

Designing Effective Assignments

Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC)
Program

September 16th, 2014

Roy Rogers & Justina Oliveira

Overview of WAC Certification Process

- **Fall semester:**
 - Selected readings about WAC pedagogy
 - Attend 4 WAC workshops
 - Today's
 - Effective grading/minimal marking: 10/14, 1pm
 - Avoiding plagiarism: 11/11, 1pm
 - Creative classroom: 12/9, 1pm
 - Develop & revise teaching materials following WAC principles
 - Syllabus: explains role of writing in your course
 - At least 1 scaffolded writing assignment: clear due dates
 - Attend support meetings with a fellow

Overview of WAC Certification Process

- **Spring semester:**
 - Continue working with a fellow
 - Implement syllabus/assignments produced fall semester
 - Integrate informal writing assignments in your course (creative classroom techniques)
 - Present your experiences & materials at year-end colloquium

Workshop Objectives

1. Explain importance of writing-to-learn philosophy & offer strategies
2. Differentiate formal vs. informal writing assignments
3. Provide tools for informal writing assignments
4. Offer scaffolding techniques
5. Explain value of typed assignment handouts

- Misconceptions About Assignment-Focused Learning
- A Focus on Critical Thinking

Handout

Reading and Writing to Learn

Writing as active reading

- Summarize lectures or course readings
- Help students explore how note taking and other writing helps sharpen ideas
- Commonplacing: to link reading to writing

Purposeful writing assignments

- Connect to course objectives
- Connect to students' life experiences
- Connect to students' prior knowledge

What kind of assignments help students learn course content through writing?

- Specific formats/structures of assignments you found helpful?

Writing-to-learn Strategies

- **Two-column note taking**
- **React or respond to texts**
- **Question what text means or how the parts of the topic connect**
- **Create problems to be solved with subject matter**
- **Prediction**
- **Apply the subject matter to one's life**
- **Define concepts or ideas about subject matter**
- **Summarize concepts and ideas from text/discussion**
- **Paraphrase, translate, or rephrase the text**

Two Column note taking

Date:

Topic:

**Topics and
notes to
yourself**

Lecture notes

Summarizing and Main Ideas

'Traditional' Writing Assignment

Assignment 2: Take-Home Final Exam Essay: Turkey and the European Union

Discuss the controversy over Turkey's membership in the European Union. What are the potential benefits for Turkey? For the European Union? Beyond Europe? What are the arguments for and against membership? Who's making these arguments and why? What are the economic implications? Papers must be typed, double-spaced and stapled. Sources must be cited, using Chicago style. You must include a list of Works Cited.

This assignment represents the equivalent of a final exam. Therefore, I expect you to put considerable time and energy into it. Papers should be focused, make an argument, and draw on course materials. I want to see evidence of thinking. I will reward originality. Points will be deducted for grammatical and syntactical errors. It's a good idea to write more than one draft of your assignment. If you need extra help, you can get it in the Writing Center. I recommend this strongly. Plagiarism is prohibited by Queens College, and any student caught teaching will receive an F on the assignment, fail the course, and be referred to the Dean of students. Don't do it!

My pet peeves: Confusion between "there" and "their;" Pronoun – anteceded disagreement; Incorrect verb tenses; Confusion between "it's" and "its"; Use of the second person ("you"); Unsupported statements of opinion.

Formal Assignments

Benefit from scaffolding:
Build on/integrate informal assignments

Tend to be “high stakes”

Often ask students to “do” the discipline

Students gain experience with polished writing

Should require multiple drafts

Informal Writing Assignments

- What is Informal Writing?
 - Low-stakes (not graded or minimal points)
 - Short assignment
 - Very limited structure
 - Helps encourage creativity & critical thinking
- Example Informal Writing Prompts
 - “What did you find most interesting about this chapter?”
 - “Relate concept X from today’s class to our previous lecture on Y/your personal experience.”
 - “What didn’t you understand about the reading? Write 3 questions about the reading that you would like to be answered.”
 - “Compose a question about this week’s reading to be discussed in class.”

Benefits of Informal Writing Assignments

Students more fully interact with course content.

