



Teaching with Writing (TWW) Tip
The Write Situation:
Suggestions on Assignment Clarity and Timing

Last month's TWW Tip focused on ways to align your course and syllabus with recent findings in [The Meaningful Writing Project](#). This month's tip continues this thread by suggesting ways to make your meaningful assignments clear and timely for your students.

Establish the Situation for Your Assignment

“At the heart of every assignment is the **rhetorical situation** — someone writing to someone about something for some purpose” (Wilhoit, quoted in Melzer, 20). As writing researchers Gottschalk and Hjortshoj point out, students are better prepared to write effectively in response to an assignment when the following questions are clearly addressed in the prompt: (1) *What am I writing about?* (2) *For whom am I writing?* (3) *For what purpose am I writing?* (4) *In what form am I writing?* Making clear the **purpose**, the **audience** and the specific **genre** and **format** (e.g. lab report, prospectus, white paper, memo, literary analysis, memoir, etc.) for your assignment can help students focus their efforts, which in turn can lead to more authentic writing.

Examples: Along with establishing a specific writing scenario, each of these prompts provides clear language about the task, purpose, audience and genre of the assignment.

from Environmental Engineering:

“Montgomery Burns sits on the Springfield City Council, and he is always looking for ways to save money. He insists it is perfectly acceptable to operate the flocculation basin according to instructions he read on Wikipedia, using $G = 700 \text{ sec}^{-1}$ and $\Theta = 700 \text{ sec}$. As an expert in this area, kindly explain to your client in the cover letter why this approach will not work and why a tapered flocculation is the better way to go” (Oulton, California Polytechnic State University).

from Spanish Literature:

“Imagine that you are an Andalusian adib living in tenth-century Córdoba. Write a letter to a like-minded friend in North Africa (or Barcelona) and describe your life so as to convince him to join you at the Umayyad court. Also tell him something about your favorite genre of poetry and what you have been hearing and writing lately” (Gottschalk and Hjortshoj 44).

from Nursing:

“You are a staff nurse at a large urban hospital. Recently the hospital became embroiled in a major controversy when several nurses were discovered to be practicing therapeutic touch (TT) on patients without the permission or knowledge of their supervisors or of attending physicians. The hospital governing board reprimanded the nurses and issued a general statement forbidding the practice of TT, which they called ‘non-scientific quackery.’ Research the professional literature on TT, looking especially for evidence-based studies. Then write a 4–5 page argument addressed to the hospital board, supporting or attaching the board’s decision to forbid the practice of TT. Support your position with reasons and evidence based on the professional literature” (Bean 232).

Ask for the Concrete before the Abstract

Research in learning theory has shown that students are more successful at complex tasks, such as argumentation, synthesis, and the application of theories, when they have had initial opportunities to work with concrete examples, cases, and personal experiences.

Example: Prior to writing an essay analyzing a current public health issue through the lens of “structural violence,” students in a medical anthropology course write short pieces defining structural violence and identifying examples.

Measure Progress through Repetition

Scaffolding shorter assignments or segmenting longer ones can help students move through key learning phases from the concrete to the abstract. Equally effective is the repetition of meaningful assignments and sequences. To develop skills of summary, explication, analysis and synthesis, students need repeat opportunities to practice such skills in their writing. If you have a meaningful assignment, consider using it more than once.

Contribute to a Community of Teachers

Do you have an assignment prompt or a sequence of assignments that have worked well in your class? If so, please consider [sharing your assignment with us](#). We’re updating our web examples and would love to include yours.

Works Cited

Bean, John. *Engaging Ideas: The Professor’s Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking and Active Learning in the Classroom*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996.

Gottschalk, Katherine and Keith Hjortshoj. *The Elements of Teaching Writing: A Resource for Instructors in all Disciplines*. New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2003.

Melzer, Dan. *Assignments Across the Curriculum: A National Study of College Writing*. Logan: Utah State University Press, 2014.

Soliday, Mary. *Everyday Genres: Writing Assignments Across the Disciplines*. NCTE/CCCC and Southern Illinois University Press, 2011.

Additional Resources

<http://writing.umn.edu/tww/assignments/designing.html>

<https://writing.colostate.edu/guides/teaching/wassign/pop2d.cfm>

Further support

See the [Teaching with Writing pages](#) on the Center for Writing website for teaching resources, including sample assignments and syllabi. As many of you know, our WAC program also hosts the popular [Teaching with Writing event series](#). Each semester, this series offers free workshops and discussions. Visit us [online](#). To schedule a phone, email, or face-to-face teaching consultation, [click here](#).