

# Developing Effective Writing Assignments

Writing Workshop Follow-up—Friday, January 16, 2009  
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## **RECAP of May 2008 Session**

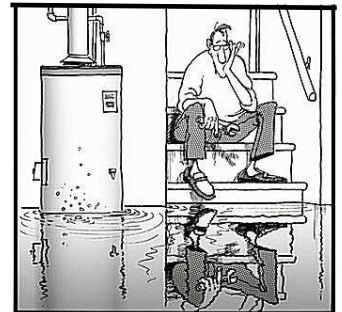
- Writing is thinking—have students write often and you will help them to develop their critical thinking and analytical skills
- Remember that Higher Order Concerns (HOCs) should be addressed first and Lower Order Concerns (LOCs) later.
- **Develop clearly focused assignments.**
  - State a claim or ask a question that students can use as the basis for a thesis or controlling idea.
  - Specify the kinds of supporting evidence you expect the students to use in writing their responses.
  - Specify the role of the writer, the intended audience, the purpose of this piece of writing, the appropriate format, and grading criteria.
  - Consider developing a scenario that specifies role, audience, purpose, and format.
  - Provide a written handout describing the assignment, explain the assignment in class, and allow time for questions.
  - Ask students to evaluate model papers from previous students.
- **Support writing development and make writing more manageable for you and for students.**
  - Use short, “writing to learn” assignments to help students develop writing skills and to prepare for tests and major writing assignments.
  - Consider the kinds of “literacy tasks” built into major assignments. What will the student need to do?
    - Use discipline specific concepts?
    - Locate and evaluate sources?
    - Present evidence that is acceptable in the discipline.
    - Balance reported information with analysis and argument.
    - Follow conventions of organization, style, and citation used in professional publications in the discipline.
  - Develop a timeline and, at various points in the writing process, evaluate the student’s progress in completing the literacy tasks necessary to complete your assignment.
    - Allot grading points for issue proposals, bibliographies, rough drafts, conferences with the professor, editing workshops, and revisions.
    - Use peer conferences and writing center conferences to save your time.

- **Use comments, corrections, and grading to promote the development of students as writers in your discipline.**
  - Focus your comments on revision. “If you were going to revise this essay, I would suggest...”
  - Use a grading rubric that establishes a hierarchy of writing concerns that you will address in grading.
  - Limit the number of corrections and comments you make. If there are many errors in grammar, punctuation, and usage, focus on the most serious problems and mark only the first one or two pages.
  - Consider developing a style sheet that notes the usage errors that appear most often in student papers and that you find most annoying.
  - Do not use your comments to justify the grade. The grading rubric should make clear the standards for an A, B, C, D, F.
  - Allow opportunities for revision or repeated practice.

## Examples of Writing Assignments used by Seaver College Faculty

### Journal Writing

- Easy to manage—can be structured or unstructured
- Facilitates reflection and promotes critical thinking on class material, readings, writing process, class process, etc.
- Requires minimal time to grade: CR/NC; simple rubric (student completes assignment, on time, meets minimum length, addresses specific criteria for content, etc.)
- Promotes the habit of writing to overcome writer’s block, develop confidence, and foster a love for writing
- Easy for students to achieve success
- Allows instructor insight into student thought—beyond test material
  - How student is enjoying class?
  - Does student find material engaging?
- Starting point for more rigorous writing assignments
  - Journals and free-writing can help students to identify areas of interest
  - Foster genuine inquiry
- Beginning with this type of writing, with looser guidelines and fewer restrictions, allows students to truly think about the material rather than simply get the assignment done.



### Essays with Clear and Well-defined expectations

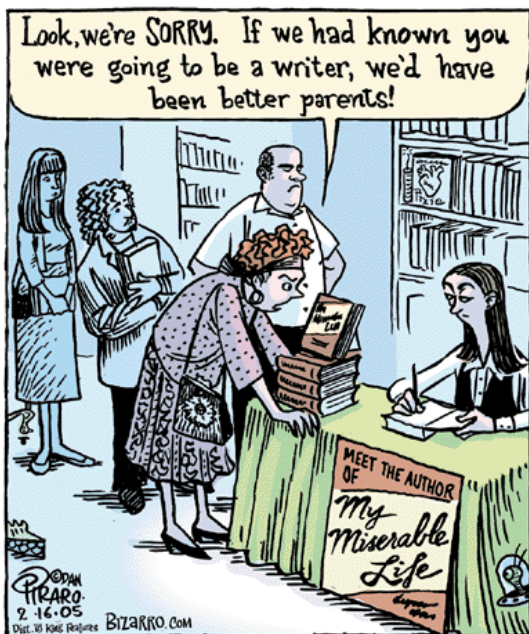
- Highly prescriptive assignments are excellent ways of teaching *how* to write for a specific academic discipline
- Open-ended, vague assignments may at times allow for more creativity, but they may result in rambling, disjointed, streams of consciousness.

- Providing an internal structure for an assignment helps students concentrate more on *what* they are saying and, in turn, coming to know *how* to say it
- Rubrics or other forms of explicitly outlining expectations make grading easier for the instructor and more concrete and clear for the student.
- Advantages: you will likely get what you are looking for in the final product as you have clearly outlined what to include.
- Disadvantages: you leave little room for creativity in format; many papers may look alike.



### Essays in which Professional Writers do the instruction

- In contrast to the highly prescriptive essay prompts, instructors can use samples from professional writers to model specific kinds of writing
- In this type of essay, you say less and let the student figure out *what* it is the writer has done in his/her piece and ask the student to adopt this style/approach.



- This kind of assignment is good for more sophisticated writers who need some direction but who are not afraid of taking risks.
- This allows for creativity but it still imposes a certain degree of control over the assignment.
- Often, this forces students to move outside of their typical style of writing.

Look, we're SORRY. If we had known you were going to be a writer, we'd have been better parents!

