

*So, You Want To Write A Writing Assignment...*

Writing a writing assignment the right way can be downright tiresome. While some can write one right away, others are left writhing. The writing you hold right in front of you will hopefully help you write a writing assignment that will encourage students to write, rightly.

Before you begin drafting a writing assignment, you must first be clear on what kind of essay you are assigning. Argument? Analysis? Compare and Contrast? Research? Once you have your answer you can go ahead and bold that word at the top of the assignment page, add the word "essay" and center. Example:

### **Critical Analysis Essay**

Keep in mind, you are not deciding on rhetorical modes willy-nilly. You want your essay assignments to compliment what you are working with in class. After doing a few classes on poetry, it might be nice to ask students to compare and contrast some poems. After reading some well-argued articles, you can create an assignment that allows students to argue class topics for themselves. You also want to keep chronology in mind: Your first essay might be a bit straight-forward. The last essay is usually your coup de grâce: the research paper.

The next step is deciding on how much this particular essay will be worth. You are required to assign four essays throughout the semester. I divide my scoring like so:

Essay 1 (15%), Essay Two (15%), Essay III (15%) and Research Paper (20%)  
The remaining 35% is spent judging and evaluating other things.  
But, that's only one way to do it.

Afterwards, you'll figure out the due dates. There are three dates that are useful to get at the top of that assignment sheet. You may even be able to anticipate them. They are:

- A) The Rough Draft Due Date,
- B) The Graded Essay Due Date,
- C) The I-Won't-Accept-Rewrites-After-Today Due Date

This is a lot to plan out, I realize. At first you may find yourself writing numbers and days of the week willy nilly, but this will only lead to more work for you in the end. The responsible thing to do is to take a look at a calender and then break it down:

- 1) When am I handing out this assignment sheet?
- 2) What is a reasonable amount of time for students to complete a rough draft of this assignment?
- 3) How long will it take me to comment on these drafts and return them?
- 4) Now with commented drafts, how long will it take students to revise and revamp for a grade?

Answering questions #1 & #2 should lead you to an appropriate Rough Draft Due Date.

Answering questions #3 & #4 should lead you to a Graded Essay due Date that is a propos.

As for the Rewrite Ultimatum, I usually just say,

"I will accept rewrites until the next essay is due."

So far we have discussed: what essay you are assigning, how much that essay will be worth and when that essay will be due. What do these three pieces of information all have in common? You got it! They should all be found on not just your four writing assignment sheets, but also your SYLLABUS!

Syllabi aside, your assignment sheets may now look like this:

**Critical Analysis Essay  
(15% of final grade)**

Rough Draft due: Thursday, Feb. 25<sup>th</sup>.

Revised Essay to be graded due: Thursday, Mar. 4<sup>th</sup>.

Rewrites accepted until: Thursday, Mar. 25<sup>th</sup>.

Here comes the fun part: brainstorming essay questions. You want your assigned prompt or question to be near the top of your assignment page, because it is debatably the most important part. You might also find it smart to include a quick overview of what the particular essay type involves. Example:

“The task for this essay is to conduct an **analysis** of a piece of literature that we cover in class. Analysis involves examining distinct parts of a piece of writing and using your interpretation of these parts in coming to a more rich and insightful conclusion about the meaning of the work as a whole.”

Voilà!

I don't want to put any words in your mouth, but here are some tips to keep in mind when creating your writing prompts/questions/topics/situations/scenarios:

-Explain why the prompt is relevant and important and worth writing on. Also explain your reasoning behind assigning this prompt.

-Make your prompts specific.

Example: do not use a prompt like, “Perform an analysis on something.”

-Having said that, prompts should be open-ended enough to accelerate students' ideas. Prompts should prompt essays. They should not be “yes” or “no” questions.

Example: do not use a prompt like, “Is *The Sun Also Rises* good?”

If you were assigning a Critical Analysis, for instance, you could prompt students to analyze particular themes, motifs, metaphors, similes, characters, symbols, settings, allusions, images, songs, actions...etcetera, etcetera.

OK, now that you have decided on one good prompt, do that one or two more times. It's good to give students options. I like to have three possible prompts for each essay. Vary the prompts as best you can. One prompt may be more direct. Another may be more creative.

I think coming up with the perfect prompts is the most challenging part of drafting a writing assignment, but it is certainly not the last. Before you distribute your assignment sheets you should be sure to do the following six things:

1) Identify the **audience**:

Discussing the importance of audience will surely be a part of many of your lesson plans. To reinforce the importance of audience, and to give students practical practice, be sure to mention audience specifically on your assignment sheets. It will not only help students hone their rhetorical skills, but it will also make the desired tone of the assignment more explicit. Are students writing to fellow students? Writing to you, the instructor? Writing to the general American public? Writing to the scholarly audience of academia? You decide.

2) Share **models** and student **samples**:

This step does not necessarily need to be on your assignment sheet, but it is still a good idea. Again, it will help to solidify exactly what it is you are looking for from your students. After each prompt, I like to provide some "possible essay ideas" which I present in the form of potential titles. Then I might read an example of a good introduction to the class and pass that example around. For instance, students might be confused about how to organize a compare and contrast essay; sharing positive examples could alleviate this stress.

3) Formal and Format **Details**:

This step should be a breeze and can usually be copied-and-pasted from assignment sheet to assignment sheet. This is the section of the assignment where you include pertinent info, such as: required font size and shape, margin measurements, minimum/maximum page length, the number of required outside sources, MLA format reminders...etcetera, etcetera.

4) **Evaluation** Criteria:

To be fair you should also include a blurb or two about how you plan on evaluating the essay. You might have essay specific requirements (Example: You must include at least three supporting points for your argument and one opposing argument) and these should be explained. Summarize the rubric you grade by in a few sentences, so students know what needs to be accomplished to succeed.

5) Give pointers to **available resources** and 6) Suggest where students can get **extra help**:

I'm conjoining these last points. At the end of your assignment sheet its nice to include directions to helpful resources (a particular library collection? JSTOR? New York Times dot com?) that would be useful. Lastly, make students aware of where they can get extra help, if needed. This means reminding everyone of your office hours, providing your e-mail for questions and saying a thing, or two, about the tutoring center and writer's assistants on campus. That info:

Tutoring Center: South Classroom Building (SCB), Room 132. Telephone: 845-257-3580

Do all that and you'll be A-OK.