

## 6 More Writing Assignment Resources

These texts include nice explanations and examples of how to design effective writing assignments:

- *The St. Martin's Guide to Teaching Writing* (5th ed.) by Cheryl Glenn, Melissa A. Goldwaithe, and Robert Conners (2003)
- *A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers* (4th ed.) by Erika Lindemann with Daniel Anderson (2001)
- *Both Art and Craft: Teaching Ideas That Spark Learning* by Diana Mitchell and Leila Christenbury (2000)
- *Assigning, Responding, Evaluating: A Writing Teacher's Guide* (3rd ed.) by Edward M. White (1999)

For more details on unpacking the language of writing assignments, see Jim Burke's "Learning the Language of Academic Study" from the May 2004 issue of *Voices from the Middle* (pp. 37–42). For a collection of topics that students can focus their texts on, get a copy of *What Can I Write About? 7,000 Topics for High School Students* (2002). You can use the basic topics listed in this book as starting points for assignments that you design.

Online resources on writing assignments are available on a companion website: <http://www.ncte.org/books/10850/>. This site includes the following materials:

- links to relevant NCTE standards, position statements, and guidelines
- an annotated bibliography of the works cited in this text, including links to NCTE journal articles that allow subscribers to read more about any topic easily
- links to ReadWriteThink lesson plans related to the examples in this text, which have been marked by this "Lesson Plan" icon:
- links to additional teaching resources and lesson plans that focus on writing assignments
- reproducible copies of the example assignment prompts and charts included in this text



## Sample Starting Points for Writing Assignments

The remainder of this chapter lists writing prompts, arranged by writing type, that you can customize for the classes that you teach. These prompts, of course, are only starting points, similar to those included in Chapter 4. Once you find one that you want to use, work it into a complete assignment by adding the details and resources that define the task for your students, explore the related expectations, and provide supporting materials. Be sure that you shape the audience and purpose and supply the related resources necessary for an effective writing assignment geared toward your students.

### Narrative

**Being Unprepared.** Because you have been sick, out of town, busy at work, or finishing other homework, you didn't have as much time as you needed to study for an important test. Everyone going to school has been in this situation. Think of a specific test that you took that you felt unprepared for and narrate the events surrounding it. Tell your readers about the preparation that you were able to do, the reasons that you didn't get to prepare as well as you wanted, the test itself, and any significant events that happened after you took it. Your paper should help readers understand what it felt like to be unprepared.

**Light Bulb Moment.** Think of a time when you realized that you suddenly understood an idea, a skill, or a concept you had been struggling with—it might be an idea discussed in a class or a specific athletic skill you were trying to perfect. For instance, you might think about when you were trying to understand how to identify iambic pentameter in a poem or how to complete a Taylor Series problem in your calculus class. Or you might consider when you were trying to perfect your free throws and suddenly understood how your follow-through was affecting your success. Write a narrative that tells the story of your movement toward understanding. How did you finally come to understand? What changed your perceptions and gave you a new understanding? Your paper should help readers grasp how you felt when you struggled with the idea or skill and then how you felt at the moment of insight.

**Childhood Event.** Choose a vivid time from your childhood—you might think of your first ride on a school bus, a visit to the principal's office, the first A you earned on a test or paper, earning money to buy something that you really wanted, and so on. Narrate the events related to the childhood memory that you've chosen so that your readers will understand why the event was important and memorable.

*Literature Option.* Have students imagine a childhood event for the main character in a piece of literature and connect it to the behavior the character shows in the story.

**Achieving a Goal.** Think of a time when you achieved a personal goal—you might have finally completed a marathon or triathlon, bettered your score on the SATs, or learned to create your own website. Tell your readers the story of how you met your goal. Be sure that your readers understand why the goal is important to you.

