Introduction

As writing teachers, we rely on writing assignments. Paper, pens and pencils, computers, highlighters, dictionaries, and a thesaurus—all are resources we'd ask students to use as they compose a text. But before any of that, there's a writing assignment. Even if we tell students to write about anything they want, we have still given them an assignment. Writing assignments are, in many ways, the structure that holds a writing class together.

Because these assignments have such a significant role, designing them is one of our most important jobs. So much depends upon the writing assignments that we ask students to complete: they can set the tone for a course, address multiple goals in the classroom, and influence students' engagement. And yet, most of us have at one time or another presented students with an assignment designed at the last minute, moments before class starts. I know I have—and I know it can be hard not to do so occasionally because of all the demands we face in (and out of) the classroom. Designing writing assignments is just one of the many tasks that we must complete as we teach, and of those tasks, designing writing assignments is one of the more complicated jobs that we face.

Writing teachers face challenges similar to those that students face when composing a writing assignment. We have to identify audience, purpose, and voice. We have to decide on the best structure and format. We have to determine the time frame and point out the resources that will help students complete the assignment. Clearly, composing writing assignments is no simple charge. Edward M. White explains this challenge: "The construction of appropriate writing assignments is one of the hardest jobs for the teacher . . . and is exacerbated by the dearth of supportive material available. Every teacher should keep in mind that designing assignments is a particularly demanding form of *writing*, calling for the teacher to use the entire writing process, most particularly revision with an eye to the audience. Careful consideration of the needs of the audience for the assignment and class discussion of the assignment, over the entire period when students are working on it, will help the teacher find out where the students are having problems; reflection about these problems will often lead to a revised assignment for future classes" (8). The important concept here is that when teachers design writing assignments, they are engaging in a "form of writing." Perhaps

this fact is obvious, and yet ineffective writing assignments probably result more from insufficient attention to the rhetorical demands of this composing process than from anything else.

As we begin our design task, we may first think of the many questions that each assignment requires us to answer:

- What is the task?
- When is it due?
- How long should it be?
- Does it need to result in a typed and double-spaced document?
- Does it need a cover page?
- Is research necessary? If so, how much?
- Where can writers find help?
- Is a multimodal text acceptable?
- What needs to be turned in? Is a rough draft required?
- How will the resulting text(s) be graded?

Since the answers to these questions can be different for every class, if not for every student, the assignments we create need to include as many options for fulfilling the requirements as possible.

Even if we answer all these questions, however, we still have a great deal of work to do to create a strong writing assignment, because designing one is much more complex than just answering a list of questions. We must balance pedagogical and curricular goals with the needs of multiple learners with multiple abilities, all within the context of the resources available in our classrooms. Adding to this complexity are local, state, and federal standards, mandated assessment and testing programs, and the realities of our workloads.

These complicated intersections result in a demanding rhetorical situation that can place the needs of individual learners at odds with the more generic goals of the curriculum. How can we encourage student autonomy and still address all the demands placed on our classes and students? If we provide students with a range of options, how can we support all learners and ensure that mandated goals are met? This book explores the answers to these questions and provides examples —as well as a "Lesson Plan" icon in the margin when there are related lesson plans on the ReadWriteThink website (http://www.readwritethink.org)—that demonstrate how teachers can meet such challenges in the writing classroom.