

Assignment Scaffolding

(& Strategies for Assigning Composition)

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Contents

5 Useful Methods for Assigning Writing	1
Low-Stakes Writing	2
(Typed) Assignment Handouts.....	4
<i>Scaffolded</i> Assignment Models	6
Revision-Oriented Feedback	8
Revision	11
 <i><u>Other Resources</u></i>	
The Anatomy of an Essay	12
General Education Writing Rubric (working copy)	13
Sample Assignment Scheduling Grid	14

5 Useful Methods for Assigning Writing:

Low-Stakes/
Informal Writing

Typed Assignment
Handouts

Scaffolded Assignment
Modeling

Marking Papers with
Revision-Oriented
Feedback

Collecting Assignments
after Revisions

1.

Low-Stakes Writing

What is it?

A short (1 or 2 pages), informal response that urges students to develop **critical thinking skills** by exploring ideas rather than focusing on structure.

Instructors grade for content and analysis, not for structure or mechanics or...

Low-stakes writing is **exploratory**. It encourages students to see learning as a process of exploring ideas, rather than repeating “right answers.”

Benefits

Stimulates thinking about issues, questions, problems, themes, etc. Stimulates discussion, enforces completion of course readings, and urges students to ask questions (of the professor or of themselves) about course content.

May be used as a tool to stimulate in-class discussions or as a preliminary step in formulating a final paper.

The accidental “structure” lesson: When your students are least concerned with structure, you might find that is when their structure is most sound. Wonderful, funnel-shaped arguments, and articulately composed thesis statements often emerge from low-stakes writing without the student even knowing it.

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Examples & Methods

In-Class Student Writing

Brief periods (2-5 minutes) of silent, uninterrupted writing in the classroom. (Can double as a means to take attendance.)

1. A question provided at the beginning of class can serve to review material from the previous session, verify completion of the day’s assigned reading, or encourage speculation on a new topic to prime in-class discussion.
2. Focused writing during the class period can provide a forum to cool a heated discussion, to stimulate ideas when discussion is lagging, or to summarize (or express confusion about) challenging new information.
3. A very brief writing period (a minute or two) at the end of class can encourage students to sum up what they have just learned or pose questions that need further clarification, either in the next session or in their own outside reading.

Homework

1. Students write for a set period of time (such as 10 or 15 minutes) to answer a course-related question. Such questions may ask students to analyze/interpret material, clarify similarities and differences, pose an opinion in agreement or disagreement, or ask students to relate course material to contemporary issues and current affairs.
 - a. Writing assignments can provide a stimulus for in-class discussion.
 - b. Focused freewriting can be aimed toward exploring all sides of an issue prior to developing a thesis and writing a final paper on that topic. In this case several freewriting questions would be posed on a topic over time to encourage lengthy engaged inquiry into it.
2. Freewriting can also be assigned without a specific question or prompt. In this case, students pose and answer their own course-related questions.
3. A dual-entry notebook can promote the pairing of observation and analysis. The student may observe visual information (such as a lab experiment or a work of art), research presented in a scholarly article, etc. on the left side of the page. The observation would then be paired with mental process on the right side of the page in the form of a hypothesis regarding the reason for the observed phenomenon or an argument for or against the accuracy of the presented information based on ideas read elsewhere or presented in class.
4. Creative writing such as imagined dialogues between writers, researchers, historical figures, characters, etc. can provide a light-hearted way of engaging deeply with course content.

Exam Preparation

1. Essay questions that may appear on exams are distributed early in the course and students gradually work out answers as course material builds. Instructors may collect student work prior to the exam or they may allow students to use their prepared answers during the exam itself.
2. Practice essays may be assigned as homework with the student recreating exam conditions such as limited time. Then, a sampling of essays is duplicated for class critique and discussion. This provides both a review of course material and an explanation of expectations on how to write essay exams. [Every student's essay must be used for in-class critique at some point during the semester.]

