A Guide for Writing Faculty

Writing in composition courses is more complex than one might initially think, and designing a writing course that is both effective and challenging should take a number of factors into consideration. Namely, as a writing faculty, you will want to decide on the major assignments for the course, construct the order of those assignments as they relate to skill-building objectives, and design informal writing assignments to assist with understanding and application of lessons and writing strategies. Such a foundation will ensure that you understand the purpose of the assignment as well as how it relates to the larger course, and when instructors can articulate clear and meaningful purposes affiliated with assigned writing projects, students learn that each assignment is more than just an assignment to be completed, that a paper is more than just a grade, and that the objectives have some larger goal.

The purpose behind assignments is, and should be, varied, emphasizing process-based stages, focusing on development of critical thinking and writing skills, offering time for self and peer review, and giving opportunities for reflection and self-evaluation. Such an array of objectives will help students to understand their writing processes better while focusing on achieving the course’s learning outcomes.

Informal Writing

Students know that composition courses have writing assignments, but often, they underestimate just how much writing (and paper printing!) is involved. Also, students might not immediately consider informal writing to be important, thinking that the major essays are what matter most and discrediting those smaller in-class writings or those homework responses on the readings. However, it is our job to share with students the purpose of these smaller, less formal writing tasks, explaining the benefits of relating to course readings, strengthening writing skills, brainstorming ideas, enhancing critical thinking, and processing possibilities and connections that might assist with contributions in class discussions.

Some informal writing assignments include, but are not limited to, the below:

- Freewrites;
- Journal entries or response logs;
- Reflective or invention paragraphs; and
- “What you already know” statements.

Instructors should use informal writing as a low-stakes assignment aimed at offering students opportunities to develop skills, work through content, invent ideas, or even organize developing essays. Instructors may also use them to hone rhetorical and critical analyses and to invite greater awareness of students’ writing, for themselves and for us as their professors. These assignments should be woven in throughout the course, appropriately and effectively, and should occur as homework and in-class assignments. Moreover, informal writing assignments will often strategically connect to a skill or invention prompt associated with one of the course’s formal writing assignments, becoming a means to implement stages in the writing process while offering instructors’ a venue to provide early feedback.¹

¹ For more information on ways to integrate process and revision in courses, refer to “Building in Process and Revision: A Handout of the Southern Miss Writing Center.”
Formal Writing

Composition classes, naturally, incorporate formal writing assignments. But teaching formal writing can be complex and even a challenge. We, as instructors, should consider larger purposes of each assignment and ensure that formal writing assignments uphold a certain trajectory that matches objectives associated with that particular course and level. Furthermore, in each assignment, students should be asked to analyze the rhetorical situation and make effective choices based on their analysis and assigned genre. Specifically, instructors might encourage students to analyze the audience, determine the essay’s purpose, inquire why the topic matters, and articulate an original argument – all before ever writing (or typing) a word. When appropriate, formal writing should require in-text citations and a works cited and should work to establish authorial voice as a response to a larger conversation.

Formal assignments should be scaffolded in a skill-building manner and should go through stages, including drafts, peer reviews, and revisions, stressing the process that precedes the product.

Students should have the chance to review their essays and their peers’ essays, workshopping and critiquing each. Objective-based peer review sessions will help when strengthening content, stylistic and rhetorical choices, and craft, in general, all in efforts to improve level of sophistication and students’ ability to work towards producing stronger, college-level essays with strong arguments and voice.

Some possible formal writing assignments include, but are not limited to, the below:
- Narrative (such as Significant Moment or Literacy Narrative);
- Profile of person, place, or community;
- Progress Report; and
- Original Argument

Evaluation of Writing Assignments

Composition instructors typically weight formal writing assignments more while informal ones might fall under daily or homework grades. Instructors may grade essays holistically, assigning letters or numbers, or they might use rubrics with specific criteria. Also, instructors may ask for just a final essay or a project portfolio, showcasing the student’s writing process of that one essay. Furthermore, some faculty may decide to assign a grade to each essay while others will use a portfolio method. Another variation in grading is hard copy versus electronic submission; also, instructors may choose to use pencil or (colored) pen or to use inserted comments or even voice-over feedback. Instructors might even require students to use TurnItIn, a database designed for grading electronically as well as identifying plagiarism. Each method has its own value, and we, as instructors, decide what will be most effective for our class and students. No matter the method, instructors are encouraged to offer feedback on at least one stage of the writing process as well as to include either written or typed narrative feedback on final products.

Other Comments

By weaving in informal and formal writing assignments effectively, we are asking students to write more, essentially creating more spaces for writing and critical thinking skills to develop. Assignments and lessons work together to instruct students how to analyze rhetorical situations better while teaching them that they are becoming scholars in their fields. Furthermore, assignments should work to enhance students’ investment in their essay topics as well as in their personal writing journeys.