Backwards Design of Writing Assignment

Main Takeaway

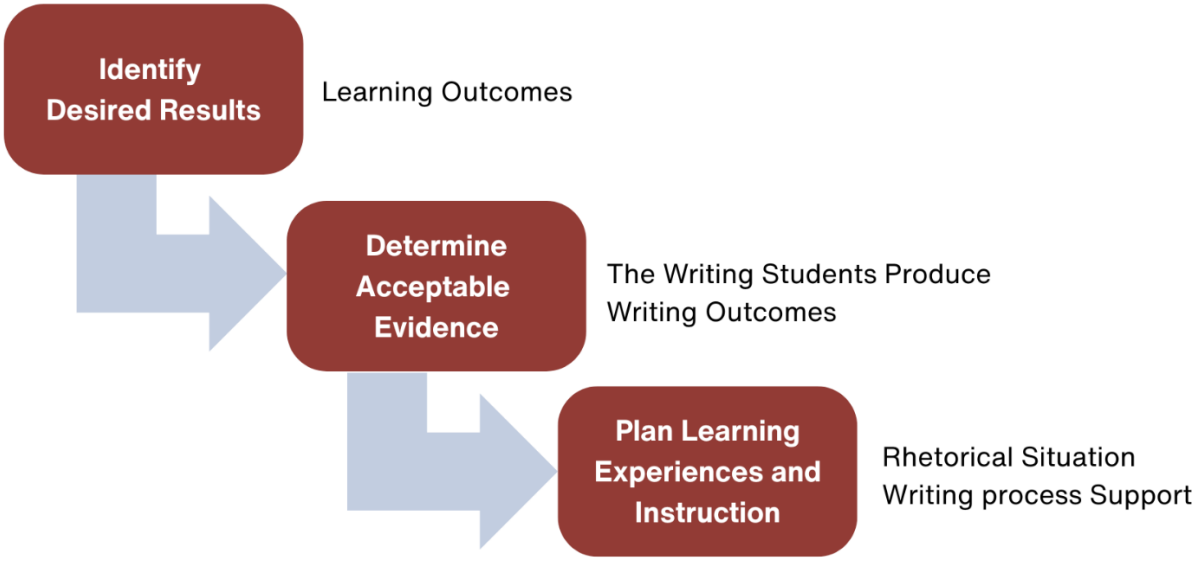
When designing writing assignments to promote deep learning, the design of an assignment is much more important than the amount of writing assigned (NSSE, WPA). Writing assignments are important because they help students achieve course learning outcomes, and help instructors gauge how well students 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.

It can be difficult to design one assignment that addresses every learning outcome, so it is beneficial to design a combination of formal and informal writing opportunities, in addition to other critical thinking tasks. This structure helps students achieve all of the course's learning objectives.

When developing writing assignments for a course using **backwards design**, it can be helpful to design the last assignment first. This method is important in clarifying the course outcomes and main takeaways, and identifying the objectives needed to achieve them. One approach to this method is to make the last project a culminating assignment, one that requires students to draw on everything they've learned throughout the course. 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 course learning outcomes are addressed. This method is also important in designing transparent writing assignments, meaning 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.

Short Writing Assignments	Medium Writing Assignments	Long Writing Assignments
Usually takes students around 1-2 class days to complete. Students may read each other's work and give feedback.	May take a few days or a couple of weeks. May include informal or formal peer observation and response.	Usually takes students several weeks or months to complete. Include at least one peer response session.

Using Backwards Design to Develop Writing Assignments



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), or 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 support 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

Approach #1 – Use National Survey of Student Engagement's (NSSE) 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 to 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 economist? historian? journalist? psychologist? past student struggles?

Approach #4 – Review lists of genres/types of writing

- Use online research to find lists of genres in your discipline

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 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)