Thesis Writing

1. Students write a single sentence summarizing the argument presented in a reading.
2. Frame paragraphs: The instructor provides a format to guide student's thinking about content. The frame may present the thesis and then the student provides supporting information. Alternatively, the instructor may provide "fill in the blanks" portions to guide students to cull essential information or develop their personal reactions and opinions.

Grading

- Grading is thus focused on the quality of ideas and inquiry evidenced in the writing.
- Low-stakes writing can be treated as a "draft" rather than a "final paper" since low-stakes writing focuses only on the development of ideas and not on their organization or grammatical perfection.
- As the name low-stakes writing suggests, the assignments can be short and their graded value should be small relative to final paper assignments.
- Low-stakes writings may also be turned in with the final paper as a portfolio of the student's progress, research, and revision on a topic. This may help reduce plagiarism.

2.

Typed Assignment Handouts

Before a student paper fails at the level of execution, often, collapse has already occurred with the instructor's failure to properly communicate the assignment.

A careful instructor complements the "assigning" of their writing assignments with a written set of instructions in which the following questions are addressed:

1. Do my students know what I'm asking of them? Are question prompts clear?
2. Do my students know what they're being graded for (**assignment outcomes**)? (Am I grading for content only? Structure, too? Grammar? Mechanics...?)
3. Do my students know which essay format they are being asked to compose? An argumentative essay? A compare/contrast essay? An analysis? A proposal? A research paper? And have I confirmed that they know how to write that format?
4. Have I expressed who the intended audience is for this paper? (One strategy is to have students write from an authoritative perspective, as "someone who knows" explaining to someone who does not know. Another is to have them take a certain perspective or point of view that they have to defend.)
5. Have I listed the assignment requirements? Length? Deadlines? Formatting? Reference-style and formatting? Font, margins, title page, bibliography, acceptable and minimum number of sources (e.g.: a minimum of 5 articles from scholarly journals).
6. **HAVE I STRESSED THE IMPORTANCE OF PROOFREADING?!**
7. **HAVE I STRESSED THE REFERENCE REQUIREMENT?**

Giving a handout for each assignment rather than dictating it or writing it on the chalkboard is a simple action that gives students something concrete, a reference to come back to. It helps the students understand what they "need to do." It also is a good reference for us to return to when asking ourselves if we can improve on the assignment (or what went wrong). **NINE TIMES OUT OF TEN, WHEN A STUDENT FAILS TO WRITE A SATISFACTORY PAPER, THIS IS THE FIRST MIS-STEP TAKEN.**

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You may choose to present the task as a problem or a question for the student to address, a thesis to support, or a rhetorical mode or form to follow. In some cases, you might pose a question or problem for them to explore.

A common misconception is that the quality of student writing stems from the skills and backgrounds of the students. While student capacities constitute an important determinant of their writing, a direct cause of the lack of such quality might lie in the quality of our own assignments. Due to our training, we take many of the skills we have for granted. (Additionally, we take for granted the impact that only one or two courses in Composition may have on our students' ability to write.) We think, for example, that students know what a paper or a book review is. We also assume that the concepts and verbs we use are clear: analyze, compare, explore, etc. In order to make sure that assignments cover some of the basic elements necessary for students to comprehend the task at hand, here (above) are some strategies that may act as a checklist during the design of assignments.

Assignment Handout, Example

Course
Term

Instructor

Argumentative Essay

Write an argumentative essay based on the “five-paragraph essay format” discussed in class, though your paper must be longer than five paragraphs. In other words, the “five paragraph essay” may have been appropriate in high school or even earlier. For this assignment, you should have more than three support paragraphs, and your support topics should require more than one paragraph of development, each.

Your topic should be relevant to the Content Section of this FIQWS course or to what we have discussed so far in class. Topics will be approved in class.

Thesis statements and paper outlines will also be approved in class. The assignment will be executed in *scaffolded* stages.

You will be graded on your ability to:

- State, defend, and develop your argument clearly.
- Respond to the assignment prompt with collegiate-level analysis. (See the “Writing” rubric for definition of standards/expectations).
- Develop ideas articulately, logically, and with loyalty to structure.
- Demonstrate sound sentence structure and logical word choice.
- Demonstrate proper usage of grammar and mechanics.

