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Creating Meaningful Writing Assignments

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Several years ago a colleague in Psychology gave his students the following writing prompt: In a ten-page paper, describe a dispute between two siblings concerning their family chores and explain the significance of this disagreement in the context of familial interactions. The instructor was surprised and disappointed when he received papers from his students that contained nine pages of description ("he said and then she said") and one paragraph discussing the significance of the episode. He said to me, "These students don't know how to make an argument!"

In my work as Director of the Writing/Rhetoric Fellows Program at Brown, I spend a semester training the new Writing Fellows to help their peers improve their writing in courses across the curriculum. In English 195 (Seminar in the Teaching of Writing) we practice decoding faculty writing assignments, so as to help students in the class understand the expectations of their professor. Although the emphasis in my course is on parsing the prompt rather than evaluating it, we can't help notice which writing prompts are most effective. And since faculty prompts are scrutinized by students and Writing Fellows, perhaps those of you who write the assignments could benefit from our insights so that you might clarify your instructions and receive better student writing.

Prompts that generate interesting writing and critical thinking have five features. They motivate students by challenging them intellectually. They accurately express the appropriate cognitive functions faculty members expect. They clearly indicate the specific rhetorical problem: the subject, the audience, and the purpose for writing. They make the

criteria for evaluating the paper clear. And, ideally, they progress developmentally through the semester, each building on the relevant skills of those that went before.

Of course it's important to tailor the prompt to the level of student writer. In the Writing Fellows Program we distinguish three kinds of student writing: pre-socialized, socialized, and post-socialized. In all three cases, we describe the level of student sophistication in contextual terms. The process of education, in this model, is one of initiating students into the conventions of a particular discourse. First-year students at Brown who have never taken a course in Economics, for example, are termed "pre-socialized" to the conventions of writing Economics. Once they learn the vocabulary and conventions of writing in this discourse, they are "socialized" to the discourse. And, some, having learned the proper way to communicate economic concepts, begin to play with these conventions consciously, becoming "post-socialized" to the discourse.

It's important to consider the levels of student writers when faculty compose writing prompts. In freshman seminars, for example, it might be important to give more writing direction rather than less. Whereas an upper-level art history course might deliberately challenge students to construct their own question and answer it, saying merely, "Write a paper," a freshman seminar assignment written this way might be distinctly unhelpful, generating a vague and general essay in response to a vague and general prompt.

On the other hand, we've seen that, in an attempt to challenge students intellectually and to give them direction, faculty sometimes err in the other direction, asking too many questions at once. Giving an overly specific "checklist prompt" often leads to externally-organized papers, where students slavishly follow the order of the checklist, instead of integrating their ideas into a more organically-discovered structure. In response to a prompt that presents a conclusion as a topic, students often feel their ideas have nowhere new to go, and are not motivated to think creatively about a topic. Another typical faculty error is to imply that there is a correct stand to take on an issue, or an ideal text: an argument or format the professor has firmly in mind but neglects to reveal to the students. In an attempt to prevent ideal texting, faculty might offer not one but several examples of model papers that approach the same topic using different, but equally successful, strategies.

Next, meaningful writing prompts specify the cognitive functions faculty require students to use when constructing essays. The cognitive function is usually expressed by the verb, and relates to the way of teaching writing several generations ago that relied on collections of essays—known as readers--divided into examples of "rhetorical modes." My high school reader identified eleven of these: description, narration, exemplification,

comparison/contrast, process analysis, division and classification, analogy, cause and effect, definition, argumentation, and exposition. The problem with teaching writing by utilizing rhetorical modes is that they tend to be taught as empty forms into which students should fit their ideas, rather than emerging organically from the subject at hand. In addition, often teachers neglect to explain that most skilled writers understand that many rhetorical modes can be used in the same piece of writing.

Thinking about the verbal signals that rhetorical modes imply, let's return to the anecdote with which I began this essay. In the case of the Psychology professor, his instructions signaled the students that analysis and argument weren't necessary until the end of the paper, when they were to 'explain the significance' of the episode they described. If, instead, he had used the term, 'analyze,' they might have realized that they were to break up a social phenomenon into parts and to assign social meaning to each part, a typical convention of social science.

Since it's the verbs in a prompt that dictate the appropriate cognitive function, it's important for professors to choose precisely the command they mean. Some commands are clearer to students than others. We have found, for example, that students are confused by the following commands: discuss, speculate, consider, explore, interpret, examine, imagine, express, comment on, ask. These verbs don't point to any specific cognitive task, although often faculty mean by these words that students should interpret or analyze, as well as perform other ways of thinking critically.

An awareness of common cognitive functions is important to faculty, who need to consider which kinds of thinking they want their students to do in a given writing assignment. Should students analyze, define, describe, or exemplify? And it's not enough for faculty merely to give these instructions; we've found from working with students that few of them have ever been told explicitly what a full analysis consists of, or the difference between analysis and classification. So it would be helpful for professors to take a minute to explain what they mean by interpret, as opposed to analyze, for example.

Being explicit about the rhetorical situation is a third criterion for a helpful writing prompt. Most instructors have no problem being specific about the subject and purpose for writing a given paper. But many faculty members neglect to stipulate an audience. Is the audience the professor? One's peers, who are at a similar level of knowledge as the writer? Is the essay aimed toward an academic audience? A popular audience? Since experienced writers use a different rhetorical strategy for different audiences, it is important for faculty to specify the intended audience for a piece of writing. Our colleagues in the physical sciences would never write the same way for the Science Times as they would for a review

article in a learned science journal. Some of the best assignments I've seen in my seventeen years as Director of the Writing/Rhetoric Fellows Program have been from fields where professors are accustomed to constructing strategies that help their students apply their knowledge to real-life scenarios. A typical example of a writing prompt from Environmental Science or Public Policy might be to write a policy paper on clean air or an approach to nuclear disarmament as if one were writing to an energy company or to the President of the United States. Students thereby practice how to "pitch" their papers using the appropriate level of discourse.

Embedded within the writing assignment—or in the syllabus—many of our colleagues state a clear set of criteria for evaluating student papers. Starting with the phrase, "A good paper would..." many professors spell out their expectations in their syllabi. Do they expect originality? An inclusion of all relevant research on the topic? A polished style? Does the paper need to include evidence that the student has done all the reading? Must the paper be handed in on time, and free of mechanical errors? Does the paper need a coherent argument, or can it be a summary or synthesis of reading and research? These statements help students understand what is expected of their writing.

And, lastly, if possible there should be a developmental model for the construction of writing assignments over the semester. In my Victorian Literature course, for example, I assign three papers of gradually increasing length. The first paper is a 2-page close reading of a short passage from one of the first two novels we read. Here I want to be sure that the student reads with accuracy and insight. The second paper—5-8 pages—examines one of the elements of fiction (plot, characters, theme, point of view or structure) in a single work by, say, Dickens or Thackeray. I want to see that the student understands formal as well as content issues and can handle a complete work of fiction. And the long final paper brings together the materials of the course, comparing two or three novels in relation to a major theme of the course as a whole. A larger synthesis is here required. In this way I try to build on the cognitive skills students demonstrate over the entire semester, as they build toward the final paper.

I have not had time in this article to discuss other kinds of writing assignments that can help students develop proficiency in writing as they learn writing in the disciplines, although there are many ways to use writing in courses besides requiring the standard paper format. Nevertheless, I hope I've shed some light on ways that faculty can encourage good writing by offering well thought-out writing prompts. Topics such as giving effective feedback, motivating revision, explaining coherence, and other matters must wait for another article.