



## Use Formal Writing Assignments to Facilitate Students' Entry into Your Discipline

Our students may not have extensive experience writing in our discipline, and their freshman writing class does not prepare them for writing in the disciplines. We can help students by teaching the specific characteristics of writing in our discipline and assigning disciplinary writing projects.

### Assign a Writing Project in Your Own Discipline

As a student, did you ever have a writing assignment like the following (or as a professor, have you ever assigned writing that resulted in the following):

"Your term paper is due at the end of the semester. It can be on any aspect of the course that interests you, but I must approve your topic in advance." Students may then submit the topic, but typically not in the form of a research question or tentative thesis. The instructor may comment that the topic needs to be narrower, and then "no further contact between teacher and student occurs. At the end of the term, the teacher collects and grades the papers. Some teachers mark the papers copiously; others make only cryptic end comments. Much to teachers' disappointment, many students never pick up their papers from the teacher's office" (Bean, 2001, pp. 73-74). Bean suggests that these term papers "often do little to enhance learning of course content" (p. 75).

Bean and Melzer (2021) discourage the use of the "inauthentic pseudo-genre called a 'research paper' or 'term paper,' which often results in an informational 'all about report' on a topic" (p. 189). Instead, create a writing assignment that is a genre used by professionals in your field.

### Teach Specific Characteristics of Writing in Our Discipline

"Each discipline poses its own kinds of problems and conducts inquiries, uses data, and makes arguments in its own characteristic fashion" (Bean, 2001, p. 3).

In addition, students may not have participated in deep research and analysis: "Forty percent of 12<sup>th</sup> graders [claim] that they never or hardly ever write papers of at least three pages in length" (Nokes & De La Paz, 2018, p. 557).

In fact, students' past writing instruction may "lead to a view of writing as a set of isolated skills unconnected to an authentic desire to converse with interested readers about real ideas" (Bean, 2001, p. 15). Students may come to view writing as "merely packaging and thus a separate thing from 'content'" (p. 15). If our evaluations of student papers emphasize good grammar over good thinking, we may be contributing to that belief. Students may believe that "good writing is good writing" in every context; it is our role to help them see writing as contributing to knowledge in our disciplines.

"The most intensive and demanding tool for eliciting sustained critical thought is a well-designed writing assignment on a subject matter problem" (Bean, 2001, p. xiii). Kellogg (2008) reiterates the importance of assigning writing in the discipline: Writing becomes a "form of problem-solving" (p. 2). We can assign formal writing tasks that use a "cognitive apprenticeship approach to embed explicit instruction on writing, argument and thinking" in our discipline (Nokes & De La Paz, 2018, p. 563).

## Formal Writing Assignments

When creating a formal writing prompt, Kellogg (2008) claims that college students are often more engaged when assigned writing that is “professionally relevant” to their own plans (p. 18) (an “apprenticeship”).

Since each discipline has its own way of communicating ideas, we need to help students enter the scholarly conversations. We expect our students to “adequately engage in written argumentation,” but many students “lack sufficient understanding of what constitutes robust argumentation and how different argumentation elements are organized to present a reasoned argument in their writing” (Hyland, 1997, as cited in Crossley et al., 2022, p. 2). In particular, argumentative/persuasive writing is “one of the most difficult types of writing to produce,” because it requires an “analytic structure that requires critical arguments to be systematically supported” (Applebee, 1984, as cited in Crossley et al., 2022, p. 2).

“Formal writing assignments which require revision and multiple drafts keep students on task for extended periods and are among our most powerful tools for teaching critical thought. They can range in length from one-paragraph ‘microthemes’ to major papers. . . . Good academic assignments usually require that the student formulate and support a thesis in response to a problem” (Bean, 2001, p. 6).

## Tips for Improving Disciplinary Writing Prompts

- **Clarify purpose & specify audience, format, etc.** Student writing and critical thinking are often improved when the instructor clarifies the purpose of the writing in terms of course outcomes, and by specifying the audience, the format, etc. (Bean, 2001, p. 77).
- **Provide rubric with prompt.** “Well-designed assignments up front prevent problems later on. . . . When you distribute the assignment in class or online, also include your grading rubric” (Bean & Melzer, 2021, p. 279).
- **Consider your reasoning for student writing.** “Consider assigning one or two short papers rather than a long one . . . that teach disciplinary ways of using evidence and making arguments” (Bean & Melzer, 2021, p. 279).
- **Share the review process.** Use student peer review or consultations with student advisors in the FHSS Writing Lab to help students with drafts (Bean & Melzer, 2021, p. 278). Remember that you can personally “train” the writing advisors in the FHSS Writing Lab to respond to your main concerns in your students’ papers! Contact Joyce for more information.
- **Make students accountable.** Require students to submit all earlier rough drafts with their final papers.
- **Provide relevant scaffolding.** Argumentative writing can be improved by “providing students with scaffolding in the form of templates, outlines, graphic organizers, and sentence starters” (Nokes & La Paz, 2018, p. 557).

## References

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