

FACULTY FOCUS

# Special Report

## Keys to Designing Effective Writing and Research Assignments

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# Keys to Designing Effective Writing and Research Assignments

Writing assignments, particularly for first- and second-year college students, are probably one of those items in the syllabus that some professors dread almost as much as their students do. Yet despite the fact that essays, research papers, and other types of writing assignments are time consuming and, at times, frustrating to grade, they also are vital to furthering student learning.

Of course part of the frustration comes when professors believe that students should arrive on campus knowing how to write research papers. Many do not. With as much content as professors have to cover, many feel they simply can't take time to teach the research skills required to write a quality, college-level term paper.

But as teaching professors who support the writing across the curriculum movement would tell you, improving students' writing skills is everyone's business, and carries with it many short- and long-term benefits for teachers and students alike. Further, many instructors are finding ways to add relevance to writing assignments by aligning them with the type of writing required in a specific profession as an alternative to the traditional, semester-long research paper.

This special report was created to provide instructors with fresh perspectives and proven strategies for designing more effective writing assignments. It features 11 articles from *The Teaching Professor*, including:

- Revising the Freshman Research Assignment
- Writing an Analytical Paper in Chunks
- Designing Assignments to Minimize Cyber-Cheating
- Chapter Essays as a Teaching Tool
- Writing (Even a Little Bit) Facilitates Learning
- How to Conduct a 'Paper Slam'

While not every approach discussed in this special report will work for every course, every time, I invite you to identify a few that look appropriate for your courses, and implement them next semester. You just might be surprised by the results.

Maryellen Weimer  
Editor  
*The Teaching Professor*

# Table of Contents

20 Questions about Writing Assignments .....4

Revising the Freshman Research Assignment.....5

Chapter Essays as a Teaching Tool .....7

A ‘Write’ That Can’t Go Wrong .....8

Writing an Analytical Paper in Chunks .....9

Designing Assignments to Minimize Cyber-Cheating .....10

Making a Case for Writing Research Papers .....12

Writing (Even a Little Bit) Facilitates Learning .....13

Empowering Students through Choice .....14

How to Conduct a ‘Paper Slam’ .....15

A Global Perspective on Responding to Student Writing.....16



# 20 Questions about Writing Assignments

By E. Shelley Reid, PhD.

At the end of English composition, I ask students how what they've just learned in my class might be useful in their other classes. They're often bemused and surprised to learn that professors in other courses care about their writing. To encourage them to take responsibility for succeeding in their future writing assignments, I hand out a list of 20 questions that they might ask to better understand "what the professor wants," and thus continue to apply what we've been practicing.

I'm sharing this list in the hopes that it will help you help students transfer good writing skills from English composition to your class. By answering these questions about your own writing assignments, you may cue students to write better by building on some learning principles common to first-year composition classes.

## Questions students could ask a professor about getting started with a writing assignment:

1. If I have my own idea for a **topic or angle** that's interesting to me, can I use it, or do I need to complete the assignment exactly the way it is described?
2. Is there an **assignment model**, a sample essay, or a kind of published writing that I could look at to help me better see how to do this assignment?
3. If I write an **essay draft** early, can I come see you to talk about it or email you to ask a few questions?

## Questions about the assignment's main purpose:

4. Why do people in this field write or read a text like this? What's the **main goal** for this kind of writing?
5. Should I mostly review the similarities, differences, events, theories, or key features? Or should I **make arguments**, draw conclusions, or give my interpretations about these ideas? Do I need to answer the question "So what?"
6. Should I broadly **survey** the field or issue, or should I narrow my focus and "go deep" with my analysis?

## Questions about the assignment's target audience:

7. Should I write for a **knowledgeable audience** that has read what I have read or do I need to give additional background or summary?
8. Should I try to write for a **resistant audience** that will need a lot of evidence or should I write for an audience that generally agrees with my point? Should I address and refute counterarguments?
9. What kind of **evidence** will be most convincing in this field (or to this audience): numbers, descriptions, direct quotations, logical reasoning, examples, case studies, expert testimony?
10. Will I need to consult **outside sources**, and if I do, what kinds of sources are appropriate for this field, audience, or genre?

## Questions about style and format that differ among disciplines:

11. Is it preferred that I use the **scholarly language or format** of this discipline or genre or should I use standard paragraphs and plain, direct language accessible to a range of readers?
12. Are lively, graceful introductions and extended **paragraphs** expected by readers in this field (or for this assignment) or will short, informative paragraphs be sufficient?
13. Is it important to readers in this field that I write smooth, **stylistic sentences** or is a straightforward "just the facts, ma'am" style enough?
14. What **citation format** should I use for outside sources?

## Questions about style and format that differ based on the assignment, context, or professorial preference:

15. Is it okay to use **first person** ("I") or **second person** ("you")? Is it okay to use specific, relevant examples from my own life or experiences?
16. Should I try to avoid **passive voice**? Does it matter whether I use present tense or past tense verbs?
17. Is the **page-length** specification an absolute requirement or is it more of a guide to how much information I should plan to include in order to satisfy the audience's needs?
18. Can I include relevant **visual or other nontext information** or should I include only text?

