Backwards Design of Writing Assignments

Main takeaway

When designing writing assignments to promote deep learning, *the design* of an assignment is much more important than *the amount* of writing assigned (NSSE, WPA). Writing assignments are important because they help students achieve course learning outcomes, and they help instructors gauge how well students are learning. In other words, writing is one of the primary ways students learn content, and it's one of the primary ways instructors evaluate student learning and assign grades; **so the design of effective writing assignments is critical under all circumstances, but especially in those which may require shifts between in-person, hybrid, and online contexts.**

Since it's difficult to design one assignment than can address every single learning outcome, think in terms of designing a combination of formal and informal writing opportunities, along with other critical thinking tasks, to help students achieve all the course's learning outcomes.
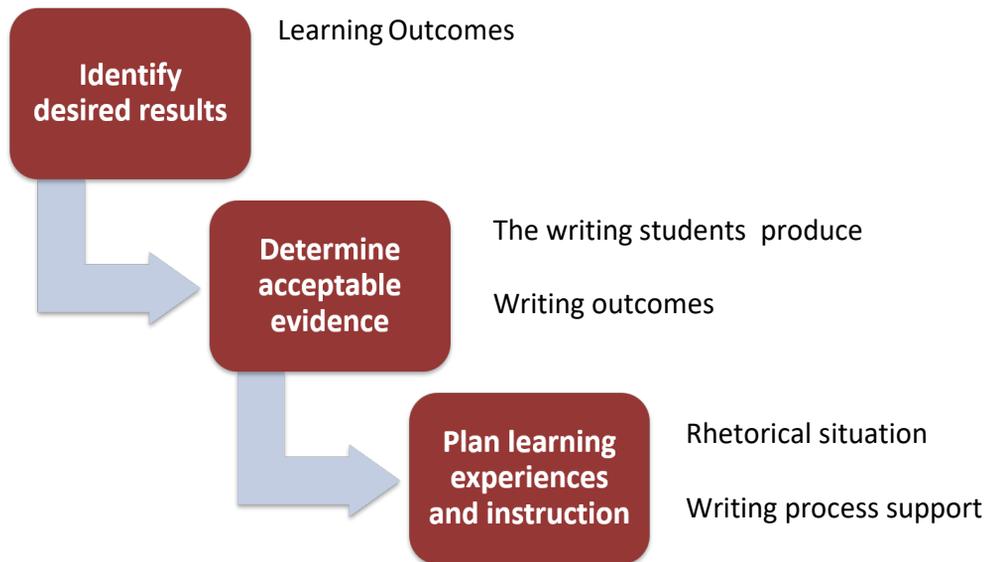
When developing the writing assignments for a course using backwards design, it can be helpful to design the last assignment first. One approach is to make this last project a culminating assignment, one that requires students to draw on everything they've learned the entire term. A second approach is to design 2-4 short or medium-length writing assignments, focusing on different course goals. In both approaches, backwards design of the writing assignments ensures that they address course learning outcomes and are transparent. Designing transparent writing assignments means that the materials make it explicit to students *why* they are doing the assignment, *what exactly* they are expected to learn, and *how* they can succeed.

When designing for flexibility given the potential shifts between in-person, hybrid and online contexts, consider selecting and designing writing assignments that allow for flexibility, such as 2-4 short or medium-length writing assignments instead of one long high-stakes assignment. If you decide that a long writing assignment is appropriate, **then you can also design it with more flexibility, by scaffolding it into shorter sections** (discussed in more detail in another handout).

Short writing assignments	Medium writing assignments	Long writing assignments
take students from one class day to the next class day or one week to complete	fall in between the short and long assignments in the amount of time they take students to complete	usually take students several weeks to even months complete
students may read each other's work and give informal feedback	may include informal or formal peer-response	typically include at least one peer-response session

Use backwards design to develop writing assignments

Earlier this week you used backwards design to develop learning outcomes for a course and to identify an activity that would help students achieve those learning outcome. Backwards design is also an appropriate method for developing writing assignments of all lengths.

Identify desired results → Learning Outcomes

Determine acceptable evidence → The writing students produce / Writing outcomes

Plan learning experiences and instruction → Rhetorical situation / Writing process support

First, identify the course learning outcome(s) for which you want to design a writing assignment.

Second, determine what kind of writing would constitute acceptable evidence that students had achieved those learning outcome(s) and phrase this evidence in the form of a writing outcome. This step sometimes requires a shift from thinking about *what* we teach to what we want students *to learn or be able to do*. For example, instead of asking students to write about what they know, understand, or realize, design writing assignments that ask students to write and explain, apply, synthesize, or evaluate. It is these second set of verbs that we can teach, see, provide feedback on, and evaluate.

Ask if the assignment guides students to: learn content? engage in intellectual moves or skills embedded in learning outcome(s)? produce writing that will constitute evidence that they have achieved the learning outcome(s)?

Third, plan the learning experiences and instruction that will support students as they learn content and produce the written product that serves as evidence they achieved the learning outcome(s). This includes defining the rhetorical situation for the writing task (audience, purpose for the writing, genre/type of text), building in attention to the writing process, developing evaluation criteria, and developing suppor activities for students as they work on their writing, such as collaborative brainstorming. These details are shared in the writing assignment handout.

Four approaches to help select a writing assignment that aligns with course outcome(s)

Approach #1 - Use NSSE's (National Survey of Student Engagement) meaning-making strategies

Summarize something you read

Analyze or evaluate something you read, researched, or observed

Describe your methods or findings related to data you collected Argue

a position using evidence and reasoning

Explain the meaning of numerical or statistical data

Write in the style and format of a specific field

Address a real or imagined audience such as your classmates, a politician, non-experts

Approach #2 - Use Washington State's Critical Thinking Categories

Identify and present the problem/question

Identify and present students' own perspectives and positions

Identify and present others' perspectives and positions Identify

and assess supporting data/evidence

Identify and assess implications and consequences

Approach #3 – Use questions about your class

How much time is spent on different topics?

What are the most important concepts?

What are the thinking skills for units, for the whole course?

Ways of thinking as an economists? historian? journalist? psychologist?

Past student struggles?

Approach #4 – Review lists of genres/types of writing (see Resources in Moodle)

Example Writing Outcomes
(see list of writing outcomes for Elon majors, generated by our Writing Excellence Initiative)

Writing-to-Learn
All graduates will be able to able to produce, as well as use, critical peer review feedback that improves the final writing product. (Environmental and Ecological Studies)

Writing in a Discipline
Write a section of the audit work papers that is included in the file to supervisors and peers for review that describes work performed and conclusions reached. (Accounting)

Writing as a Citizen
Students will be able to summarize complex scientific ideas and confront scientific misconceptions in a way that will allow someone who is interested in the topic, but not very knowledgeable in it, to expand their understanding. The style of this summary would be similar to what you might find in a newspaper opinion piece, or a popular magazine. (Physics)