

Designing Essay/Paper Assignments

Students often do their best and hardest thinking, and feel the greatest sense of mastery and growth, in the writing they do for a course. As professors, we want to keep this in mind as we design assignments: we want to provide them with clear goals, so they have the greatest chance possible to succeed and to illustrate what they are learning and thinking. There are a few things we can do to help them succeed in their writing. *Above all, as professors, we need to write out our assignments*—so they can revisit it as they work. If you put it on Moodle, make sure they *all* know how to access it and can print it out. This becomes especially important as AUCA builds a Writing and Academic Resource Center—tutors will need to know exactly what the writing assignment is, so they can best help the student.

Three principles are paramount in designing assignments:

1. Name what you want and imagine students doing it:

However free students are to range and explore in a paper, the general kind of paper you're inviting has common components, operations, and criteria of success, and you should make these explicit.

Having satisfied yourself, as you should, that what you're asking is doable by writers who are just learning the material, or expanding on skills, try to ask yourself these questions about your assignment:

- What is the main task or tasks? What key word or verb makes the task clear and explicit? (e.g. *analyze, explain the significance of, critique, explore, support, reflect on, define, outline, argue, etc.*) Make sure you know what the verb means in the context of the assignment and material.
- What purpose is this assignment supporting? (e.g. *developing close reading skills, critical analysis, speculative thought, analogical thinking or writing skills, etc.*)
 - How does the assignment go beyond what you have done or discussed in class? (*Am I asking students to apply it in a new area, or practicing a key academic skill or asking them to apply some skill or idea to their own experience? How will it allow them to show independent thought if it's appropriate for the assignment?*)
- To what audience am I asking students to write? What will be most challenging in this, and what qualities will most distinguish a good paper? (*Lists of possible questions for students to answer in a paper are often not sufficiently prioritized to be helpful.*)
- What form will evidence take in the paper (e.g. *direct quotes, block quotations? paraphrase? graphs or charts, interviews?*) How should students cite it?
- Are there some broad options for structure, emphasis, or approach that I can discuss in class when I hand out the assignment.
 - Last, it is important to ask yourself, how does this assignment help to meet the objectives or goals of the course?

2. Take time in class to prepare students to succeed at the paper

Resist the impulse to think of class meetings as time for “content” only and of writing as work done *only* outside class. Your students won't have mastered the art of essay writing (if such a mastery is possible) and won't necessarily know the particular skills relevant to the material at hand. Take time in class to show them:

- discuss the assignment in class when you give it, so students can see that you take it seriously,

so they can ask questions about it, so they can have it in mind during subsequent class discussions. Have them read it aloud and identify any vocabulary that's uncertain.

- introduce the analytic vocabulary of your assignment into class discussions, and take opportunities to note relevant moves in discussions
- have students practice key tasks in class discussions, or in informal writing they do in or before or after a discussion; remember, they don't have to work on everything at once
- show examples of writing that illustrates components and criteria of the assignment (class readings can sometimes serve as illustrations of a writing principle; so can short excerpts of writing—*e.g.* a sampling of introductions; bad writing can also be instructive—*e.g.* go over a list of problematic thesis statements);
- discuss the topics of originality and plagiarism (what the temptations might be, how to avoid risks); these should at some point be addressed directly. Take the time to say, you are interested in *their* thinking.

3. Build in process

Ideas develop over time, in a process of posing and revising and getting feedback and revising some more. Assignments should allow for this:

- smaller assignments in a course should prepare for larger ones later
- students should do some thinking and writing before they write a draft and get a response to it (frequently just sharing their ideas in class or in groups is beneficial)
- for larger papers, students should write and get response to a draft
- if possible, meet with students individually about their writing: nothing inspires them more than feeling that you care about their work and development
- let students reflect on their own writing, in brief cover letters attached to drafts and revisions (these may also ask students to perform certain checks on what they have written, before submitting); [Please don't hesitate to ask about these]
- have clear and firm policies about late work that nonetheless allow for exceptions *if students talk to you in advance.*