## Questions to gauge individual professors' goals and concerns:

19. What is the most difficult part of this assignment? What are the most common mistakes students make with this assignment?

PAGE 5 ▶

FROM PAGE 4

20. What is the *most important aspect* of this assignment? What should I spend most of my time and energy on as I write and edit?

One final, crucial thing you can do that will help students draw on what they've learned in classes like mine is to get them working on the assignment before it's due. Require them to write something—a proposal, a thesis

statement, an introductory paragraph, a rant, an outline, a bibliography—at least a week or two before the due date. Even if you provide no in-depth feedback at that point, you've indicated that you know the fundamental principle of good writing in English courses and beyond: it requires good revising, and thus takes more time and attention than we initially think.

If you'd like to duplicate this set of questions and share them with your

students, you're welcome to do so. This way we work together to send the message that the good writing skills learned in English apply in every course.

*Dr. E. Shelley Reid, is an assistant professor and director of composition in the English department at George Mason University.* 🍀

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## Revising the Freshman Research Assignment

By Cara Snyder, PhD.

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Two years ago, I said goodbye to the traditional 10-page research paper in my freshman composition classes. My students knew too well that Googling along with cut and paste could produce 10 pages of fluff in no time, with a bibliography of 15 sources. (Who cares how reliable?) It was time for a change.

The new assignment consists of five short (about four-page), somewhat diachronic papers. The student sticks with the same topic through all five papers. Typically, each student has a different topic. The topics are very narrow and reflect the mission of my college; for example, why was stoning the biblical method of execution, or how is “yeast” used in Scripture? I provide a list of suggestions, but students can come up with their own topics. One of these papers is due every two weeks (but we're flexible), and much of our class time is spent in the library, with me finding out about

new sources right along with the class as I attempt to answer their

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questions. As can be seen in the following brief description of the papers, despite the specificity of these topics, the way I've reformulated the traditional research paper is applicable to many other topics and content areas.

**Paper One**—Students begin with a reader-response essay researched using only a primary source. The goal is for the student to find out what this source seems to be saying and showing about the topic. In my case, the primary source is the Bible. Students are limited to versions of the Bible and to complete concordances, and they are expected to study as many passages as possible that pertain to their topics. Similar assignments in other fields could involve whatever the primary literature is, whether creative writing, historical documents, or scientific papers.

**Paper Two**—Students are limited to dictionaries, encyclopedias, handbooks, or other reference works. I do allow Wikipedia on this one, but with the stipulation that anything they find in it must be checked against their other sources and that inaccuracies then be submitted to Wikipedia. The goals of this paper

PAGE 6 ▶

## FROM PAGE 5

are (1) to get an overview of the discussion; (2) to see how many sources say the same things; (2) to find the earliest source saying it; and (3) to check for differences or added details over the years. In this one, they are encouraged to come up with as many citations as possible (I'm hoping for between six and 12).

**Paper Three**—This paper requires that students use only sources written before 1899. Whether they find these sources online or in hard copy doesn't matter—the sources just have to be old. In our case, the online library [www.ccel.org/](http://www.ccel.org/) (Christian Classics Ethereal Library, Calvin College) has made this research easily accessible. Students are usually quite surprised to find that the old guys already have said so much about their topics. Given the difficulty of the material, I grade them on how much they managed to find and how well they organized and presented it rather than how much they may have understood it. I'm hoping for approximately six sources in the works cited. (Originally, this was the second assignment because I wanted to tackle the oldest material first; however, it turned out to be a bit too difficult at this stage.)

**Paper Four**—In the fourth paper, students turn to the most established works in our field, which are commentaries and books on Scripture since 1900. Again, students may use either print copies or online versions—preferably both—but the bulk of this research should be from print copies on the shelves at the library. Students are generally surprised at this point to discover how much excellent material can be found in books, of all things. For this one, I'm hoping for 12 to 15 sources cited, but I am happy if I get eight or ten good ones.

**Paper Five**—Finally, students do an annotated bibliography of journal

articles and Internet sources. Use of relevant electronic indexes for the field (ATLA in our case) is required, but so is as much Googling as they want to do. By this point, the students have become pretty good authorities on their own topics and are better able to judge Internet materials. Annotations merely have to point the way to good sources and

I do find, though, that I get through the four-page papers much more efficiently and enthusiastically than I do 10-page papers where I'm repeatedly marking the same mistakes. Using this approach gives students more feedback more quickly, and that improves subsequent papers.

weed out the less reliable; I expect some scanning rather than serious reading here.

This collection of papers precludes having students integrate all their research into one long paper. I simply do not have the time at that point in the semester to read 20-page papers because I've already graded a lot of papers. I do find, though, that I get through the four-page papers much more efficiently and enthusiastically than I do 10-page papers where I'm repeatedly marking the same mistakes. Using this approach gives students more feedback more quickly, and that improves subsequent papers.

The greatest advantages I'm finding are that the students really do seem to begin to understand the research process, their topics, and specific kinds of bibliography forms. There is much less mindless Googling and much less plagiarism. So far I'm finding this system preferable to the traditional approach.

*Dr. Cara Snyder is a professor of English and Literature at Dallas Christian College, TX* 🍀

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# Chapter Essays as a Teaching Tool

By David A. Locher, PhD.

