Designing Effective Writing Assignments

Dr. Michael Pemberton
QEP/CT2 Workshop
9/23/2015
Thinking about Assignments

- Purpose for making the assignment
  - Develop effective communication skills
  - Enhance retention and/or learning
  - Check reading comprehension
  - Apply or synthesize specific skills/knowledge
  - Build/expand on course content
  - Scaffold towards a major project
A Delicate Balance…

• Vygotsky’s “Zone of Proximal Development”
• Scaffolding with “support points”
• Resources, examples, teaching, instructions, success criteria
• Variations in ability, choices about support points
Critiquing Writing Assignments

In groups of 2-3 people, read and discuss the writing assignments on the handout, collected at Purdue University’s Writing Lab in the mid-1990’s.

What are these assignments’ strengths and weaknesses?

What expectations and assumptions are embodied in these assignments?

What range of responses would you expect students to produce?

Today's writing assignment -
write a short story
about the following
three subjects -

1. Religion
2. Sexuality
3. Mystery
Thinking about Assignments

- Expectations for the assignment
  - Topic (assigned or variable?)
  - Content
  - Form/genre
  - Structure
  - Process/drafts (due dates, length, sources, etc.)
  - Correctness

- Explicit criteria – Rubric

KEEP CALM AND MEET EXPECTATIONS
Thinking about Assignments

• Audience(s) for the assignment
  – Instructor (always present)
  – Peers
  – Professionals
  – Outside groups/communities
  – Interested general outsiders

• Audience analysis
  – What do they already know?
  – What are their interests and expectations?
Announce the dates of first and final drafts in the syllabus and on each assignment sheet.

Prepare a handout/document for each assignment and distribute it when students should begin work on it.

Specify topic, type of paper you expect, and the purpose of the assignment.

Consider breaking the assignment into several steps, especially big assignments.

Specify the audience. If you, will your role change with drafts?
Guidelines for Making Assignments

Provide, if possible, the criteria you will use for responding and grading on each draft.

Use part of a class period to discuss the assignment and answer questions.

Consider using previous student papers as models.

Use small group activities to encourage discussion and generate ideas.

Consider assigning short, informal writing tasks as “steps” toward a final product.
Questions for Analyzing a Writing Task

Use these questions to reflect on and revise writing assignments.

Where is the student likely to be in terms of writing ability? What level of performance do you expect?

What does the assignment demand in terms of content knowledge or knowledge of form?

What do you need to provide as a teacher?

What do you expect them to do on their own?
What is the purpose for the assignment? Is it explicitly stated?

What terms are used to describe the form of the final product? Are they clear?

What terms are used to describe the expected content of the assignment? Are they clear?

Does this assignment stand alone or does it relate to a previous (or future) task?
Do students have any choices in topic or approach?

Is the language/voice of the assignment intimidating or difficult to understand?

Does it sound inviting to students? If not, how could it be made more so?

What resources (prior knowledge of content and form, other texts, models, feedback, etc.) should students have available?
Is a particular audience specified? Will students know how to address this audience?

Does the assignment specify steps in the process? Are there clear due dates for all parts?

How much time do students have to do the entire task? Is it sufficient?

What activities (research, worksheets, etc.) will students have to engage in? Will they know how?
What problems do you anticipate students having with understanding the task or producing the final product?

Are grading criteria provided or explained? Are they specific to the task? Do they reflect your purpose and goals for the assignment?

What problems do you anticipate in reading, responding to, and evaluating the task?
Revising a Writing Assignment

• Select a writing assignment you give (or plan to give) in one of your courses and respond to questions on the handout.