

Thoughts on Assignment Design

- A. “A good writing assignment deepens students’ engagement with course material, promotes critical thinking, and helps them learn the discipline’s discourse – its characteristic methods of inquiry, analysis, and argumentation.” (Bean 95-6)
- B. Our assignments should “undermine the night-before, all-night typing frenzy and its product – the McPaper – a fast-food version of writing that offers little nutritional value to students and is frequently indigestible for readers.” This is a “strong enough pattern that students are likely to use it unless the assignment makes it impossible.” (White 2)
- C. “When individual writing assignments do not work, the reason is not necessarily that they are bad assignments. Teachers often realize instead that an assignment worked poorly because it called for knowledge and skills the students did not yet possess or was in other ways misplaced in the sequence.” (Gottschalk and Hjortshoj 40)
- D. “At some point in their undergraduate careers, we want to turn students loose and say, ‘Okay, now talk and write like a new member of this discipline. Go find your own topic and do something interesting with it.’ But for many college writers, such freedom is debilitating. Not yet at home with academic writing or with the discourse conventions of a new discipline, these students are apt to produce wandering ‘all about’ papers rather than arguments.... Because the traditional term paper assignment does not guide students towards formulating a problem and developing a thesis, it often does not stimulate the complex thinking ... that teachers desire.” (Bean 74-5)
- E. “Teachers often obscure the boundaries of an assignment by offering suggestions, hints, examples, and ‘clarifications.’ [...] When you are tempted to add ‘clarifications’ to an assignment, you might keep the following warnings in mind:
- When you find yourself adding helpful suggestions, remember that students will almost invariably read ‘might’ as ‘should.’
 - Students will also tend (despite your injunctions to the contrary) to interpret examples as prescriptions: indications of what you really want them to do but aren’t saying outright.
 - If you include lists of examples, questions, or points they ‘might’ find useful, student writers will also tend to use these sequences as organizational guidelines. When you read their papers, you will find that suggestions you listed at random, as they happened to occur to you, will appear in the same order, as though you had prescribed a logical sequence for writing and thinking about the topic. (Gottschalk and Hjortshoj 38-9)

F. “Good writing, I like to tell my students, grows out of good talking – either talking with classmates or talking dialogically with oneself through exploratory writing.” (Bean 7)

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Compare the following two assignments. Which seems better? Why? [This examples comes from Gottschalk and Hjortshoj (34).]

- What is Steven Pinker’s central argument in *How the Mind Works*, and who is he arguing against?
- In four pages, explain what you consider to be the most important argument in Steven Pinker’s *How the Mind Works*, with examples and quotations that support your interpretation. There are several themes you might reasonably choose to emphasize. I want to know which one you consider the most important, and how well you can make your case.

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Sources:

Bean, John. *Engaging Ideas*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001.

Gottschalk and Hjortshoj. *The Elements of Teaching Writing*. NY: Bedford/St . Martin’s, 2004.

White, Edward. *Assigning, Responding, Evaluating*. NY: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2007.