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A few years ago I added a simple assignment to my introductory sociology classes, and it has paid off in more ways than I ever expected. Each student writes a two-page essay for each chapter we cover in class. Each essay is worth enough points to influence their semester grade. In the essay, which is prepared outside of class, the student identifies what he or she considers the single most important concept from the chapter unit (anything in the textbook or class lecture and discussion). They then explain why they think it is important. They must give an example from their own life experiences that illustrates the idea, establish the importance of their example, and then relate it to the topic.

My idea behind creating the essays assignment was to encourage students to think about the concepts as we discuss them and to apply them to their world outside of the classroom. Preparing these essays forces students to actually sit down and reflect on the information, its ramifications, and meaning. One of the unexpected payoffs has been how this process makes course content more interesting for the students and for me. They take it seriously, and frequently make connections that I would not have considered. Doing the assignment well requires students to not only know and understand the material but to apply, analyze, and (in a really good essay) synthesize and evaluate the material.

This approach may not work for every kind of class, but I can imagine adapting a similar approach for any of

the social sciences and several other kinds of courses as well. Some professors may be inclined to ask students to be broad rather than specific with the topic of the essays. I would recommend against broad topics. My experience has shown that asking the students to focus the essay on one very specific concept makes for better essays, and does not leave the bigger picture out. A student who writes about a specific term or concept almost always places that idea into a larger context, but those who try to write about too broad a topic invariably skim across generalities.

Too often we expect our students to immediately and intuitively understand why the subject we teach is important to them. We expect them to automatically see how it applies to their own lives and to the world around them. However, I have observed that students consistently do just the opposite: they compartmentalize, treating each unit as an isolated piece of information to be memorized for the next exam and then forgotten or filed away. I have also found that telling students the course material is important doesn't seem to make much of a difference to most of them. Writing these essays, and engaging in the thinking required to write them well, helps students turn otherwise abstract ideas into concrete reality. No one walks out of the classroom at the end of the semester thinking they didn't learn anything "real" or important.

Sometimes completing this assignment does more than just demonstrate that they have learned the material and

can apply it to their own lives. Sometimes writing these essays gives students an entirely new perspective on themselves or their world, to the point where they actually take on a new level of determination and ambition for themselves. Every semester I receive a few essays that clearly stand out from all the rest. They tend to be longer than average, and reveal a great deal of thought and attention. Often they begin with a phrase like "I never understood why I..." and usually end with a phrase similar to "now I know how to..." I won't reveal any personal information, but one of my students last semester applied the concept of cultural capital to her own family and upbringing. She wrote several pages, connecting the concept to specific aspects of her own past and her relationship with her family, and concluded by explaining that she now understood them better, understood herself better, and understood what it would really mean to "pull herself up" by being the first member of her family to ever get a university education.

These breakthrough essays are the most interesting to read, of course, but even more exciting is how they document the process of a student fully realizing the connections between their own world and the world of higher learning. They discover what sociology has to offer, and how to use their new knowledge to understand and perhaps better their own lives. Through experiences like these students discover that college is not just something that you do in order to get a job, but can be a place where real learning takes place. They sometimes realize that learning about the world means learning about themselves, and that means gaining a better understanding of both.

*Dr. David A. Locher is a sociology professor at Missouri Southern State University.* 📍

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# A ‘Write’ That Can’t Go Wrong

By Susan R. Wilson

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In 1999 some colleges sounded an alarm against a phenomenon referred to as “mall-speak” that seemed to pervade student discourse. Student speech riddled with “likes,” “you knows,” and “whatevers.” This kind of speech was not limited by context: it was used when students hung out in the cafeteria, when they were making presentations in the classroom, and when they found themselves in the “real world.” According to the Boston Globe, Smith College’s “alumni began reporting back their horror at the way graduates spoke in job interviews, or remarking how unprepared they felt to express themselves in the working world.”

Eight years later, this kind of casual discourse is still pervasive. Couple the filler phrases associated with “mall-speak” with the mad/sad/bad/glad problem (speech choices restricted to simple sentences with nondescript adjectives) and we end up with student contributions in classroom discussions that go something like this: “I liked Russo’s book. It was really good. Like, the characters are so real and interesting. That one part, you know, was pretty bad, I mean, the description got kinda bloody. I’m glad it turned out in the end though.” Perhaps comments like these can be tolerated when students are young and first learning to discuss, but hearing them in a college classroom makes most faculty cringe.

I use a very simple and short writing/performance assignment that creates an awareness of the power

and eloquence of well-crafted language. Students write two paragraphs. In the first one, I ask them to

**The writing is more detailed,  
more evocative of feelings  
and attitudes, and  
consequently draws the  
audience in more thoroughly.**

write a bland, incompetent description about some topic such as a favorite food, a particular song, a landscape or place that holds special meaning, a favorite holiday or season, a historical event of significance, or something of that nature. In the second paragraph, they rework that description using effective and evocative language.

Students bring these paragraphs to class to share with their classmates. I have volunteers read their pairs of paragraphs. Students are often embarrassed to read the first paragraph; they and their classmates frequently chortle throughout the reading. When I ask them why the snickers, they say that the writing seems juvenile and simplistic. Even the writers admit that the first paragraph was painful to write. And yet, further probing reveals that each student has heard college-level presentations that sound like this paragraph.

