

# Comp Quickreads

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## Designing Effective Assignments

### Questions to Ask When Designing an Assignment

- What **purpose** are students attempting to accomplish with their writing? Is this purpose do-able?
- Who's the **audience** for their writing? How much do students know about this audience?
- How familiar are my students with this **genre** of writing? What do they need to know about this genre to be comfortable and successful?
- **How long** should the paper be? Why this length?
- What is the assignment's **central task**? What at a minimum must they do or what at a minimum must they address?
- What might students find **difficult** about this assignment? How can I help them without being overly directive and limiting?
- Is there a specific sequence of steps, or **process**, that will help students write a successful essay? Does this process allow opportunities for feedback and revision?
- What are my **evaluation criteria**? How well do these criteria line up with my goals for this assignment? Of these, which are most important?

The many pedagogic resources available on designing effective writing assignments mostly agree on the importance of beginning with three questions:

**Why?** Why are students being asked to write?

**For whom?** Who is the audience for the writing?

**What?** What form will the finished product take?

These three questions, of course, correspond to purpose, audience, and genre, and an effective assignment will help students identify the purpose, audience, and genre of their writing.

While instructors might believe that the purpose of an assignment is clear, most inexperienced writers have difficulty identifying *their* purpose for writing. Often they believe their purpose is to complete an assignment, which leads to safe and disengaged responses. Consider providing a succinct statement of purpose, such as "Your purpose in writing this essay is to identify the main proposals for transforming the Los Angeles River, and then argue for the approach that you believe will be most effective."

Many instructors are already including information about audience in their topics. It is not surprising, for example, to find a statement like the following on an essay assignment sheet: "While it is tempting to think that you are writing to me, the instructor, you should consider the entire class to be your audience." Such advice is certainly a start, but students often find imaginary scenarios helpful, such as writing a letter to a public official or submitting a report to a campus group. Such scenarios, while obviously artificial, help students recognize the demands that real audiences can make. Courses that incorporate community engagement move one step beyond these artificial "real-

world" scenarios to actual writing tasks (such as producing memos, brochures, user instructions and other documents) produced for flesh-and-blood readers.

As to the form of the finished product, we can be most helpful to students by being as explicit about our expectations as possible without being so directive and limiting that students are left with a "fill-in the blanks" assignment. Format, page length, process, even "pet peeves" about style and grammar should be stated upfront. If I believe that the only appropriate use of the word "thing" in a student essay is a reference to a 1951 film about vegetable-based aliens, then I should state that expectation on the assignment. In short, if students are expected to use certain forms and follow certain conventions, they should be instructed to do so.

Thinking about these three questions is only one way of approaching assignment design. We might also think about the assignment as it might be seen by our students. From the student's perspective, the key questions might be

1. What is the instructor's purpose in creating this assignment? What skills, knowledge, and/or abilities am I supposed to demonstrate?
2. What *exactly* am I supposed to do? What is the central task?
3. What is the process? What steps are required to do the assignment properly?
4. Who, other than the instructor, might read or use this document?
5. How will the instructor know the best papers from the worst?

While effective writing assignments take time and effort to create, well-planned assignments are not only easier for students to do, they are easier for the instructor to grade.