

WID Conversations: Crafting Better Writing Prompts

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A. Designing Assignments

1. Consider which skills you value and which learning outcomes the assignment should address
2. Decide on the level of difficulty appropriate for your students at that point in the semester
3. Decide whether to assign the same topic/task to all students or give them the freedom of choice
4. Decide on a task/topic that is meaningful and relevant, serving a purpose the students recognize as real
5. Decide on the format and genre of assignment based on the previous criteria

B. Writing Assignment Prompts

Assignment prompts should include the following information:

1. Task & Purpose Overview

Explain the subject matter and context of the assignment, introduce the topic or remind students of something discussed in class, and be clear about how the assignment fits into the context of the course and how it helps them fulfill the objectives of the course.

- Prioritize which skills you value and design assignments accordingly. Explain those priorities clearly to students
- Make the level of difficulty appropriate for students at that place in the term
- Strive for clarity about why you are assigning this writing project: Why are you asking students to write this assignment? How does doing this work benefit their learning? This helps with student motivation in completing the assignment.

2. Task & Questions

Explain what kind of writing or thinking you want your students to do. To do so, break the assignment down into specific tasks or questions. Tasks are requirements and questions are suggestions for students to begin thinking about the topic (not requirements).

- Words like analyze, summarize, or compare direct them to think about the topic in specific ways. Words such as how, what, when, where, and why guide their attention toward specific information. Be aware that these words can mean very different things from one discipline to another or even from one instructor to another.
- Including many questions may confuse the students, and they may think they need to answer them all in turn

3. Audience

Help students understand who their audience is, what information they might already have, and what their stance toward the subject is. This is especially helpful if the audience for the paper is not you. Help the students understand what the audience should get from reading the paper: Will they be better informed, be persuaded, etc.?

4. Format or Genre

Help students make decisions about document design, organization, style, length, documentation, etc.

5. Schedule and Process

Provide a schedule for the students to follow.

- Consider creating small assignments that build into larger projects. Smaller assignments both help students structure their time as well as learn the process of research writing. In addition, such sequences of assignments help you check in on student progress and help struggling students before it is too late. This also helps instructors identify the writing quality of each student, which likely leads to fewer cases of unnoticed plagiarism.

6. Evaluation Criteria

Describe success in realistic and understandable terms (checklist/rubric).

C. Tips to create an assignment prompt

1. Clarity:

- a. Be clear about what you want and don't want
- b. Write clearly and be concise
- c. Include only information the students need
- d. Refer explicitly to elements in the course
- e. Define who the reader is (who does not always have to be you).

2. Diversity in writing modes/tasks: ask students for various modes of writing, not always essays and reports (abstract of a required reading, summary, interpretation, solution, impact statement, museum display notes, manual for clients, etc.)

3. Design: Make sure the prompt is visually organized and easy to read

4. Examples: Share past student writing with commentary on what exactly makes them good/improvable.

5. Questions: Invite questions early and often, whether in class when explaining the assignment or as they are working on it

6. Review: Ask a colleague to peer review your assignment handout, or try it out yourself. By visiting the Writing Center; tutors are also available to respond to your

writing prompt, to give you an idea of how your students might read and understand your expectations

D. Tips to help students while working on the assignment

1. Write about their progress: ask students to write/talk briefly about their work in progress. They will express anxieties, concerns and success which leads to an in class discussion that everyone can benefit from.
2. Focus statements: require student to write focus statements where they briefly state and explain why they chose to tackle a particular point, what they want to say about it and why it's worth mentioning.
3. Peer review sessions: organize peer review sessions in which students can respond to one another's work in progress according to a set of criteria or questions.
4. University resources: Encourage students to seek the help of a librarian or a writing center tutor.

E. Additional Resources

Anderson, Paul, et al. "How to create high-impact writing assignments that enhance learning and development and reinvigorate WAC/WID programs: What almost 72,000 undergraduates taught us." *Across the Disciplines* 13.4 (2016): n4.

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