The second paragraph provides a

marked contrast. The writing is more detailed, more evocative of feelings and attitudes, and consequently draws the audience in more thoroughly. While the “text” of the second paragraphs is noticeably improved, sometimes the presentation is not. Some students are embarrassed to own their words; they mumble, rush, or speak softly. In the discussion that follows, I try to help students understand what it might mean to “perform” their words, to translate what is on the page into a spoken description. Sometimes I have students work in small groups to coach each other on how this kind of presentation sounds. If students bristle at the notion of “performing” the text, I remind them of awards ceremonies where presenters merely read or mumbled or misread an important quotation. Usually this jolts them into realizing that effective writing can be compromised by ineffective presentation. What you say and how you say it both matter.

After this 30- to 45-minute exercise, I ask students to write a journal entry in which they select any text—from literature, essays, speeches—that they believe is eloquent and then justify that choice. This ungraded assignment allows us to play around with improving the level and effectiveness of written and spoken discourse. Students internalize this activity in ways that lecturing about sound language use (or even viewing great speeches) misses. In fact, often when a discussion becomes peppered with “mall-speak” and simplistic discourse, it is the students who remind each other, with a chuckle, that it is time, as Chef Emeril Lagasse says, to “kick it up a notch.”

*Contact Susan R. Wilson is a professor in the Communication and Theatre Department at DePauw University. 🍀*



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# Writing an Analytical Paper in Chunks

By Rita Duarte Marinho, PhD.

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For faculty who have not received formal training in teaching writing, coaching students in the art of writing analytical papers is a challenge. Because students habitually disconnect content from one course to another, they generally do not carry over their good writing habits from the traditional first-year writing programs to other courses. And then there is the heavy burden of elevating the paper content from the secondary-education-level of reliance on description to the college-level expectation of critical analysis. Despite these and other challenges, writing teachers insist that the way to good writing is to do it, and to do it, over and over with substantial feedback and coaching.

The following system breaks up the writing of an analytical paper into four steps I refer to as “chunks.” I have used this system with lower-level and upper-level courses. I have used it with group writing projects and individual writing projects. The students are given one week per chunk. Chunks are submitted to me electronically before midnight on Friday. After the third chunk, the four chunks must be submitted appended to each other as a draft of the entire paper. Chunks may be submitted multiple times. In fact I encourage submitting the chunk due this week with a revised version of the chunk that was submitted last week. Feedback is rendered electronically within 48 hours for each submission.

Yes, this system requires a substantial amount of feedback and that means instructor time. It rests on the premise that good writing is a product of feedback and editing. The students keep editing their chunks as

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the process continues. I point out where there is a problem. I do not use the WORD editor; I simply embed my references in red. Here’s the handout I give students that describes the chunks and offers advice on writing them.

## Directions for Writing an Analytical Paper in Chunks

Assume that the audience is someone who knows nothing about the subject matter. This is an important assumption that prevents you from glossing over important explanations.

**Chunk One:** What is the topic? This should be articulated in one or two words or a short phrase. It is the answer to this question: What is the subject of the paper? Example: Communication and Gender (Note that the phrase may become the title of the paper)

This section of the paper frequently describes the topic. The description should contain a definition of the topic usually with historical/cultural references, including how it was defined in the past or by other cultures or value systems.

**Chunk Two:** What is the conceptual framework? Explaining the conceptual framework is often the most difficult part of writing a paper. It involves understanding two issues: What ideas are connected to the topic? How are the ideas connected to the topic?

Example: Idea that gender affects the act of communication. Idea that men and women (two forms of gender) communicate differently, through, for example, a feminist framework.

**Chunk Three:** What do experts think about this topic and framework? What do you as author think about it (based on the work of experts, compared to the evidence that you have gathered)? It is absolutely necessary to discover what experts think about your topic and framework. Otherwise you have only an opinion (yours) that does not meet research standards. In research, one deals with facts (empirically “provable” statements).

Discover what experts think by doing a search of the literature regarding the topic and framework. This is accomplished by using the library. Select those articles/books

PAGE 10 ►

which seem most relevant to the question posed or to the ideas which require connecting.

Note: The bibliography which is attached to your paper should contain about 10 references, only three of which are to be Internet references. Wikipedia is NOT an acceptable reference.

Read the findings of the experts and take into account how much they 1) agree with your assumptions; 2) differ from your assumptions; 3) differ or agree with each other. The important issue is understanding

WHY they agree—with each other and/or your assumptions and evidence.

Then write up the body of your analysis based on what has been learned. One usually describes what the experts think.

**Chunk Four:** What difference does your finding make to the world, to our culture, to our country, to ourselves, to something/one? Why is it important that anyone understands why men and women differ in communication? Is this important? How is it important? If someone reads the paper, what two or three things do you want them to remember fifty

years from now about this paper? Convince the reader that the topic is important and why s/he should remember the analysis.

*Dr. Rita Duarte Marinho is a professor of Women's Studies and former Dean of the College of Liberal Arts, Towson University.* 🍀

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## Designing Assignments to Minimize Cyber-Cheating

By Maryellen Weimer, PhD.