**The Good and the Bad.** Think about an event in your life that seemed bad but turned out to be good. Maybe you got injured and while you were waiting for your broken leg to heal, you learned how to use a computer. The thing that makes the event change from a bad one to a good one may be something that you learned as a result, something that you did differently as a result, or something that happened that wouldn't have occurred otherwise. Tell the story of the event and help your readers understand how this event that seemed negative turned out to have positive consequences.

*Literature Option.* As a book report alternative, ask students to consider how a character in a book realizes that an event that originally seemed negative was ultimately a positive influence.

**Being a Teacher.** Teaching someone else how to do something can be rewarding. Think of a skill that you've taught someone. Perhaps you taught someone how to swim, showed someone how to bake a soufflé, or helped someone learn to study more effectively. Think about the events that made up the process of teaching the skill and narrate the story for your readers.

**Changing Places.** Every place has things that change—sometimes as the result of economics, sometimes because different people are involved, and sometimes for no clear reason that you know about. Think of a change to a place that you know well. Perhaps Smith and Bros. Grocery, your local grocery store, was bought out by a regional chain like Food Lion or Winn Dixie. Maybe the First National Bank of Smithburg suddenly became CitiBank. Perhaps the change was more personal—an older sibling moved out of the house and your family turned the bedroom into a guest room or an office. Think of a specific change and narrate the events that occurred. Readers should know the details of the change, and they should know how you feel about it.

**Personal Rituals.** Describe a personal ritual that you, your friends, or your family members have. For example, think about the personal steps that you always go through when you prepare for an exam. Do you sit at a desk, spread books and notes across your bed, or use the

kitchen table? Do you have to have something to drink—soda, water, Red Bull? We do numerous things for which we create personal rituals. Choose one event—studying for a test, writing a paper, dressing and warming up before a game, or preparing and having a special family meal. Narrate the events that take place when you complete your ritual so that your readers understand the steps that the ritual includes and why you complete them.

**Standing Up.** Choose a time when you did something that took a lot of nerve, a time when you didn't follow the crowd, or a time when you stood up for your beliefs. Perhaps your friends were urging you to do something that you were uncomfortable with and you chose not to cave to peer pressure. Maybe you took a stance on a political issue that was important in your community. Whatever experience you choose, think about the details of the event and write a story that tells what happened. Show your readers why you decided to make a stand or try something that took nerve, give specifics on the event, and share how you felt after the event.

**Disagreeing.** Think of a time when you disagreed with a decision that had been made and did something about it. The decision might have been made by someone you know personally—your biology teacher announced a new policy to grade for spelling and grammar on your quizzes and homework or an older family member decided to cancel a subscription to a magazine that you liked to read or an online service that you liked to use. You might have responded by discussing your concerns with your principal or dean, or you might have decided to get a part-time job to earn enough money to buy the magazine yourself. Or the decision could have been made by someone you never met—perhaps your school board decided to change the boundary lines in your school district so that you would have to go to a different school, or your state legislature passed a bill that you disagreed with. Your response might have been to write a letter to the editor, to your state representative, or to the school board. Whatever happened, your job now is to write a paper that narrates the events that occurred—from the decision that was made to your response. Be sure to include enough details so that your readers understand why you disagreed with the decision and why you felt that your response was appropriate.

### **Informative**

**New Policies.** Your school has instituted some new policies. Most students seem to understand the rules, but not everyone is aware of the reasons for the policies or the specific details. Your school's adminis-

tration has decided that the best way to deal with the situation is to create a handbook that explains all the school's rules and guidelines. The handbook will be distributed to all students this year, and it will become an ongoing piece of the new orientation packet given to new students each fall. Your job is to choose one of the new policies and write an explanation that tells readers what it is, the reason it exists, and what happens if it is broken.

**Definition.** A local civic organization is having a scholarship contest for students at your school. The winner will get a \$1,500 prize. To enter, you have to write an essay that answers the question "What Is a Student at [Your School]?" or "What Does *Education* Mean at [Your School]?" Your job is to define the term "Student" or "Education" in the context of your school. Be sure to include concrete examples and details to support your definition.

