account for the variables that define a writing situation, we fail to provide students with rhetorical contexts that will allow them to engage in an iterative research and writing process and therefore can expect students to struggle (Lindemann 215). We can shape plagiarism-unfriendly assignments that provide students with the information they need to succeed. By designing assignments that require students to inquire into a topic to address a need or discover an answer—rather than designing assignments that ask students to find, record, and recycle information—we set the stage for an authentic research process while preventing opportunities for plagiarism.

Topic for Inquiry

This is a clear articulation of the subject matter that you want students to inquire into and write about. Helpful tips in articulating the topic include:

- Avoid recycling assignment topics year after year.
- Frame topics as questions, as problems worth solving. Invite students to construct understanding rather than report information by asking them to address a need, question, or problem. Provide students with opportunities to narrow their topics and formulate their own potential research questions.
- Provide students with enough time to explore and narrow their topics.
- Ask students to answer a specific question or solve a specific problem by combining unique materials.
- Involve material/issues you've already engaged them in prior to assigning the paper, requiring that they use unusual combinations of concepts or sources.
- Ask students to use unique course materials to analyze local events, issues, or behaviors.

Purpose

This is entirely related to the main goal of the assignment. What do you hope this piece of writing will accomplish? What is its aim? Tell students what purpose the writing is to achieve. Is it to inform an audience? persuade them? present them with alternatives? evaluate an idea or theory?

Try to specify a purpose that moves students beyond reporting facts or summarizing others' ideas. We can promote original thinking by asking students to analyze or synthesize information, tasks that encourage students to produce new knowledge rather than report current information.

For example, instead of asking why a particular phenomenon occurs, consider asking why a specific theory does not adequately explain the particular phenomenon (a problem to solve). Or instead of asking students to write a paper on X topic, ask students to identify a specific question or problem related to X topic and to use research to argue for an answer to the question or for a solution to the problem.

Explain Main Purpose Verb

Often, students don't know what we mean by "analyze," "describe," "interpret," etc. The careful wording of the assignment can help students avoid summarizing or regurgitating when they should be interpreting, describing, analyzing, challenging, or questioning. To the extent feasible, we should try to reveal the purpose of the assignment in one main verb that is free from the distractions of other verbs (Lindemann 218).

Alternatively, we can break our assignments down into stages, each with a different main purpose verb. For example, if writing a research paper in a sociology course, a student may need guidance as to where it is appropriate to *describe* methodology, *define* terms, *summarize* and *evaluate* the literature, *explain* results, etc. Certainly, the paper as a whole can be characterized as an effort to

argue for the writer's conclusion. However, students often don't recognize that the larger purpose verb 'argue' requires that they also define, summarize, evaluate, etc.

Occasion/Context

Why are students writing at this time? Defining an occasion for a piece of writing helps to give students a context and a sense of how writing responds to real situations. They also get a better sense of their audience and purpose.

For example, is the student being asked to write in order to provide information for a college student encyclopedia? Is the student being asked to educate the general public regarding a new policy? Is the student being asked to write as if he/she was submitting to an academic journal?

Role

Clarifying the role of the writer is part of defining the occasion/context. Decide from what position, or perspective, you want students to write. Do you want them to write as expert? as explorer? as recommender? as instructor? as employee? as employer? as student? as customer? as researcher? as someone who knows, or as someone who is trying to find out? Often we include this element when we give students the above element: an occasion or scenario in which to write. For example, probably the role of student when writing as part of an exam is to write as experts who fully understand the subject matter.

Audience

We do our students a great service by making explicit the audience for whom their writing is intended. By writing for different audiences, students develop a wider range of stylistic opinions and methods of organization. *By consciously considering their audience and their intended effects on that audience, students develop greater confidence in their handling of information and organization.* Yes, you are most likely to be the reader and evaluator in most cases, but are you the person you really want them to write for? If the instructor is the audience, the student can rightfully assume he/she does not have to explain many of the things you are expecting him/her to explain.

Format

Students often need clear directions concerning essay format and other features. In classes where students are likely to be unfamiliar with the procedures of the discipline and its conventions, the assignment itself can serve as an opportunity to explain assumptions about the methods of the discipline. It can be very helpful to provide a model so they can see what format is required.

Criteria

If the writing is to be evaluated, then it is important that students understand what criteria you will apply to make your evaluation. What will a successful paper achieve? Determining what these criteria are may be an ongoing self-examination. Articulate for yourself what aspects of student writing are important to you and to the outcomes of your course. Figure out what language to use to articulate these criteria clearly for your students.

Schedule

Always a necessary ingredient. When is the assignment due? Are there any intermediate stages of the project with intermediate deadlines? Make sure you give all these details.

Handout Sources:

Bean, John C. *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2001. Print.

Lindemann, Erika. *A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001, Print.