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Take the plethora of information available online, add the cut-and-paste feature, throw in lots of pressure to get good grades, and plagiarism becomes an appealing option to almost any student. Arthur Sterngold (citation below) holds students accountable, but he doesn't place all the blame there. Some of the blame, he contends, belongs to us and the way we design assignments — take the traditional term paper, for example. It requires strong research skills, critical thinking, and clear discursive prose. “Yet most undergraduates have weak research and writing skills. . . . Most college students do not know how to formulate workable hypotheses or research questions, evaluate the quality and appropriateness of source materials, or integrate data and ideas from multiple sources.” (p. 19)

Most college students do not know how to formulate workable hypotheses or research questions, evaluate the quality and appropriateness of source materials, or integrate data and ideas from multiple sources.

Some professors believe that students should come to college knowing how to write research papers. With as much content as professors have to cover, they can't take time to teach research skills,

assuming they have the interest and skills necessary to teach those skills. In these classes, the term papers get assigned at the beginning of the course, they're worth a lot of credit, completed outside of class, and due in final form at the end of the course.

And it is in those classes students are often the most motivated to plagiarize material. Sterngold maintains that the term-paper assignment can be designed so that it is almost impossible to plagiarize. Here's a sample of the design features he recommends:

- **Break up major research papers into smaller assignments** — “Dividing a research assignment into a series of more manageable components forces students to work on the project over time

PAGE 11 ►

*FROM PAGE 10*

instead of trying to write the entire paper at the last minute when they may be most tempted to plagiarize.” (p. 18)

- **Require students to write about course-specific topics** — The advice here is to tie topics closely to course objectives and content. “I often require students to write research papers relating course topics to campus speakers or current news events.” (pp. 18-19) The more course-specific the paper topic, the more difficult it is to find material that can be directly pasted into the paper.
- **Choose some required source material for your students** — Select major reference works in your field and sources you know well. Students are less likely to plagiarize if you have demonstrated your knowledge of the sources.

- **Incorporate assignments into class discussions and tests** — “I frequently call on students during class discussions to give examples from their . . . research that relate to the day’s topics.” (p. 19) This practice encourages students to work more persistently on their papers at the same time it makes clear who is not working on their paper.
- **Meet with students to discuss their research** — This reinforces the importance of the assignment and helps students develop the kind of comfort and familiarity with their topic and sources that ends up making them confident enough to rely on their own ideas and opinions.
- **Require students to submit printouts of source materials** — This all but ensures that students won’t plagiarize from these sources. If it sounds cumbersome and daunting, Sterngold reports,

“Reading over the students’ article-packets is less tedious and time-consuming than you might fear if you assign research topics that interest you.” (p. 20)

If a student is determined to plagiarize, no set of strategies is failsafe. But careful assignment design can decrease the motivation and make the plagiarism process a much more difficult one.

**Reference:** Sterngold, A. (2004). Confronting plagiarism: How conventional teaching invites cyber-cheating. *Change*, May/June, 2004, 16-21.

*Dr. Maryellen Weimer is the editor of The Teaching Professor, and a professor emerita, teaching and learning, Penn State-Berks. 🍏*

# Making a Case for Writing Research Papers

By Stephen L. Broskoske, PhD.

When asked to prepare a research paper, many first-year college students tend to submit a position paper filled with opinion and unsubstantiated claims rather than a research paper.

Recently, I have tried a new approach that seems to be helping students understand the task more thoroughly before they begin. Through a series of three PowerPoint presentations that I prepared, I present to my students the analogy that writing a research paper is like being a lawyer defending a court case. Students can relate to this analogy because there seems to never be a shortage of high-visibility court cases in the news to which I can refer. I draw out the analogy in terms of how lawyers frame their case (define their topic), search out evidence (search for sources), present the evidence (write the paper), and make the closing argument (draw a conclusion). I am finding that, if I frame their thinking in this way, the students write better papers.

First, I begin with the topic. I find that students typically submit a topic that is too broad and lacks focus. For example, I typically get topics like “Distance Learning” or “Assistive Technology.” Before a lawyer begins a case, he/she has to frame the case properly. Similarly, a writer has to frame the topic so that it is definable and defensible. While the topic of “Distance Learning” is too general, “Is Distance Learning Effective in Teaching/Learning?” can be

defended. Many students have wanted to research assistive technology, but did not know what to research or how to approach the task. If the topic is framed as “Benefits of

Through a series of three PowerPoint presentations that I prepared, I present to my students the analogy that writing a research paper is like being a lawyer defending a court case. I am finding that, if I frame their thinking in this way, the students write better papers.

Using Assistive Technology in the Classroom,” this is a case that can be defended. Defining topics in this manner guides students through the next steps in the process.

