

Creating Writing Assignments for Writing in the Disciplines

No matter what the field or level of study, it’s best to put writing assignments in writing and to compose assignments that detail your expectations. All writers, even juniors and seniors, written instructions and writing instruction. Guidelines, like the ones I’ll suggest below, will help your students write better—and will support students with disabilities, promote access among students with time and technology limitations, and help students learn the ropes of academic culture. These 12 guidelines are followed by an assignment template and a sample assignment.

Guideline 1: Put it in writing.

Plan to share the assignment in writing (handout, overhead slide, and/or email), even if it’s a brief homework assignment that may lead into something bigger, such as a discussion, a paper draft, or a presentation. Writing down your expectations, even if they are just a few sentences, will help you make them **clear** to yourself and to students and **align** them with course objectives.

Guideline 2: Make the purpose clear.

Give students a question to respond to, an idea/debate to consider, or a topic to center their paper around—or indicate that they can choose a topic, if that’s the case. Then, to make the purpose clear, think in terms of **Bloom’s Taxonomy** and its keywords: indicate whether the goal of the paper is to define, describe, explain, interpret, solve, compare/contrast, test, argue, defend, judge, create, or design—or some combination of those. Be specific and get specific results.

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|  <p style="text-align: center;">New Version</p> | <p>In 1956, Benjamin Bloom headed a group of educational psychologists who developed a classification of levels of intellectual behavior important in learning. During the 1990’s a new group of cognitive psychologists, lead by Lorin Anderson (a former student of Bloom), updated the taxonomy to reflect relevance to 21st century work. The two graphics show the revised and original Taxonomy. Note the change from nouns to verbs associated with each level.</p> <p><i>Note that the top two levels are essentially exchanged from the traditional to the new version.</i></p> |
| <p>Remembering: can the student recall or remember the information?</p> | <p>define, duplicate, list, memorize, recall, repeat, reproduce state</p> |
| <p>Understanding: can the student explain ideas or concepts?</p> | <p>classify, describe, discuss, explain, identify, locate, recognize, report, select, translate, paraphrase</p> |
| <p>Applying: can the student use the information in a new way?</p> | <p>choose, demonstrate, dramatize, employ, illustrate, interpret, operate, schedule, sketch, solve, use, write.</p> |
| <p>Analyzing: can the student distinguish between the different parts?</p> | <p>appraise, compare, contrast, criticize, differentiate, discriminate, distinguish, examine, experiment, question, test.</p> |
| <p>Evaluating: can the student justify a stand or decision?</p> | <p>appraise, argue, defend, judge, select, support, value, evaluate</p> |
| <p>Creating: can the student create new product or point of view?</p> | <p>assemble, construct, create, design, develop, formulate, write.</p> |

Figure 1. From http://ww2.odu.edu/educ/roverbau/Bloom/blooms_taxonomy.htm

Guideline 3: Clarify the audience.

The “audience” means the intended readers. **Whom** is the paper for? A real or imagined person or group of people? What do those readers **value**, considering their academic field, level of expertise, and the rhetorical situation? What can the student do to meet the audience’s **expectations** for the writing? Clarify what the reader(s) care(s) about by doing the following:

3.a. Require a **formal citation style**.

3. b. Require students to use a **specific writing handbook** (e.g. *The Everyday Writer*, required in the Composition I and II courses, which provides specs for MLA, APA, Chicago, and CSE style) or **formal style guide** (such as the actual MLA or APA Manual), or to use a [specific writing online resource](#) (e.g. *The Everyday Writer* online supplement or the Purdue University Online Writing Lab).

3.c. Provide **examples** or **templates** of successful (and unsuccessful, too, if possible) writing. Some professors see these as limiting or as a crutch, but **writing samples** can be beneficial, especially if presented and discussed in relation to the writing assignment (students are still building writing skills, are still in development, even if they are in upper-level courses).

3.d. Specify the **number** and **type of required sources**. Consider reminding students to cite at least once from each source and indicating to them HOW they should use sources (e.g. to help define terms, to support their argument, to provide anecdotal evidence, to provide evidence from controlled research, etc.). Consider providing a few sources in a source packet and challenging students to use those in their papers, as well as a few others they find on their own.

Guideline 4: Specify the required length.

Specify your expectations for **page count, paragraph count, sentence count, or word count**. Sick of students BS-ing to meet a word count? Experiment by setting word or page maximums but no minimums—being careful to emphasize that students must fully develop their description or argument.

Guideline 5: Have the plagiarism talk in class, and include a note defining plagiarism and its consequences on the assignment itself.

On the assignment, near the end of the assignment (**recency**), include **language from the syllabus** or from a **working definition** that you develop with students in class.

Guideline 6: Writing is a process. Scaffold smaller, lower-stakes assignments to lead up to and interconnect with larger, complex, higher-stakes assignments.

Ideas: (1) Allow students to submit **drafts** for points and/or for peer review, or assign **smaller, simpler writing tasks** (e.g. defining a key term or finding and summarizing one example of a peer-reviewed source) that are related to a larger project. (2) If you can't make class time for **peer review**, put students into **cohort groups** and require those groups to read each other's drafts and **email** each other (and CC you) 1-paragraph responses offering praise for what's done well and critique/suggestions about what needs improvement. (3) Consider allowing students to **revise** their work to gain back up to 10% of the paper's worth.

Guideline 7: Recommend student support services on campus, like the **Writing Center** or various tutoring labs.