*Note.* Customize the assignment by replacing "[Your School]" with the name of your own school (e.g., "What Is a Student at Thomas Dale High School?").

*Literature Option.* For a piece of literature that includes a school or educational setting, ask students to write from the perspective of a character in the book, adapting the assignment to fit the text. For instance, a student might adopt the character of Holden Caulfield and write a journal or diary entry that focuses on the question "What Does *Education* Mean at Pencey Prep?"

**Biography.** To help students and parents learn more about the people working at your school, your school's website is featuring a biography of a new staff member each day. The goal of this part of the website is to share information about the staff so that everyone knows more about the people that students interact with daily. Your job is to choose a staff member and write his or her biographical statement. Think about the kinds of things that families and students probably want to know about the people who work at your school—and remember that other staff members will read the biographical statements too. You'll write two pieces: a twenty-five-word blurb for the homepage and a longer profile (about two double-spaced pages) with more information. There will be a "MORE. . ." link at the end of the short blurb on the homepage that will lead to the second profile.

*Literature Option.* Have students construct a similar website composed of biographical statements for characters in a piece of literature. The biographies might focus on faculty and students at a school, members of a community organization, or people in a workplace. Students could also focus simply on characters in a book, creating biographies appro-

priate for a guide to that work. This activity can be a useful review activity and creates an artifact that students can return to as they study for semester examinations.

**Newspaper Story.** Write an announcement for your local newspaper about an upcoming event at your school, your local community center, a nearby religious center, or a similar location. Provide details on the event so that readers will learn everything they need to know in order to attend: Why is the event going on? Who is organizing it? Who can attend? When will it happen? What special information can you share about the event? Be sure that your writing not only provides the details but also does so in a way that will entice readers to participate.

**PSA.** Celebrate a special month by creating a public service announcement for your morning intercom announcements or for public access TV or radio. Consult a calendar to choose an existing celebration (e.g., Black History Month in February) or select a special group or topic, such as famous people from your state or important scientific discoveries, to honor in your month-long celebration. Prepare an announcement for each day, highlighting a different person or achievement. The announcement should provide all the basic details on the subject and indicate why the person or achievement was significant. If resources at your school do not allow for schoolwide announcements, consider beginning each class period with an announcement. Compile printed copies of the announcements in a class anthology or bulletin board so that other students can revisit the information.

**Field Trip.** Your class or a club you are a member of is preparing for a field trip to a local point of interest. Everyone in the class or club has chosen a different location to explore. Each of you is to write a short description of the location you've chosen. All of the descriptions will be shared so that your group can choose where to go. You need to include everything about the location: hours, cost, features, any special events, and so forth. Your job is not to persuade your class or club to choose your location. You're simply to provide a fair, informative description of the location so that all the places your group can visit can be evaluated.

**Literature Option.** As preparation for a piece of literature that follows characters as they travel, ask students to investigate and report on specific places that the characters are likely to encounter. You might choose specific places mentioned in the work or locations in the cities or towns mentioned in it. Depending upon the piece of literature, students might research the location as it currently is or as it would have been in the time when the piece of literature is set.

**Tradition.** Explain a tradition to someone who is not familiar with the custom. It can be a tradition for your family, within your community, related to your religious beliefs, or practiced by members of a club that you belong to. Imagine that someone is coming to an event where the tradition will be prominent or that someone will participate in the tradition. Your job is to write that person a letter or an email message explaining the tradition. Include details on what happens, when it happens, why it happens, and so forth. Give the reader everything he or she will need to participate in or understand your tradition.

*Literature Option.* Choose a tradition that is included in a piece of literature and ask students to write a letter to someone who will join in on the tradition in the future. If relevant, students can do outside research to complement the information included in the text.

**Calendar.** Create a school calendar for your website, marking vacation dates, important deadlines, sporting events, and so forth. Each brief entry should explain the significance of the date, listing any special information about time and location as well as including background details and links to any additional resources. Begin by brainstorming a list of major school events that occur over the course of the year (e.g., special social events, homecoming week activities, debate competitions, dramatic performances, and graduation) and their significance.

