1 The Essentials of an Effective Writing Assignment

I know that good writing assignments result in good writing. I've seen the ways that writers—me, my colleagues, my classmates, the students whom I've taught—write stronger, more sophisticated papers when they are asked to respond to well-developed writing assignments.

When I first started teaching business writing, for instance, I tried the very basic assignments included in many of the texts I had reviewed. These assignments were often totally bare-bones: "Write a fund-raising letter" or "Write a bad-news memo." Totally bare-bones—and totally ineffective. Neither of these prompts gives students the support and information they need to successfully complete the writing task. Such assignments are not limited to the business writing classroom of course. In a language arts or composition classroom, they take the form of prompts such as "Write a persuasive essay" or "Write an analysis of the novel." When I presented students with such stripped-down assignments, they typically wrote extremely general responses with unclear purposes and audiences. Compare these generic prompts with the following assignment:

> There has been a problem in Montgomery County Schools with discipline and violence. On the basis of the positive examples that they have seen at other Virginia schools, Families for Safe Schools, a local community group, is calling for the school board to adopt a school uniform policy in order to cut down on these problems. What is your position on this issue? Write a letter to the editor of a local newspaper or the school newspaper, stating your position on this issue and supporting it with convincing reasons. Turn in two copies of your letter and an envelope addressed to the newspaper (I'll provide the stamp). I'll grade one copy and send the other copy off to the newspaper.

When I used this assignment—one that offers considerable support and detail—students responded with stronger writing. I quickly learned that

the more detail and attention I put into the writing assignments, the better students' writing was.

It's not that I was just lucky. Research tells us that student success in the writing classroom is directly related to the support and direction provided in the assignments. Barbara A. Storms, Anastasia Riazantseva, and Claudia Gentile analyzed the writing that students completed for the 1998 National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) Special Study on Classroom Writing for a 2000 NAEP/ETS report. This examination, as reported in *California English*, began with the following observation: "The students had obviously spent class periods working on the assignment. The topics were very similar, yet the results very different. In both classes, students had written drafts, talked with other students and/or the teacher about their writing, then rewritten their pieces to a 'final' product. Yet one set of papers was lively and well written; the kind of papers where readers wondered what would come next and were disappointed when the last paper in the set had been read. The other class's papers were predictable, each one sounding similar to the next. What made the written products differ so greatly?" (26).

The critical difference was the writing assignments. Storms, Riazantseva, and Gentile found that writing assignments that offered students the chance to engage with the available information on a topic and then make their own analyses, reflections, observations, or syntheses resulted in stronger writing. In addition to the importance of the content of the assignment, they found that "stronger pieces resulted when writing was a genuine act of communication" (26). As they close their discussion of the study, the researchers state that "qualities of writing assignments strongly influenced the writing outcomes" (27).

A 2001 NAEP/National Writing Project study drew similar conclusions about the relationship between writing assignments and the success of student writers. The study looked at writing assignments and the related writing that students composed, as well as at interview transcripts of both students and teachers reflecting on the assignments. A second, related study analyzed the writing assignments that led to the strongest student writing. The study found that the most effective writing assignments paid attention to these essential characteristics:

- The *content and scope* asked students to focus on critical thinking, rather than reiteration, by interacting with a text.
- The *organization and development* provided scaffolding that supported students' writing process.

- The *audience* for the assignment focused on *communication* with an authentic group of readers regarding a topic on which the writer was an expert.
- A range of *choices* for students' focus was balanced with support and direction so that students could *engage* in the process as equal partners, rather than be directed to complete teacher-driven tasks. (Peterson)

The report stresses that "these characteristics of strong assignments can not [*sic*] be seen in isolation; they are interconnected." In other words, an effective writing assignment must include all of these components in an integrated and relevant way.

For students to succeed, research and, often, our own experience tell us that the writing assignments we create must fulfill all these requirements. The essential elements of an effective writing assignment may seem quite obvious. Students should be asked to engage in higher-level writing that focuses on interpretation, analysis, and synthesis. They should be given support that encourages a multidraft composing process. Students should be experts on the topics that they write about, and they should be asked to engage with a group of real, known readers. Students should be able to choose from several options for each project.