Provide location and contact information.

Guideline 8: List your pet peeves.

Make a **top 10 list** of the problems you most often see in student writing. Sure, there will be plenty more than just those 10, but try to keep it simple and short for now. **Present** it in class and **ask** students about their own—this makes for a great teaching moment to engage students about writing. Get them talking.

Guideline 9: Keep it brief.

Perhaps your ideas about writing and expectations for an assignment requires 3-4 dense pages to fully express. (Mine seem to!) However, students will respond best to an assignment sheet that is limited to 1-2 pages. **Aim for 1 page.** All elaboration could be presented in **appendices**. This will help students stay focused and not become overwhelmed at the amount of rules to follow.

Guideline 10: Provide a list of your expectations or a rubric with the assignment.

Keep the list to 5-10 items. These should be qualities of effective writing, in terms of this assignment. Here are the sort of things I list:

Content expectations: writing follows instructions and is on topic, arguments/descriptions are developed and effective, paper is unified, and thought process is clear

Organization expectations: paper is organized on a global (paragraph) and local (sentence) level, transitions are effective, and ideas flow

Style expectations: writing is clear, terms from course content are effectively employed, formality/wording meet audience expectations, and diction is concise (not awkward or wordy)

Grammar/spelling/punctuation expectations: errors are limited and do not distract the reader, and paper has been proofread to perfection or near perfection

Citation/formatting expectations: quotes/paraphrases are cited, and margins/ spacing/ headers/ etc. meet citation style requirements

Length requirement met

Number of references required

Paper submitted on time

Evidence of writing process: writer submits required drafts or revisions and participates in peer review

This list easily translates to a **dimensional rubric**, since each item could be weighted and then evaluated at level of performance. Just as an example, on a 100 point scale, in writing classes, I tend to weigh content as 30 points, organization and style as 20 points each, and gr/sp/pun and citation/formatting as 15 points each. (This differs in courses in the Disciplines, where I might weigh content at 50 points; organization, style, and gr/sp/pun at 10 points each; and citation/formatting at 20 points. It all depends.) If any of the basic requirements are not met, the student receives no higher than a 60/100. Levels of performance could include very effective, effective, ineffective, and very ineffective. (I think I'll have to write a separate handout about rubrics!)

Guideline 11: Include the due date and the date of any peer review sessions or draft due dates.

Guideline 12: Share your own work.

Consider sharing your own writing with students and **discussing** it with them. Tell them about the origin of the text, the process of writing it, peers you consulted with, sources you referenced, how tedious it is to proofread, all the good and the bad. Writing is labor; writing is a craft. Show them that it's normal, human, and good to struggle with writing, to ask for help, and to build skills by persevering. **Model** writing habits and ways of thinking about writing that you wish to promote.

TEMPLATE

Title of Assignment

The Lead-up: remind students how this assignment ties into recent classwork and upcoming classwork

Writing Prompt: include purpose, audience, topic/question/direction. This is part of the assignment that they are to respond to directly, using the same keywords you do. Consider allowing students to choose from a few prompts or allowing them to create their own prompt as a class.

Specific requirements: page length, citation style, formatting, organization, number/type of required references , any other special requirements. You may want to mention relevant course readings here.

List of expectations: I like to title this part “What I Will Look for in Your Writing.”

Due Dates

Information about Academic Support

Plagiarism Definition and Consequences

Appendices: templates, list of pet peeves, important writing resources, lecture notes on style/citation/peer review/collaborative writing/etc., source packet, sample papers, list of writing tips, etc.

SAMPLE ASSIGNMENT

Critique Assignment

Before we write synthesis papers, you must demonstrate your ability to write clear, concise, objective summaries and organized, succinct, thorough critiques. We started with summaries. Now, we'll do a formal critique.

Read "An Introduction to Fairy Tales" by Maria Tatar on *Writing & Reading across the Curriculum* pages 229-235, and write a formal critique of the essay summarizes, evaluates, and then personally responds to the text. Alternatively, you may choose to write a critique of "From *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*" by Robert M. Pirsig on WRAC pages 469-473. Use the suggested questions on page 253 to complete your critique. Write 8-9 fully developed paragraphs, no matter which essay you choose.

Relevant course reading: WRAC chapter 2 and *The Everyday Writer* chapters 7-8, 11-13, 48, and 50-51.

What I will look for in your writing:

Content as described and demonstrated in WRAC Chapter 2 (pages 65 and 67-72)

Organization as described and demonstrated in WRAC Chapter 2 (pages 65 and 67-72)

Formal, academic essay structure

Academic tone and style (audience-appropriate diction, clear syntax, etc.)

MLA formatting and citation of 1-3 scholarly, academic sources

Proofreading: zero grammar, spelling, or punctuation errors

2 copies of an outline (elements: hook idea, working thesis, and 3-4 working topic sentences) and half draft due in class on Feb. 6th.

Final draft of summaries due to eCampus inbox by 5 p.m. on Feb. 10th.

Writing Center

The RSU Writing Center can be reached at 918-343-7838 or writingcenter@rsu.edu. Make an appointment, or just ask quick questions about writing.

Academic Integrity (from class syllabus)

Students found intentionally plagiarizing are subject to strict penalties, which may include but are but not limited to a grade of 0% on the assignment, an F in the course, disciplinary suspension from the University, and/or a notation of academic dishonesty in the student's record. Unintentional plagiarism will result in loss of points, required revision, and/or extra writing assignments over writing and ethics.