



Redesign Writing Prompts to Improve Student Writing

There is no such thing as writing in general! It is a myth that “Good writing is good writing.”

The characteristics of good writing in each discipline are unique. And even within a single discipline “every new situation, audience, and purpose requires writers to learn to do and understand new possibilities and constraints for their writing. . . . Context, audience, purpose, medium, history, and values of the community all impact what writing is and needs to be in each situation” (Wardle, 2017, p. 30).

Students “don’t know how to learn what they need to learn in new writing situations . . . [and may] attempt to rigidly use what has worked for them in other situations, only to find out the hard way that such rigid re-use is not appropriate in the new setting” (Wardle, 2017, p. 31).

“The purpose of a writing prompt is to invite students to think about, develop a perspective about, and write about a topic. A writing prompt introduces and focuses on the writing topic. It also provides clear information or instructions about the essay writing task” (Kline, C. B. [2020]. *Writing made easy*. Independent publisher.) If students do not understand the writing prompt, the writing and critical thinking may not align with the instructor’s goals.

Redesigning Writing Prompts

“Research tells us that student success in [writing] is directly related to the support and direction provided in the assignments” (Gardner, 2008, p. 2). Well-designed prompts can prevent problems. “If an assignment is vague or unfocused, students may barrage you with questions or submit papers that don’t do what you intended” (Bean & Melzer, 2021, p. 279).

Writing Prompts should be created based on what you want from students. Teach and require your discipline’s methods for researching, reading, and writing.

Consider These Three Writing Prompts

Writing prompt #1: Write an 8-10 page paper on any aspect of the course. Follow Chicago style.

Writing prompt #2: Choose a topic related to this course and “find gaps or remaining unknowns in the literature and establish a new research question . . . show why the new research question is problematic (no one else has solved it) and significant (it is worth solving)” (Bean & Melzer, 2021, p. 60).

Writing prompt #3: Recently, several hundred people gathered in a public park to persuade those who are disabled in the community to vote for their proposal. Governor Hopkins felt that the gathering was inappropriate and banned public assemblies that intended to persuade those with cognitive disabilities. Research professional literature and respond to the evidence either by supporting Governor Hopkins’ ban or arguing against it.

Consider These Three Writing Prompts

None of the prompts are perfect; however, they could each be revised to fit your learning outcomes.

- The first prompt is a pseudo-academic prompt – one that students would only encounter in a school setting.
- The second prompt may require more than students are prepared to accomplish.
- The third prompt may be unsettling for students because they often come to college with the goal of getting the “right answers.” They may be uncomfortable expressing their own opinions. Create writing prompts that “teach disciplinary ways of using evidence and making arguments” (Bean & Melzer, 2021, p. 279).

Common Elements of Writing Prompts

Purpose of the writing assignment — *why* do you want students to complete it?

- Deepen students’ content knowledge
- Teach conventions of writing in your discipline
- Prepare students for publishing

Process – *how* do you want students to complete it?

- Choose a topic
- Follow this format . . .
- Do research with the intent to . . .
- Synthesize scholarly sources
- Complete the minimum length
- Indicate whether it is single-authored or work with others
- Review the good and poor examples . . .

Audience – *who* is the audience?

- Based on an understanding of the audience, decide what can be assumed

Schedule -- *when* will students complete the assignment?

- Will there be preliminary assignments such as a proposal, etc.?
- Will you require drafts?
- Will you require a visit to the FHSS Writing Lab?
- When will the final paper be due?
- Will students be allowed to revise and resubmit?

Assessment – *how* will students be evaluated?

- When you distribute the writing prompt, also give students the rubrics you plan to use in assessing their papers
- What criteria will you include for grading?
- Will you offer the opportunity for students to do a peer review?
- Will you review drafts?

(adapted from Lindemann, 2001, pp. 220-221)

Common Problems That Appear in Student Papers

- “Students tend to reach closure too quickly. They do not suspend judgment, question assumptions, evaluate evidence, imagine alternative answers . . . and often write truncated and underdeveloped papers” (Bean & Melzer, 2021, p. 8).
- Students may submit final papers which are simply “edited rough drafts” (Bean & Melzer, 2021, p. 9).
- Students may not understand the difference between researching a topic and persuading an audience to take action.

Research a Topic	Identify a Problem & Suggest a Partial Solution
Informative	Persuasive
Summarize sources	Synthesize sources
Restate sources	Analyze and evaluate sources
Find 10 sources	Find 2-3 sources & based on the readings, choose 2-3 more sources . . .
Report findings	Situate in the current conversation on the topic
	Address counter-evidence

Remember – you do not need to create writing prompts alone!

- Talk to former instructors of the course
- Ask peers for prompts & to have them review the drafts of your prompts
- Use online resources to find writing prompts that you can modify for your own use
- Joyce is always happy to help

References

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Lindemann, E. (2001). *A rhetoric for writing teachers*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Wardle, E. (2017) You can learn to write in general. *Bad ideas about writing*. Open access textbooks.

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