Your final draft will be a minimum of **4 pages** plus a works cited page.
(Double-spaced. M-Word default formatting should be obvious).

Content, Structure, Grammar/Mechanics each comprises 33% of your grade.

Schedule:

Low-Stakes assignment: brainstorm paper topics due October 1st

Low-Stakes assignment: brainstorm Topic Sentences and Theses Statement drafts: due October 6th

Final Drafts due: October 18th

3.

Scaffolded Assignment Models

or: assigning writing in stages

The second area in which an unsatisfactory paper commonly fails prior to execution is **structure**.

Assignment Scaffolding, or assigning a paper in **small, detailed stages**, helps infinitely to cut these problems off before a student sits down to write a structurally unsound paper to begin with.

Instead of simply saying that a formal paper is due on a certain date, break it up into steps which will allow students to link the learning of writing to the modes of inquiry and discovery in your discipline. The goal is to get students personally engaged with the kinds of questions that propel writers through the writing process, so that it becomes a powerful means of learning in the discipline.

Do yourself and your students a favor. Save time by approving the structure of the paper before your student begins building on an unsound foundation:

1. Assigning Low-Stakes Writing first to give your students the opportunity to develop their ideas and concepts first prior to their first attempts at writing their essay.
 - 1) In one LSW assignment, have students brainstorm topics. Return them with notes and suggestions.
 - 2) In another, have students brainstorm topics and Thesis Statements drafts. Return to them with notes.
2. Once you've approved paper topics and theses statements, formally assign the paper with a typed Assignment Handout. (Later, collect the paper.)
3. Return the paper with **revision-oriented feedback**.
4. Collect revised drafts.

In between these main steps, you might add others, as you see fit and as time allows.

*There is no one way to scaffold an assignment. Rather than asking for an outline, you might consider asking for one or more of the following items:

1. A prospectus, in which the student is asked to describe the problem that will be addressed and the direction that the student intends to take. An effectively designed prospectus assignment can guide students toward a problem-thesis structure and steer them away from writing which lacks focus or strong reasoning.
2. For shorter papers, students can be asked to submit two sentences: a one-sentence question that summarizes the problem the paper addresses and a one-sentence thesis statement that summarizes the writer's argument in response to the question.
3. A 100 to 200-word abstract of their drafts can be an alternative to asking for question-plus-thesis summaries. The act of summarizing one's own argument helps writers clarify their own thinking and often reveals organizational and conceptual problems that prompt revision.

Some notes/suggestions on scaffolding:

1. Instead of asking students to choose “topics” and narrow them, encourage students to pose questions or problems and explore them. Show how inquiry and writing are related.
2. Build adequate talk time into the writing process. Encourage students to bounce ideas off each other, to test arguments, and see how audiences react. Perhaps the most important service offered by the writing center might be the opportunity for students to talk through their ideas in the early stages of drafting.
3. Develop strategies for peer review of drafts, either in class or out of class. After students have written a prospectus or completed a rough draft, well in advance of the final due date, have students exchange them and serve as “readers” for each other.
4. **Hold writing conferences**, especially for students who are having difficulty with the assignment.
5. Make your comments revision oriented.
6. Bring in examples of your own work in progress so that student can see how you go through the writing process yourself.
7. Give advice on the mechanics of revising. If students compose at a computer, explain the advantages of revising off a double-spaced hard copy rather than the screen. If they compose by hand or use conventional typewriters, explain the advantages of writing double-spaced on one side of the page to provide plenty of room for revision and to facilitate cutting and pasting.
8. Although they are important, essay exams should not substitute for writing that goes through multiple drafts.
9. Hold to high standards for finished products. Students do not see much point in revision if they can earn A’s and B’s for their edited first drafts.
10. Give yourself time to make comments that will encourage revisions, and the student time to revise and reformulate, as well as edit.

4.