The second phase is searching out evidence to support the case. Referring to a current, highly visible court case, I indicate to students that although a lawyer might feel or believe certain “facts” about the client, these so-called facts are merely conjecture unless they are substantiated by evidence. Then I draw the analogy that the evidence researchers use is information from professional

literature. This leads to several other discussions:

- **What constitutes believable evidence?** The sources must be respected, scholarly material. After all, not all witnesses are believable. A witness may not add to the strength of the case, which may lead the jury to discount the testimony of that witness.
- **Is there sufficient evidence to support your case?** I prompt students to do a preliminary search of the professional literature to ensure there is sufficient research to support their topic. If not, I instruct them to either adjust the focus of their topic according to the material they are finding, or select another topic.
- **Selecting more sources rather than fewer is better because you have more on which to report.** I point out that it is difficult to write a multi-page paper using limited sources.

The third phase is presenting the evidence in court, which is analogous to writing the paper. At this point, I show students how to present their evidence in the context of the paper. Just like a lawyer would do, the students should introduce evidence to argue key points that will help them make their case. When viewed from this frame of reference, students can realize the importance of using an authoritative tone and of writing in the active voice. After all, evidence is presented live by witnesses who are on the stand.

The fourth phase is making the closing argument, which is the most critical time in a court case. A lawyer begins by reminding the jury of the argument he/she was attempting to make. Then, using a persuasive tone, the lawyer briefly reviews the entire case, highlighting the key points. The

PAGE 13 ►

lawyer then draws a conclusion, and rests the case. From this part of the analogy, students realize the important role of the conclusion section of the paper.

Finally, before actually going to court, a lawyer would review the

entire case to make sure there are no “holes” in the case, areas that could be discredited due to lack of evidence. This is analogous to looking over the paper to ensure that sufficient sources were cited to support the claims presented, and to ensure that the student made no unsubstantiated claims.

To view my PowerPoint files and other teaching materials, visit my Web page: [www.misericordia.edu/academics/education/drsteve](http://www.misericordia.edu/academics/education/drsteve).

*Dr. Stephen L. Broskoske is an associate professor in the teacher education department at Misericordia University.* 🍀

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## Writing (Even a Little Bit) Facilitates Learning

*By Maryellen Weimer, PhD.*

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**T**he message of the Writing Across the Curriculum movement seems to have gotten through. Developing student writing skills is a responsibility we all share. We cannot expect our colleagues in English to do it alone. What is less well known is that the power of writing to positively impact learning outcomes has been proved. And the very best news of all is that the kind of writing linked to more and better learning is not just the formal paper with numerous instructor comments and/or rewrite options.

Here's the case in point, and it is a compelling one: 978 undergraduates in 32 sections of an introductory psychology course attended two lectures and one TA-led recitation per week. In the 16 experimental sections, students wrote on a topic for five minutes and then discussed it in class for 10 additional minutes. “Writing topics centered on expressing opinions about current controversies in the field, applying course content to everyday experiences, and choosing and supporting a position after presentation of competing viewpoints.” (p. 173) Students completed

nine of these writing assignments, for one point each. The writing was not graded.

**Developing student writing skills is a responsibility we all share. We cannot expect our colleagues in English to do it alone.**

In the 16 control sections, students were presented the same topics in their recitation sections. Only in this case, students were told to think about the topic for five minutes, and that period was then followed with same 10-minute discussion.

All students took three multiple-choice exams that included six target questions, two for each topic students had written/thought about. Researchers used a variety of statistical methods to demonstrate that students in the experimental and control groups were not different.

The students who wrote and discussed did better on both factual

and conceptual multiple-choice questions. Researchers do caution that effect sizes for group differences were small, but those could not be explained by any other factors.

“Just 5 minutes of writing on a topic per week (45 minutes per semester) produced significantly higher scores on test items than did the same amount of time spent thinking.” (p. 174) The approach they used could be implemented in classes of almost any size. For the instructor, this is not a labor-intensive approach to implementing a writing exercise; and for the students, here's an easy, in-class exercise that translates into improved understanding of course content.

**Reference:** Drabick, D. A. G., Weisberg, R., Paul, L., and Bubier, J. L. (2007). Keeping it short and sweet: Brief, ungraded writing assignments facilitate learning. *Teaching of Psychology*, 34 (3), 172-176.

*Dr. Maryellen Weimer is the editor The Teaching Professor, and a professor emerita, teaching and learning, Penn State-Berks.* 🍀

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# Empowering Students through Choice

By Denise D. Knight, PhD.

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College teachers who support writing across the curriculum sometimes wonder how to craft assignments that intellectually challenge students while at the same time investing students in the writing process. So often, students view writing as a chore rather than an opportunity. That perception can be changed by giving students some choice about how to fulfill their writing requirements. Rather than simply imposing our preferences on students, this approach enables them to assess their own strengths and interests, to make decisions accordingly, and to be accountable for the choices they make. Faculty benefit because they are no longer required to devise specific writing topics each semester. That responsibility now belongs to the students.

Offering students a choice can work in virtually any discipline that requires writing, and the options can be devised for traditional essays as well those that are less conventional. In a class that requires 15 pages of writing, for example, students may be given the option of submitting three five-page papers, two seven- to eight-page papers, or one 15-page paper. Because individual writing abilities tend to vary significantly, even this small choice enables students to build on their strengths as writers.