*Note.* This can be an assignment that students create one year to leave behind for students who come the next year, or it can be a rolling assignment, with different students adding to the calendar each month.

**Influential Object.** Write an essay about an object in the school that has influenced you in an important way this year. You may write about something you own or use on a regular basis (a book, a picture in your locker, or a gym uniform) or an object that you interact with only occasionally (the unabridged dictionary in the library). The object that you choose should be one that you could hold: choose a book in the library rather than the whole library, for instance. Explain specific ways that this object has influenced you. Support your ideas with examples and details. All the responses will be collected and shared with new students who come to the school.

*Note.* Customize this prompt to fit your situation. For instance, if you're working with first-year college students, the last sentence can explain that the responses will be shared with incoming first-year students next fall.

*Literature Option.* Have students choose the most influential object for a character in a text and write a similar essay that explains why the object

is so important to the character. Students can write in the voice of the character or in their own voices, as observers of the character's behavior.

**Biggest Myth.** What is the biggest myth about the ninth grade? Write a letter to the editor of your school paper or for a collection to be shared with new students in the fall that explains the biggest falsehood you were told when you were an eighth grader. In your letter, be sure to describe what you heard before you came to the school and then reveal the truth about the situation. Add details that suggest why the myth has developed. Your goal is to create a myth-busting resource for students who will be in your position next year.

*Note.* Customize this prompt to fit your situation. For instance, you might ask students to write on the biggest myth about American literature class. Additionally, you might allow students to focus their work further (e.g., the biggest myth about being in the marching band rather than about the ninth grade).

*Literature Option.* Ask students to write from the perspective of a character in a piece of literature and explain the biggest myth from that character's perspective. For instance, students might write "The Biggest Myth about Being Rich" by Jay Gatsby or "The Biggest Myth about the English Language" by Eliza Doolittle.

## Analysis

**Naming.** Take a close look at the names that are used for events, people, and things that are associated with a specific current event or controversial issue. In relation to military activities, for instance, think about who uses the word "war" and who uses other names. Consider the connotations and the denotations of the words used. Choose several related terms that are being used. In your paper, analyze this diction. What is the purpose of such names? What audience are they pointed toward? What tone does the writer want to communicate to readers/listeners? What conclusions can you draw about the writer's rhetorical strategies?

*Note.* Here are some loaded terms used in wars over the last few decades: *ethnic cleansing*, *peacekeepers*, *police action*, *death squad*, *insurgents*, and *freedom fighters*. Use these terms to demonstrate the analysis that students will do for the topic that they choose.

*Literature Option.* Ask students to consider the names used for events, people, and things in a piece of literature. Students might trace all the names associated with a specific character and draw conclusions about the relationships among characters based on the names, or they could



consider how the different names for a particular group or event communicate underlying values that influence the text. Demonstrate the possibilities by using the various names for the character Voldemort from the Harry Potter series.

**Evasion.** Choose a speech or statement of a group involved in a specific current event or controversial issue. Be sure that you find a specific statement by the group rather than paraphrased statements—the group’s website will probably have texts that you can use. Look closely at what the group’s representative says in the speech or statement and then step back and think of all the things that are *not* said. What issues has the writer avoided? What descriptions are missing? Which people are never mentioned? Who never speaks? What emotions are not dealt with? Write a paper that explains the absences in the text. Account for the writer’s rhetorical purpose in avoiding these issues.

*Note.* For a connection to history or to the setting of a piece of literature, choose historical speeches that fit the time period rather than contemporary statements.

**Objective vs. Subjective.** Focus on a news broadcast, a newspaper or magazine article, a news briefing, or another speech or statement available online, in print, on the radio, or on television. Go through the text and separate the objective details and material from the subjective details and material. When does the writer use objective details, and when does the writer rely on subjective details? Write text that analyzes the ways that the writer uses these different kinds of details.