Even students tell us that they need writing tasks that fit these criteria. The problem is that often we don't hear them. Look at the typical resources on designing writing assignments that are widely available online and in various articles and books. Without too much searching, you'll find assertions such as this one, from Northern Illinois University's Writing Across the Curriculum program: "Students often complain that they don't know what the teacher wants. Even though we may be quite explicit in describing the writing assignment, students will tend to forget details unless the assignment is in print." The solution, according to this site, is to provide students with an assignment sheet that explains such details as the kind of writing required, its scope and length, the formatting requirements, and the due dates. Even when we provide these details, however, "students may still claim that they don't know what the teacher wants"; this resource suggests that teachers provide additional support materials to help avoid students' complaints.

Students do complain—I've certainly heard my share of student dissatisfaction. It's not surprising that teachers get frustrated when we're asked to explain an activity for the umpteenth time. Comments like these from Northern Illinois University's website feel natural, perhaps even justified. Yet, the language also reveals what can go wrong when we present assignments to students.

The language introducing these tips and heuristics blames the students—rhetorically, the readers of these assignments—for problems in the composition classroom: Students complain. Students forget. Students *claim* they don't know what we want. This kind of language places students very obviously at fault. Teachers, it seems, or the writing assignments themselves, are blameless.

Yet in these same classrooms, we urge students to analyze their audience and provide enough details for their readers to understand the messages in their texts. We urge them to accept that readers cannot guess what an author means, so writers must work diligently to communicate clearly. Our own knowledge of the composition process, in other words, should lead us to fit our writing assignments to the specific group of readers in the classroom—to fit the message to the audience's needs.

The research by Storms, Riazantseva, and Gentile as well as the findings of the 2001 NAEP/National Writing Project study indicate that writing assignments need to contain adequate detail for students to understand and accomplish the writing task. We need to match the writing assignments we give students with their needs as developing writers. Unfortunately, there is frequently a wide gap in meaning between what students read into a writing assignment and what the teacher means and wants.

Members of the University of Hawaii Mānoa Writing Program interviewed over 200 students in writing intensive courses over a two-year period for its *Writing Matters #1* newsletter. These interviews revealed the gaps between students' and teachers' visions of writing tasks. As an example, one teacher in the program expressed this expectation:

> For the short paper on a video, I wanted students to make connections among the archeologist's questions, the methods used to get answers, and principles from their reading.

Compare that expectation with what a student who was interviewed understood:

> This assignment was like writing a high-school movie review. I wanted to give my own personal understanding about the video, so I was going to write a narrative.

On the basis of such examples, the researchers found that students typically "translate an instructor's goals into processes they think they can handle." Here, the student focuses on "personal understanding" and narrative writing, rather than on the more sophisticated analysis and synthesis that the instructor expected. Additionally, the researchers

determined that students frequently rely on techniques and strategies used in earlier assignments (in this case a high-school movie review) "rather than risk something new."

The Mānoa Writing Program interviews reveal three different versions of the assignment in play. In *Teaching Literature as Reflective Practice*, Kathleen Blake Yancey explains that there are three curricula in the classroom: the lived curriculum, the delivered curriculum, and the experienced curriculum (16–17). The relationships among these three curricula can inform our understanding of how writing assignments affect students' success as writers. The lived curriculum, "the curriculum that students bring in the door with them" (16), is clear in this student's reference to "a high-school movie review." That prior knowledge affected the way that this student approached the writing assignment. The delivered curriculum, "the one [teachers] design" (17), is evident in the assignment that the teacher presented to the class—the directive to write a short analytical video review that connected to class readings. The experienced curriculum, "the curriculum that *students construct* in the context of both the lived curriculum they bring with them and the delivered curriculum [teachers] seek to share" (58), is something of a mash-up of the prior knowledge and experiences from the lived curriculum, artifacts from the delivered curriculum, and the interpretations students make as they work in a course. The student interview shows the experienced curriculum, which is based on an interpretation of the delivered assignment and prior experience with movie reviews: "I wanted to give my own personal understanding about the video, so I was going to write a narrative." In the places where these three curricula overlap, student learning can occur, and students are more likely to meet teachers' expectations for a course. Where there are gaps between students' interpretations and the delivered assignment, however, the result can be unsatisfactory student writing.

