



## Designing an Effective Writing Assignment

By Howard Tinberg

### What happens when a writing assignment goes wrong?

Effective writing assignments give our students the tools with which to meet our expectations and to achieve learning goals. When our instructions do not enable students to meet those expectations or achieve those goals, all parties become frustrated by the outcome. While many reasons exist for why students fail to meet our expectations, it is safe to say that a badly designed assignment can surely contribute to such a negative outcome. It's been my experience that writing assignments can be part of the problem when:

- Students are not engaged with the subject
- Few choices are given
- Expected outcomes are left unstated or are implied rather than explicitly stated
- The writing has little connection to course objectives and has an unclear purpose
- Criteria for success are not given
- The form or genre is left unclear
- Models—for new and unfamiliar forms of writing--are not offered
- Tasks are not sufficiently challenging
- Complicated tasks are not broken down into manageable steps
- Insufficient time is given to complete the task.

### What kinds of questions or steps can lead to effective writing assignments?

In *A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers* (4<sup>th</sup> ed. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001), Erika Lindemann offers advice of use to all teachers interested in using writing assignments to elicit student learning. She encourages faculty to ask the following questions when planning their assignments:

1. What do I want my students to do?
2. How do I want them to do the assignment?
3. For whom are students writing?
4. When will students do the assignment?
5. What will I do with the assignment? (220-21)

The first question goes to the purpose of the assignment. We need to ask the second question in order to be mindful of the process and not just the product: exactly how are students to work on this assignment? The third question goes to the complex matter of audience: to whom or for whom is the student writing? The fourth question raises not only the matter of how much time to give students but what relationship exists between the assignment and other portions of the course: Why does the assignment come now and not later? Where does it fit in this course? The final question is linked to the all-important matter of how we will evaluate the writing, how we will respond. What does a successful paper look like?

### Final advice

My final words of advice are these:

- Make your purpose, format, and expected outcome explicit
- Articulate clearly and explicitly the criteria for success (establishing, perhaps, a rubric or set of grading criteria)
- Read student response as critical feedback on the assignment
- Be prepared to revise the assignment and to enact the changes.