*Literature Option.* Have students complete a similar search but use a piece of literature instead. For instance, students might separate the objective and subjective statements in the play *Inherit the Wind* or in the short story “A Jury of Her Peers.”

**Firsthand Reports.** Compare firsthand reports for two or more similar events (e.g., natural disasters, centennial celebrations, Super Bowl games). Look at what the writer or speaker says, the things that are described, the emotions that are expressed, and the explanations for events that are given. You might even test yourself and your friends: if you remove place names and other obvious identifying information, can you tell which event the firsthand report refers to? Write a comparison/contrast paper that explores the relationships between the reports and accounts for the reasons that the firsthand reports echo or diverge from each other.

*Literature Option.* If the class is reading a text that includes firsthand reports, such as *Nothing but the Truth* by Avi, ask them to complete a similar assignment by focusing on the reports in the text.

**Picture This.** Examine the ways that pictures, graphics, and films are used to communicate information about a specific current event or controversial issue on three different websites. What role do these media fill? What rhetorical purpose do they serve? How do they relate to words about them—Is there an audio recording that plays? Are words included in a sidebar or caption? Is there any music or sound effect related to the pictures, graphics, or film? How do the parameters change by author and by audience for the sites? For example, how are the pictures that are used in a government briefing different from those used on the evening news, shown on a newspaper website, or provided on a relief agency’s website? Create a classification system that accounts for the kinds of pictures, graphics, and films that are used, when they are used, and the ways that they are used.

**Role of Television.** Edward R. Murrow said, “Television in the main is being used to distract, delude, amuse, and insulate us.” In light of Murrow’s quotation, what role would you say that television plays in a specific current event or controversial issue? Does television distract? If so, from what, and how? Or does it delude? Who is being deluded? What methods does television use to do this? If television amuses, whom does it amuse, and what techniques are used? If television is insulating us, what is it insulating us from, and how are we being insulated? Does television fill several roles? Or do you see the media as filling roles that Murrow has not allowed for? Explain the general roles that television fills, but focus on specific television coverage and provide examples and explanations from the shows that support your analysis.

**Gender and Violence.** Analyze the ways that gender plays a role in discussions of violence and in portrayals of violent actions on television, in movies, in video games, and in other media. How often do the discussions focus on men/boys and women/girls, and how often do they refer to people generally? When is the gender specified—and more importantly, why? How do stereotypes influence the portrayals, and how do the portrayals create (or support) stereotypes? Choose one show, movie, game, or website to focus on and analyze the ways that gender and violence are connected (or not) in its presentation of information. In your paper, consider the specific roles/characters involved, their actions and interactions, and the underlying messages that the television show, movie, game, or article is sending to viewers, readers, or players.

## **Persuasion**

**Litter.** A litter problem has developed on your school's campus. Students are throwing trash on the ground, leaving empty soda cans and bottles outside on the benches, and dropping napkins and other trash on the cafeteria floor instead of carrying them to the trash can. Your principal asked students to take more care, but the litter problem persisted. The principal has reacted by canceling all extracurricular activities until students consistently clean up after themselves. What is your position on the issue? Write a letter to the editor of the school newspaper in support of or against the principal's solution.

**New Highway Exit.** The state has created a plan to add a second highway exit to help shoppers access a busy mall. The only problem is that the new exit will move the access road 500 yards closer to a nearby elementary school. Teachers and parents at the school complain that moving the road closer will increase noise at the school and provide unnecessary distractions. The state plans to include privacy fences to help solve the problems, but protesters are unsatisfied. Write a letter outlining your position to the local school board or the state planners and support your view with convincing reasons.

**Computers in the Classroom.** As part of a new technology initiative, your local school district is increasing the number of computers in every school. The district plan provides for two computers in every classroom. Teachers at your school are lobbying instead to place all the computers together to create two computer-based classrooms so that all students in a class, rather than only one or two students, can work at the computers at once. The district is worried about the additional cost of creating and maintaining these special classrooms and is concerned about how access to the classrooms can be provided fairly and efficiently. What is your position on this issue? Write a persuasive letter asking the local school board to adopt your point of view on how the computers should be set up.