Our understanding of reading and cognitive processes can explain why the delivered curriculum and the experienced curriculum can be so different. Reading is always a process of interpreting a text. Based on their prior knowledge and experience, readers cast the ideas in a text to match their own understanding of its concepts. In their explanation of how students read, David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky explain: "The question is not, then, whether some students' readings miss the mark. All readings are misses. The key question, as [Jonathan] Culler says, is 'whose misses matter,' and these decisions depend upon a 'host of complex and contingent factors,' factors that help 'one to question the institutional forces and practices that institute the normal by mark-

ing or excluding the deviant'" (6). Because all readers come to a text with different experiences and prior knowledge, all readings are different—and none is absolutely identical to the writer's original intentions. Knowing that there is always a difference between readers and writers, Bartholomae and Petrosky urge teachers to consider how power and authority influence these divergent understandings. Some readings are close enough to the author's intention, while others wander far from the original purpose. In the case of the latter, the question becomes not whether the reader understands but whether the reader understands adequately enough for the text to achieve its purpose.

In the classroom, differences between the delivered curriculum and the experienced one stem from students' construction, or reading, of the classroom in general and of the writing assignment in particular. Every writing assignment is a multifaceted text composed of specific artifacts (such as handouts and peer review guidelines), peer and teacher feedback on current and previous writing, social interaction in and out of class, and students' personal experiences. In her 1990 case study of thirteen students, Jennie Nelson concludes that students' readings of a text directly affect their performance: "It seems important for teachers to know that students actively interpret the assignments they receive, and that students often rely on implicit cues to determine what counts in completing tasks. These case studies suggest that students' task interpretations are based, at least in part, on situational factors over which the teacher has some control—namely, the criteria used to evaluate products, the quality and frequency of feedback, and the nature of the instructions and other explicit support students receive for completing assignments" (391). Simple delivery of assignment artifacts is not enough. To design successful writing assignments, teachers must attend to the situational factors Nelson identifies in ways that build overlap between the experienced curriculum and the delivered curriculum. In other words, they must expand the writing assignment in ways that help students construct a reading that matches the goals for the activity. In doing so, they widen the overlap between the delivered curriculum and the experienced one.

Consider the gaps that can occur because of the language used in writing assignments. Assignment prompts typically engage in the language of academic discourse and ask student writers not only to complete a writing task but also to complete a task that is explained in language that may not be familiar to them and may recall various previous writing experiences. Jim Burke describes the predicament students can face:

> Academic words like "compare" and "evaluate," "argument" and "claim," come with their own academic connotations; they are concepts, habits of mind, ways of thinking that are not intuitive. Indeed, many terms, such as "argument," come with their own conventions. Thus to ask students to "write a short essay in which you make a claim about the author's purpose" is to introduce several concepts students must learn to "unpack" if they are to write what the assignment demands.
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> These words are consequential: if students do not understand them, they will not achieve success on class assignments, tests, or state exams. (37, 39)

Even when an assignment calls for the higher-level critical thinking that studies have identified as crucial to improved student writing, students may not read the writing task in ways that actually lead to the expected critical thinking. We must, as Burke explains, "unpack" the meanings and construct a shared reading of the activity.

When teachers and students explore their readings of writing tasks openly and actively, the experienced curriculum that students construct is more likely to result in strong writing. On the basis of a deeper reading of four case studies from her original research, Jennie Nelson, in "Reading Classrooms as Text: Exploring Student Writers' Interpretive Practices," identifies the value of paying attention to students' readings of the curriculum: "This finding underscores the value of exploring students' interpretive practices, of understanding how the set of assumptions about school writing that students invoke each time they undertake a writing assignment complicates our best efforts and most innovative assignments. It also underscores the importance of finding ways to make students' interpretive practices a part of the classroom discussion about writing assignments" (427). Thought of in light of this research, a writing assignment is far more than a handout listing a prompt and various deadlines. The text of a writing assignment must also involve what Kathleen Blake Yancey describes as "inviting [the] experienced curriculum into the course, making it visible and thus accessible and indeed legitimate" (*Teaching* 17). The delivered curriculum must provide pathways that connect prior experiences (the lived curriculum) and students' interpretations (the experienced curriculum) directly with the teacher's expectations. When these three curricula overlap in our construction of writing assignments, we are better able to support student writers by scaffolding their comprehension of the task.

The success of a writing assignment hinges on our definition of one. The term *writing assignment* must be synonymous with a full pro-

cess that includes creating explanatory materials, defining a task that touches on the four key areas outlined in the NWP/NAEP study, explaining and exploring the expectations for the activity, and pointing out available support. By paying attention to the entire process, we can ensure that the assignments we devise or choose for students contribute to their success as writers.