

Best Practices in Designing Writing Assignments*Rebecca Lorimer Leonard**Associate Professor, English Department**Former Director, UMass Amherst Writing Center*

Successful assignments encourage students' engagement with course material, promote critical thinking, and help students learn characteristic ways of asking questions, analyzing data, and making arguments in your discipline. No matter what type of writing you assign, how you present the assignments to your students can affect their success.

1. Be clear about your pedagogical goals and design assignments to meet those goals.

- Continually share your pedagogical goals for the course and for writing assignments with students.
- Sequence writing assignments to build on developing writing skills by progressing from easier to more difficult kinds of writing and thinking (e.g., move from summaries to arguments, from narrow questions to more complex problems).

2. Put the assignment in writing, making sure to explain

- The writing task (what you want them to do)
- The student writer's role
- Audience
- Format (length, resources to be used, manuscript details, etc.)
- Expectations for process (draft dates, peer review workshops, revision dates)
- Criteria for evaluation

3. Discuss the assignment in class.

- Discuss how to read and interpret writing assignments.
- Ask students how they plan to approach the assignment to clarify any misinterpretations they may have and to help them get started on the right track.
- Allow time for student questions.
- Model successful sample papers.
- Do a "norming" session by asking students to evaluate a variety of sample essays (or parts of essays) and explain why the good papers were successful.
- Try writing the assignment yourself and share your efforts with your students.

4. Provide opportunities for students to approach writing as a process.

- Provide students with multiple opportunities for feedback and revision with proposal and draft due dates.
- Have students work in peer review groups together, presenting their work and asking each other questions.
- Hold brief individual conferences in your office to talk about plans or drafts.
- Have students give class presentations on their work.

5. Move through a checklist before distributing the assignment.

- Does the assignment:
 - make clear which course goals this writing task helps students meet?
 - specify the audience and purpose of the assignment?
 - outline clearly all required sub-parts or prompt choices of the assignment?
 - point students toward appropriate prewriting activities or sources of information?
 - include grading criteria on the assignment sheet?
 - specify the format of the final paper (documentation, headings/sections, page layout)?
 - anticipate potential problems and offer explanations for them?