Revision-Oriented Feedback

First, understand that your feedback is an important part of a dialog that you're having with your student. Together, you are working towards a satisfactory final draft. Rather than point out every mistake, we should seek to facilitate improvement, while doing so in a manner that's both manageable and effective.

When asked for responses to teacher's comments, students usually express confusion. Negative comments, no matter how well-intentioned, rarely lead to attempts at better revision. Make clear, legible comments that are focused on producing a better draft. Make sure to be specific and articulate. **Tell students exactly what they need to know in order to improve the paper. Gaps in logic, gaps in structure...**

When writing the assignment handout: think carefully about what, specifically, you want to grade (your assignment outcomes); make sure you communicate your outcomes; and focus mainly on those components when grading. (So... if you did not indicate that you're grading for grammar and mechanics, you may want to make a comment or two somewhere, or focus on one paragraph in particular where a student repeated the same errors, but don't spend a significant amount of time circling poor punctuation if you're not prepared to take the instruction any further or provide the student with the necessary resource/s they need to improve their punctuation.)

Make comments that help make students better editors of their own work.

As well, giving a student prepared handouts for Grammar/Mechanics issues (or photocopies or chapter suggestions from a Grammar/Mechanics handbook) will help save you time before you sit down with your student during your office hour, or help the save the time of a Writing Center tutor (which you should also lean on for a resource).

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Notes on Giving Feedback

Making effective comments requires a plan and consistent philosophy. We propose the following hierarchy: higher order concerns, lower order concerns, and final comments.

Higher Order Concerns:

Here, we are concerned with the quality of ideas, organization, development, and clarity of the paper. Here are five questions the grader should have in mind in order to address these issues.

- 1) *Does the draft follow the assignment?*
- 2) *Does the writer have a thesis that addresses an appropriate problem or question?*

Many students have difficulties coming up with a thesis. Other students may have a thesis, but it is unclear, buried, or addressed late in the essay. This happens when the student develops a thesis in the course of writing.

- 3) *If the draft has a thesis, what is the quality of the argument?*

With this question, we are concerned about the strengths and weaknesses of the ideas in the paper.

4) *Is the draft effectively organized at the macro level?*

This can be a challenge to students. The final product is usually quite different than the first draft, even with professional writers, and students usually require more guidance in this area. We break this question into smaller questions. **Can the paper be outlined** or tree diagramed? What needs to be added or removed? Does the paper need to be reorganized? Are there adequate transitions? Here are some sample comments:

- a) How does this part fit?
- b) You lost me in that last sentence.
- c) What's the point of this section?
- d) How does the previous paragraph relate to this?
- e) Your introduction made me expect X, but this is about Y.
- f) You're bouncing all over; I need a road map.

5) *Is the draft organized effectively at the micro level?*

This questions deals with the organization of each paragraph. Tell-tale signs of problems here are short, choppy paragraphs, or for the other extreme, long paragraphs with a wandering focus. The question to ask here is whether the paragraphs are unified and coherent.

Lower Order Concerns:

These issues involve **grammatical errors, misspellings, punctuation** mistakes, and **awkwardness in style**. This is the cause of major annoyance among professors, and it frequently distracts them from the ideas in the paper. **We discourage line-editing- marking every mistake in the paper. This tends to shift the focus away from the ideas in the paper and does not seem to improve student writing.**

When a student reads aloud his draft, he or she frequently corrects his mistakes, sometimes not even realizing the difference between what he wrote and what he said. Requiring a student to read aloud their draft will make them better editors. Other studies have shown that when students write about a familiar topic, something autobiographical for example, they write according to proper academic standards. But as the topics become more complicated and less familiar, their writing skills deteriorate. This study suggests that their mistakes are due to an incomplete understanding of the material they are expected to write about. To counter this phenomenon, teachers can employ scaffolding methods so that students are given a chance to build up their knowledge of material. This study also gives another justification of putting more focus on the ideas presented in the paper than on grammatical issues in the paper, and how a student can improve the explanation of their ideas. A better understanding of the material will reduce grammatical mistakes.