Helps students make connections between new concepts and previous knowledge.

Encourages concentration and helps students to understand and retain key concepts and processes.

Gives students an opportunity to grapple with problems and tasks, to speculate about possible answers or solutions without risk.

Helps instructors to assess student comprehension and progress.

Helps prevent plagiarism in high-stakes papers.

What is Scaffolding?

- Scaffolding is structuring assignments in a systematic way to support your learning objectives and make the goals and process transparent to students. (Skene and Fedko)
- Breaking major assignments (i.e. research papers) into smaller informal or semi-formal assignments which build towards the larger, formal assignment.
- Scaffolding allows students to build towards difficult assignments and instructors to steadily assess student progress.

Examples of Scaffolding Traditional Assignments

Assignment: Defend an Assigned Thesis

English:

- Philip Roth is/is not a misogynist writer.

Assignment: Group Brainstorming

Math:

- In small groups, students brainstorm what data they'd like to collect, what they predict to find, and why (before any data collection, analyses)

Activity: Transform The Assignment with Scaffolding

Take-Home Final Exam Essay: Turkey and the European Union

Discuss the controversy over Turkey's membership in the European Union. What are the potential benefits for Turkey? For the European Union? Beyond Europe? What are the arguments for and against membership? Who's making these arguments and why? What are the economic implications? Papers must be typed, double-spaced and stapled. Sources must be cited, using Chicago style. You must include a list of Works Cited.

This assignment represents the equivalent of a final exam. Therefore, I expect you to put considerable time and energy into it. Papers should be focused, make an argument, and draw on course materials. I want to see evidence of thinking. I will reward originality. Points will be deducted for grammatical and syntactical errors. It's a good idea to write more than one draft of your assignment. If you need extra help, you can get it in the Writing Center. I recommend this strongly. Plagiarism is prohibited by Queens College, and any student caught cheating will receive an F on the assignment, fail the course, and be referred to the Dean of students. Don't do it!

My pet peeves: Confusion between "there" and "their;" Pronoun – antecedent disagreement; Incorrect verb tenses; Confusion between "it's" and "its"; Use of the second person ("you"); Unsupported statements of opinion.

Scaffolding Traditional Assignments: Evidence-based Microthemes

Dear Dr. Catlove,

You've got to help me settle this argument I am having with my girlfriend. We were watching a baseball game several weeks ago when this guy hit a high pop-up straight over the catcher's head. When it finally came down, the catcher caught it standing on home plate. Well, my girlfriend told me that when the ball stopped in midair just before it started back down, its velocity was 0, but its acceleration was not 0. I said she was *stupid*. Needless to say, that started an argument. Please help us save our relationship!

Sincerely,
Baseball Blues

Can this relationship be saved? Speaking as Dr. Catlove, write an answer to Baseball Blues. Restrict your answer to 250 words or less. Don't confuse Mr. Blues by using any special physics terms unless you explain clearly what you mean.

All Assignments Benefit From Clarity

Always Provide Students with a Typed Assignment Handout

- Helps the students understand what they “need to do”
- Assists tutors in the Learning Center in providing appropriate assistance to the student
- Provides reference for instructors in later semesters

Assignment Handout Checklist

Do students know what they need to do? Is the task clear? E.g. compare/contrast, summarize, etc.

Do students know what they're being graded for?

Do students know which essay format they are being asked to compose?

Have I expressed who the intended audience is for this paper?

Have I expressed the acceptable and minimum number of sources (e.g., a minimum of 5 articles from scholarly journals)?

Have I listed the assignment requirements? (length, deadlines, reference-style and formatting, font, margins, title page, bibliography)

Have I stressed the importance of proofreading?
(peer review can be helpful)

Has class material prepared students for this assignment?

Next Time on WAC...

- **Effective Grading and Minimal Marking**
 - Tuesday 10/14
 - 1:00-2:15pm Location: TBA
- **Skills related to the next workshop**
 - Effective assignment design reduces grading time & grading frustration
 - Effective assignment design sets clear expectations for students
 - Marking should encourage revision as part of scaffolding
- **Reading from Bean book**
 - Chps. 1, 6, & 16