Another easy way to empower students is to have them design their own paper topics, rather than limiting them to specific subjects chosen by the instructor. This way students get to

work on a project that they find exciting, rather than one that the teacher prefers. Initially, students may be intimidated by the prospect of devising their own paper topics, but the benefits are considerable. For one thing, students often produce more imaginative topics than do we. In some cases, their ideas may need to be refined and their topics narrowed, but having students “own” their topics is an important step in the writing process. To ensure that proposed essays are sufficiently focused, the instructor can have students submit the topic and tentative thesis for approval before they start writing. Taking this step reduces the likelihood that students will end up writing poorly conceived essays.

For faculty members who aren’t comfortable with shifting responsibility entirely to students, some methods blend the two by offering a “two out of three” assignment (or a “one out of two” or “three out of four,” depending on the amount of writing the course requires.) For example, in my American literature survey course, I have students choose to write two different papers from a menu comprising three options: 1) a line-by-line explication of a sonnet by an American poet, 2) a creative/research assignment, and 3) a traditional literary analysis. The results have been overwhelmingly positive.

Built into each option are still more choices. When students choose to explicate a sonnet, for example, they have a starting point around which to

construct their essays. I provide three sonnets from which students select one, and I ask that they first identify poetic elements (speaker, imagery, tone, metaphors, personification, etc.) and then prepare an informative and original explication of the poem.

The second option, an exercise that combines a creative component with documented research, appeals to non-English majors who aren’t always skilled in literary interpretation. Students who choose this assignment select a work from the course readings and design an illustration that depicts a character, scene, symbol, or theme reflecting the cultural norms of the historical period in which the literary work is set. In addition to creating an illustration, students provide both a written analysis of their design (i.e., what it is intended to depict and how it illuminates an aspect of the work) and a research-based overview of the critical reception that the work garnered when it was first published.

The third option, a straightforward literary analysis, requires students to analyze one of the formal elements in a literary work, without reliance on external sources. I provide students with several examples of critical analyses, but they are ultimately responsible for selecting a work, for designing their topic, and for generating a viable thesis.

Giving student writers choice benefits instructors too. Rather than continually reading different versions of the same writing assignment, we end up evaluating a much wider range of essays. Not only does this practice encourage students to showcase their strengths, whether they be research skills or analytical abilities, but it also enables instructors to learn something more about their students. Offering writing options across the curriculum is a win-win situation for faculty and students alike.

*Dr. Denise D. Knight is an English professor at SUNY Cortland.* 🍀

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# How to Conduct a ‘Paper Slam’

By Stephanie Schlitz, PhD.

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Last year, I attended a digital humanities conference where the highlight of the program was undoubtedly the “Poster Slam.” The poster what? I’d wondered when I’d first read about it. I’d never heard of a ‘poster slam’ and had no idea what to expect, but my interest was piqued. I hadn’t attended the conference before, but I assumed that because the program was as rooted in technology as it was in the humanities, I shouldn’t be too surprised to find myself in uncharted territory.

As more information about the conference program and the mysterious poster slam was disseminated, I learned that the poster slam, which turned out to be one of the most well-received and informative aspects of the program, was simply a conference session devoted to sharing information about the various posters that would be on display during the poster session.

Poster session participants had been invited to create one slide (in PowerPoint or a similar format) depicting the principal content of their posters, and each would be allotted one minute to entice conference participants to visit their poster during the poster session. During the slam, poster session presenters lined up and took turns at the podium in front of the room, speaking about their research while their slides were displayed. If a presenter spoke beyond the allotted minute, the session organizer rang a bell, and – in good humor – the presenter was stopped and the next ushered forth.

Loosely modeled on a poetry slam,

this new version of ‘slamming’ most likely originated in the technology community. When programmers sought new ways to make the most of their time during conferences and meetings, they broke from more con-

While asking students to discuss their papers on their due dates is a worthwhile venture, extending the slam concept to the classroom improves upon this format and formalizes the submission process in an innovative and pedagogically astute way.

ventional formats by offering participants one to three minutes to preview their current research, an in-progress project, or a useful programming shortcut. Because doing so provided a succinct and efficient way to cover a lot of ground in a very short time, the slam concept caught on and eventually found its way back into the humanities community via the digital humanities.

Shortly after attending the conference, I introduced another version of slamming in my college classes, the

‘paper’ slam: an in-class activity held on paper due dates. College students, like academics and programmers, I reasoned, regularly write interesting papers about intriguing and diverse concepts, and they regularly unearth and apply research that deserves a much broader audience than their professor. Students often have much to gain from one another’s research as well. Yet, the traditional paper submission process, wherein students submit a text document that has virtually no circulation beyond their professor’s office, fails to recognize this. While asking students to discuss their papers on their due dates is a worthwhile venture, extending the slam concept to the classroom improves upon this format and formalizes the submission process in an innovative and pedagogically astute way.

Toward the end of each semester as paper due dates draw closer, I explain the slam requirements to my students. I ask them to develop one slide that highlights the key ideas explored in their papers, and I require them to prepare a sixty to ninety second oral narrative that explains their work to their peers.

Since they are free to use images and color and to explore various modes of composition, the slide preparation invokes their creative energy. It also links an otherwise static document to another mode of technology. And being asked to prepare a slide and oral synopsis to effectively distill the significance of their work encourages student authors to think carefully about the content, organization, and delivery of their message – in their slam materials, and, as I learned from my students, in their papers as well.