With the above studies in mind, we propose a method aimed at putting the responsibility of editing on the student.

- 1) If the paper is riddled with grammatical errors so that it cannot be evaluated, withhold a grade or give a lowered grade with the comment that it won't be graded until the student corrects them. If the student requires help, mark the lines with a mistake by an "X" on the side of the paper.
- 2) If a mistake is being repeated, point it out. Even if you do not explain the rule, the student knows what to look for. A comment can look like this:

- a) You have lots of sentence errors here, but many of them are of two types: (1) apostrophe errors- you tend to use apostrophes with plurals rather than possessives; (2) comma splices (remember those from English class?)
- 3) You may decide to line-edit one or two paragraphs, and have the student do the rest. Make sure to be clear when an edit is for stylistic reasons or for grammatical reasons.

There are issues besides grammar that fall under the category of lower order concerns. Stylistic issues differ from grammar issues, in that grammar errors are in violation of standard edited English. Issues like wordiness, choppiness, use of the passive voice are not grammatical issues, but stylistic. How these issues are dealt with between disciplines can vary greatly. In some disciplines, the use of "I" is acceptable, while other disciplines frown upon the practice. It helps students when these distinctions are made clearly. We suggest creating a Top Three list of pet peeves you have and make them known to students.

Final Comments:

Many professors use final comments to justify the final grade of the paper. This tends to put the focus on the weaknesses of the paper. **The purpose of the comments should be to encourage improvement.** We recommend using a strengths/major problems approach: sum up the strengths, identify the problems that require attention, and make a few specific suggestions. Here is a sample comment:

When this essay is good, it is very, very good. I like very much your discussion of Diem's leadership and the rise of dissent in Vietnam. Your consideration of our fears of not being taken seriously by Diem is also strong. In these discussions, you set your ideas clearly and with strong evidence.

However there are other hills and valleys here as well. You need to focus the reader on your primary concerns in an introduction. You need to expand your consideration of the military and bring in more evidence toward the end. For your revision, pay particular attention to my marginal comments, where I note the places that need more expansion and development.

5. Revision

People learn to write – and produce better writing – only after revising.

Without creating revised drafts, and applying (or at least considering) instructor feedback, the student-writing process is only halfway done.

Resources

The Anatomy of an Essay

Introduction

- ❑ Begins (“introduces”) your essay
- ❑ Contains your Thesis Statement: one sentence that states clearly what position you will take in the essay
- ❑ Introduces reasons/evidence that you will discuss in detail in the body paragraphs

Body Paragraphs

- ❑ All sentences are related to ONE main idea
- ❑ The TOPIC SENTENCE:
 - Supports the Thesis Statement of the essay
 - Introduces the idea that guides the paragraph and lets the reader know what to expect
 - Should be a specific idea that needs to be proven
- ❑ SUPPORTING SENTENCES:
 - Related to topic sentence and controlling ideas
 - Offer evidence to support, describe, or define the topic
 - Can answer the questions: Who, What, When, Where, Why, or How (a.k.a. the “5 W’s”)
- ❑ CONCLUDING SENTENCE:
 - Re-states the main idea, offers a solution or prediction, answers any unresolved questions

Conclusion

- ❑ Signals the end of the essay and leaves the reader with a final thought
- ❑ Can be a call to action (What do you want the reader to do?)
- ❑ Can be a final point that ties together all the ideas in the essay
- ❑ Can ask a question that leaves the reader with a final problem to think about
- ❑ Avoid using the overused phrases “to conclude” or “in conclusion”: we *know* you’re concluding if it’s the last paragraph!
- ❑ WHATEVER strategy you choose, a conclusion should leave the reader with a strong, clear idea of what your position is

Some final thoughts:

- ❑ Argumentative essays are designed to convince a reader to take a certain position on an issue
- ❑ Stay away from wimpy statements: use strong, declarative statements
- ❑ “*Think* locally, *write* globally”: connect personal situations to universal conditions (e.g. “I live with my parents” is more effective as “many students live with their parents”)
- ❑ Use transitions to connect ideas