

More Ideas for Student Writing Assignments in Large-Enrollment Classes (*Second in a Series*)

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(Appeared in the *CETL Blog*, UC Davis, August 2014)

In my entry for July, I described two short and easy writing assignments that can help students learn and think critically in large-enrollment classes: “session starters” and “class closers.” Two weeks ago, Tracy Quan wrote about another informal writing assignment—online forum discussions—in the post “How to effectively facilitate online discussions.” In both types of assignments, the learning goals include

- Student engagement with subject matter through the instructor’s question-based prompts
- Student thinking about application of course concepts
- Students benefiting from the thought processes and ideas of their peers

In both types of assignments, instructor feedback is minimal (though focused) and peer response is important.

This month, I take up the challenge of assigning longer writing-based projects in large classes. Many UC Davis faculty routinely assign such projects. Those teachers of large-enrollment classes whose courses meet the General Education (GE) requirement in Writing Experience (WE) have worked out solutions to the logistical challenge of

- Providing informative feedback to many (often 100+) students so that
- They can turn in revised drafts, which are then
- Read and graded for diverse criteria (as required by the Writing Experience guidelines: <http://ge.ucdavis.edu/course-approval-descriptions.htm>)

The writing in these WE courses must total at least 10 *revised* pages during the quarter (early drafts don’t count toward the total), and two of the most popular ways to meet this requirement are

(1) through a single paper of at least ten pages that is written in stages (e.g., a proposal, a first draft, and a revised draft, with the revised draft totaling 10 pages or more) or

(2) through two or more shorter papers, for which the feedback on the first paper is also meant to help students do well on the second.

The GE website offers several more common scenarios for arranging the written work in WE courses. Instructors are invited to invent other arrangements of the written work that fit the learning outcomes of the particular course.

The Importance of Feedback Early in the Process

Key to all of the scenarios—and to the success of the longer writing that occurs in other courses that don't necessarily meet the WE requirement—is the feedback that instructors and TAs give to the *early stages* of the writing. College instructors who merely assign longer papers to be due at the end of the term, with neither a proposal nor first draft stage, are ensuring themselves and most of their students confusion and a less than satisfactory outcome.

Proposals



Caption: Proposal workshop at UCD. Photo by Chris Thaiss

Particularly valuable is offering, even requiring, students to craft a *proposal* of their writing projects for your feedback. Since most of our undergraduate students, and even many of our graduate students, have little experience writing to the sophisticated assignments instructors give, offering students a chance to talk with us, or get a written response from us, about what they want to accomplish can answer key questions, clear up basic misunderstandings, and raise confidence.

In writing this request for proposals (your own RFP) for your assignment, ask students to address basic questions that their fully-drafted papers will have to address. Sample questions might include

1. What question(s) will your paper attempt to answer? Be as specific as possible.
2. List some materials (readings, etc.) that you intend to study to carry out your investigation.
3. For whom do you think your study will be useful or valuable? How might your audience use this information?

Of course, your own questions in your RFP will be suited to your goals for the specific assignment (just as a specific call for proposals by a journal is tailored to the demands of the issue), so these questions are meant merely as samples.

Nevertheless, they represent calls for three basic kinds of information that most RFPs share: the purposes of the work, the materials (sources of evidence) likely to be used, and the needs of the end-users of the work.

Instructor and TA Workload

While including a proposal stage may look like a time-consuming “extra” that will increase instructor/TA and student workload, the many teachers across disciplines who use them (see, e.g., Melzer, 2014; Thaiss and Zawacki, 2006) have found them both a time saver down the road and a way to ensure better student performance.

Further Sources:

Melzer, D. (2014). *Assignments across the Curriculum: A National Study of College Writing*. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press.

Thaiss, C. and Zawacki, T. (2006). *Engaged Writers and Dynamic Disciplines: Research on the Academic Writing Life*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Tags:

Writing, feedback, proposals, cross-disciplinary, general education