Students email their slides to me in the days before the slam, and I organize them alphabetically by last

PAGE 16 ▶

name since I use this criterion to determine the presentation order. I then compile the slides into a single slideshow. Finally, I create a text document that lists the students' names and their topics in order and distribute copies to the class so that everyone can follow along and take notes during the slam.

On the day of the slam, I seat students in alphabetical order and appoint a timer to keep track of time and to hold up a "stop" sign when a

presenter exceeds his or her allotted time. The slam advances as I scroll through slides and students move to the front of the room to present when their slides are displayed. Some students prepare and read note cards while others extemporize in response to prompts built into their slides, but importantly, all of my students convey their ideas to their peers, and the process is as fun as it is illuminating.

Students often have much to learn from one another's research, but too often the opportunity to exchange

ideas is missed. A paper slam can rectify this by inviting students to present their research in a way that acknowledges the importance of their work and continues the academic tradition of sharing it with their peers.

*Dr. Stephanie Schlitz is an assistant professor of Linguistics and English at Bloomsburg University.* 🍀

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## A Global Perspective on Responding to Student Writing

By Kathy Gehr, PhD.

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Faculty who assign writing in their courses know that it enhances student learning, yet many do not require written assignments because they have learned that evaluating student work takes a lot of time. Even the most seasoned writing teachers often spend five minutes per page responding to student texts. With 20 students in a class and a three-page paper, that comes to five intense hours of grading per assignment. For teachers who have less experience responding to student writing, grading consumes even more time.

Too often conversations about efficient grading focus exclusively on the process of marking final drafts. Approaches such as minimal marking or grading sheets can reduce the amount of time involved in marking those drafts; however, they are not always effective. To make student writing a rich and enriching

**To make student writing a rich and enriching component of a course, it must be embedded in the course's design and classroom activities.**

component of a course, it must be embedded in the course's design and classroom activities. We must think of designing assignments, working with drafts, and grading final drafts as an interconnected process. The following strategies make grading shortcuts on final drafts more likely to work for everyone:

### Designing Assignments

- Sequence written assignments from less to more complex intel-

lectual work. Think of your assignments as guides to the kinds of thinking and writing that your discipline requires. If, for example, you want students in a psychology class to write a literature review of five recent studies on the effects of antidepressants on children, start with a short assignment that asks students to write a one-paragraph summary of one study and a one-paragraph analysis of that same study. When the student is asked to synthesize five studies, she will know how to begin. In fact, she will have already started.

- Discuss sample responses to major written assignments. Sample papers should offer a clear fit with the assignment at hand, but should not be so successful that they intimidate students. Usually a

PAGE 17 ►



## FROM PAGE 16

solid “B” paper makes an effective sample draft. As for the content of sample papers, topics based on previous course material or on engaging examples from popular culture are much more effective than a direct hit on the assignment’s topic.

- Use grading criteria or rubrics to set a tone of encouragement rather than punishment. Define the terms that you use in these rubrics. If you ask for a “reasonably complex” thesis statement, provide an example of what one looks like. If you require secondary sources, list a few sources so that your students can distinguish them from primary sources. Format with hollow boxes instead of bullets, ask questions rather than giving commands, emphasize what an effective paper does rather than what a lousy paper does not do, and arrange criteria from most to least important.

## Working with Drafts

- Personalize your responses to student work. Instead of automatically responding to every students’ work, a process that often reinforces a tell-me-what-you-want mentality, require that students ask you two questions about their drafts. The more time and effort that they put into their questions, the more useful your feedback is likely to be. This sends the message that you respect the student’s ownership of her ideas and want to provide feedback that makes her draft a better paper rather than a closer version of some perfect paper that exists in your own mind.
- Emphasize your role as a reader rather than an evaluator. Rather

than saying, “This essay lacks effective transitions.” Say: “Sally, I was interested in the point that you make about Hamlet’s insanity in paragraph two, but as a reader, I was confused about how this point is related to the quote from Claudius that you discuss in paragraph three. How does Claudius’s language affect our reaction to Hamlet’s behavior? This is the question

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that you need to answer at the beginning of paragraph three.” This example offers a question that guides the student to the next step in the revision process.

- Make writing a communal problem that everyone in the class is working together to solve. Encourage students to present revisions of paragraphs or sentences to the class as a whole. Schedule group writing conferences. Mention the conversations that you have had with students outside of class during class time: “That’s a good question, Mark. This is the same problem that John was struggling with in his essay. He decided to

integrate a different kind of source to define his terms. Would you mind telling us about that, John? How did you decide which definition would work best?”

- Use familiar examples and storytelling to create a shorthand way of talking about common writing issues. In class I might say: “Good conclusions are more like buffets than plated dinners. An effective conclusion offers a clear focus—Chinese, Indian, or Italian—but doesn’t force you to eat your moo-shu in a pancake.” Later, when a student offers a conclusion with no clear controlling idea, I might say, “I feel like I’m being served beer at a breakfast buffet. You offer a lot of good ideas, but I don’t understand the logic of how they are related to one another.” Examples like this not only take the edge off the criticism, they also help students understand shorthand comments on final drafts—“Conclusion lacks focus and is too repetitive.”

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