

# Comp Quickreads

CSULA Department of English

February 15, 2010

## Effective Writing Assignments

### Questions to Ask When Designing an Assignment

- What **purpose** are students attempting to accomplish with their writing?
- 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?
- **How long** should the paper be? Why this length?
- What is the assignment's **central task**? What at a minimum must they do?
- What might students find **difficult** about this assignment? How can I help them without limiting them?
- 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?

### Questions a Student Might Ask of an Assignment

- What is the instructor's purpose in creating this assignment? What am I supposed to demonstrate?
- What *exactly* am I supposed to *do*?
- What is the process? What steps are required to do the assignment properly?
- Who, other than the instructor, might read or use this document?
- How will the instructor know the best papers from the worst?

The most recent Composition Conversation focused on one of the most rewarding and difficult tasks faced by teachers of writing: designing effective writing assignments. Many of the ideas that emerged in the discussion applied not merely to designing writing assignments but to good teaching practice. Two key insights dominated: developing good assignments takes time and frequent revision, and students benefit when challenged to come up with their own ideas and their own way of presenting them.

The conversation began with a litany of best practices, some obvious, others less so. All agreed that assignments should be in writing and that instructors needed to devote sufficient class time to going over the assignment. The assignment should focus on what students were supposed to do (not simply what they were not supposed to do). If the assignment required a specific process, the assignment should specify those steps as explicitly as possible. As much as possible, the criteria to be used to evaluate the work should be made clear at the time of the assignment. One participant noted that students often use an assignment sheet like a recipe—the clearer and more explicit we can make our instructions and expectations, the better the results.

Where do the good assignments come from? Most participants could recall starting with writing assignments of their predecessors, colleagues, and possibly teachers. “The best teacher is the best student” is one formulation of this common adage. Another is “the best teacher is the best thief.” But participants noted that while good teachers might start with the work of others, they also personalize and refine assignments over time. Everyone could recount some terrible essay assignment they

inflicted on students, but everyone could also recall “fixing” the “bad” topics through revision. One participant offered this instructive advice: make notes on a topic as you read student responses to it. These notes might address what students do well, what they do poorly, and how students might have misread the topic. The notes might be simpler: “Never use this topic again!” The key is recognizing that developing a good assignment is not very different from developing a good technical document—the teacher needs to know his/her purpose, his/her audience, and must be willing to test the document on actual users to find out whether it works, and use the feedback of readers to improve each draft.

What characterizes a good assignment? All agreed that good assignments allow students to develop their own ideas and their own ways of presenting them. Usually from the best of intentions assignments become overly directive and limiting, and substitute the instructor's thinking for the student's. “Helping” easily slips into “doing for.” Sometimes students are given little or no choice in their response and struggle to work within the narrow limitations of a single topic to which they must but cannot respond, or an overly simple task that leaves them with little to do other than repeat the argument of the assignment. Some participants noted that some students imaginatively go beyond a topic, but by doing so produce an essay that runs the risk of appearing “off-topic.” In portfolio-assessed classes, the danger is other readers might see such license as signaling an inability to respond to an assignment. But teachers can usually distinguish between innovation and inability. In short, students benefit from our high expectations and suffer when we oversimplify what is in fact complex.