# Best Practices in Writing Assignment Design

## Main Takeaway

Once you've used backward design to select a writing assignment that constitutes evidence that students have achieved the course's learning outcome(s) and phrased the assignment in the form of a writing outcome, **several best practices in writing assignment design** can help ensure that students understand the assignment, what they are learning, and how to succeed. In addition, including certain information in writing assignment handouts can make them more transparent to students, further increasing the chances of student success in achieving the course learning and writing outcomes.

## Best Practices in Writing Assignment Design

1. Define a rhetorical situation (audience, purpose, genre/type of text)
2. Include interactive components (writing as inquiry and discovery)
3. Include a meaning-making or problem-based task
4. Include clear explanation of writing expectations and evaluation criteria

**Best Practice #1: Define a rhetorical situation:**
Different audiences, purposes, and genres impact students' thinking and writing. Defining a rhetorical situation invites students to write for meaning and to make an argument, as opposed to just writing an information "dump." Writing always has an audience, and defining this audience, (whether it is the instructor or a real or imagined audience) encourages students to make "writerly" decisions (what does the reader know? need to know? etc.) Explaining the purpose and audience of the writing task helps frame the context for the assignment, and stating the genre tells students what kind of text they are producing.

**Best Practice #2: Include interactive components:**
Including opportunities for students to talk with others about their writing and to give and receive feedback from peers emphasizes that writing is about inquiry and discovery (of ideas, arguments, data, etc.) Interactive activities include group discussion, peer-response, and revising work in response to readers' feedback.

**Best Practice #3: Include a meaning-making or problem-based task:**
Embedding a meaning-making task into a writing assignment moves students beyond simply repeating information to exploring and resolving a problem that matters to them and/or audiences. Washington State's Critical Thinking categories are helpful for designing such tasks.

**Best Practice #4: Include a clear explanation of writing expectations and evaluation criteria:**
Transparent assignments include clear writing expectations and evaluation criteria because they identify what constitutes successful writing in the situation, what the instructor values about writing in the class/discipline, what the students are practicing, and how instructors will grade student work.

## Designing Effective Writing Assignment Handouts

Designing an effective writing assignment handout is important for short, medium, and long writing projects because it tells students about the rhetorical situation in which they're writing and what constitutes effective writing in that situation.

**A writing assignment handout should include:**

- Student learning/writing outcomes(s) (what you want students to learn and be able to do)
- Rhetorical situations (audience, purpose, genre)
- Due dates for process (brainstorm, proposal, peer-responses, conferences, etc.)
- Due date of final drafts and how to submit
- Evaluation criteria

**Create detailed evaluation criteria:**

- Provide clear assessment criteria that are aligned with the learning and writing outcomes and focus on the intellectual tasks you want students to practice (and not technicalities like length or font).
- Consider evaluating or giving credit for student participation/completion of each section or part of the writing process along the way (as opposed to evaluating only the final product). Giving credit for completing successive sections prioritizes student effort and learning and can be especially helpful when working with challenging content or under distanced, online situations.
- Consider contract grading, which prioritizes student effort and participation and encourages revision and reflection. With contract grading, students agree to do a certain amount of work at a specific level of quality to achieve a certain grade.
- Creating evaluation criteria is covered in more detail in the next module.