Teaching with Writing

**Teaching with Writing (TWW) Tip
Creating and Using Formative Writing
Assignments**

As writers, we know that writing is a process that takes place over time and is made up of different sorts of intellectual activities. As instructors, however, we often assign writing tasks as large, single assignments at the end of a semester. This can be too late for feedback to be meaningful or effective for future use and can encourage students to procrastinate until the last minute. By breaking up these large writing assignments into smaller "formative" assignments, you can not only provide more timely feedback but also better train students to approach writing as a process made up of different, equally important intellectual activities.

Formative assignments are low-stake, high-value smaller assignments that are later brought together into larger, cumulative assignments. For example, instead of assigning a single writing project all at once, you might schedule a series of small assignments that, for instance, require students to summarize the theories they've studied, analyze the evidence they will be using, and formulate and present the question and thesis to be addressed. After students have received feedback on each of these component parts, they bring them all together into the larger assignment.

There are many benefits to breaking up large assignments into smaller, formative assignments:
- They encourage students to think of writing as an ongoing, developing process rather than as a single activity done all at once.
- They can keep students on track in terms of both time and content (by, for example, helping them avoid writing an entire assignment at the last minute on a bad or misguided idea).
- Rather than piling up all your own feedback work at once, they allow you to spread it out and give immediate, targeted feedback to the intellectual task at hand.
- They emphasize and target specific skills for the course or discipline (for example, source use, results discussion, and so on).

How to write formative assignments:
- Break a large writing assignment into its component pieces (e.g., introduction, conclusion, summary, methods, etc.).
  - Prepare explicit directions for each piece. For example, provide specific explanations for what belongs in a successful introduction, or what a summary component requires, and so on. (The best instructions also tell students why these things are required.)
  - Prepare straightforward rubrics for evaluating the assignment according to the

given directions.
- ○ Pace the deadlines for the assignments appropriately.
    - ■ For example, if the first thing students need to do is analyze evidence, have them complete this assignment first; if the last thing they should do is write the introduction, have them complete this assignment last.
- Use assignments to target potential stumbling blocks for students; if, for instance, you know students struggle with thesis development or counterargument, create assignments focused on these areas.
- Formative assignments can also focus on specific writing conventions of the discipline, such as tone, voice, terminology, use of sources, and so on.

Learn more:
- WAC Clearinghouse, "Sequencing Writing Assignments"
- MIT Comparative Media Studies/Writing, "Sequencing Writing Assignments"
- Kate Kiefer, "Examples of Writing-to-Learn Activities"
- University of Minnesota Center for Writing, "Informal, In-class Writing Activities"

Further support: Visit us online at http://writing.umn.edu/tww. To schedule a phone, email, or face-to-face teaching consultation, click here.

Our purpose is to provide practical strategies for teaching with writing. Our goal is to offer timely and pragmatic support to faculty members and instructors who teach with writing in undergraduate and graduate courses in all disciplinary areas.