**Endorsement.** Write a letter of endorsement (or an endorsement speech) for a political candidate, referendum initiative, or similar item on your local election ballot. In your letter, state which candidate or position you support and provide a complete explanation for the reasons that you've chosen your position. Remember that the information in your letter needs to convince readers or listeners that you've thought about the issues involved and have concrete reasons for the choice that you've made.

**Ask a School Visitor.** Several students will be allowed to ask a question of an important visitor who is coming to your school. The school's administration has devised a contest to choose the lucky students. To enter the contest, you have to write the question you want to ask as well as a justification for the question that explains why the issue is important to other students and why it matters to you. Entries are limited to one typed page. The visitor will read the winning entries before the debate, so the background information that you provide will help the visitor understand the purpose of your question. The administrators will select the winner on the basis of the originality of the question, whether others would be interested in the question, and the persuasiveness of the explanation. Write your entry for the contest.

*Note.* Be sure to choose a specific speaker for this activity so that students can focus their entries.

*Literature Option.* Have students propose questions for a literary character from a text the class is familiar with.

### Literary Analysis

**Breaking News.** Choose a critical event from your reading and write a news brief on the events to be videotaped or posted on a news website.

*Note.* Update the story, if desired, for the medium. For instance, students can discuss the differences between a news report written on the events in *The Scarlet Letter* today and one that would have been included in a bulletin distributed at the time. Add a twist to the assignment by having students choose the website where the story will be posted (e.g., a cable news site, an entertainment site, a gossip site).

**Advice Letter.** Assume the role of a character from a story you have read and write a letter to an advice columnist to ask for suggestions on how to handle a particular problem that the character faces. Be sure to include details about the challenge that make the situation clear to the columnist. Next, take the role of the advice columnist and respond to the letter by addressing the challenge that the character has identified.

*Note.* A great strategy when students have all read the same text is to have students exchange the character letters and respond to those letters, instead of their own, as the advice columnist.

**Missing Scene.** Have students choose a scene that isn't included in a reading and write their versions of the events that might happen. Students can concentrate on events that are referred to but aren't explored, or they can focus on a time period that passes without comment.

What happened the night before the events that open *A Raisin in the Sun*, for instance? Describe a scene from either Othello's or Desdemona's childhood—that is, before they met. What happened before Mr. Mallard went to work in "The Story of an Hour"?

**Characters in the Future.** Where will the characters be in twenty years? Choose one character and use the information in the text to imagine his or her future. Once you think through the character's future, write a narrative, a letter to another character, or an address at a twenty-year reunion.

**Opposites Attract.** You've probably heard the phrase "opposites attract." You may even have studied the principle in a science class. For your assignment, think about the ways that the notion applies (or doesn't) to the foil and main characters in a play or other piece of literature. In what ways do their opposite characteristics, values, and behaviors bring them closer together instead of separating them? Are they in some ways different halves of the same whole? Explore the connections that bind them while establishing their contrast—and move beyond the basics of their relationship to address the ways that their opposition and attraction affect the text.

**Diary Entry.** Choose a particularly involved exchange between two characters in the reading—they may have had an argument, one may have confessed something to the other, or perhaps they just had a long sharing of beliefs. Take on the persona of one character. Imagine that you, as the character, go back to your room (or home or office or whatever makes sense) and get out your personal diary. Now write your private, personal account of the interaction. Include not just what happened but also your personal reaction to the events and any motivation for your reaction. Naturally, whatever you said to the other character may not be identical to the thoughts that went through your head. Here in your diary, you're confessing all! What did you think? What did you say? And what were your motivations during the discussion?

*Note.* Once students finish the diary entries for one character, have them step back into the other character's persona and write entries from that point of view. When they finish, ask them to reflect on how they chose the motivations and reactions that the characters had.