

Assignments from Hell:
The View from the Writing Center

Muriel Harris

but from the perspective of a writing center tutor, the road to hellishly bad papers is often paved with well-intentioned assignments.

writing can and does go astray when assignments prompted by good intentions are not well constructed. As a result, students coping with such assignments often head for their campus writing center, looking for clarification, assistance in interpreting what the assignment is about, or feedback about whether their draft has met the requirements of the assignment because they

From *What Is "College-*

From *What Is "College-*

assigned paper done and a chemistry test is looming on the horizon). Setting up criteria that are weighted in importance is clearly a way to help students see what truly is important and what is being stressed in any particular assignment, but they need to hear that the whole set of criteria are important and that even something that will only count for 5% or 15% is important too. A paper is a composite of many writing abilities, and it helps to explain that they all must work together to form the satisfactory paper.

Students care about their grades, and giving them understandable, concrete criteria, as complete as possible within reasonable limits, can result in papers more consciously aimed at the effective, clear, literate prose we are trying to help them learn to write.

Stressing Form over Substance

There are yet other aspects of grading standards for assignments that can cause problems. Kim Ballard, the writing center director at Western Michigan University, reminds us how over-

I've noticed that instructors who struggle with assignments tend to write assignments based on how they want a document to look which is crucial to them not on (a) the writing goals the task is supposed to help students grapple with or learn or (b) the way the task fits into a particular discipline.

For example, the assignment will be full of details about margins, fonts, and length. The teachers may have a full chart of the types of mechanical errors they don't want to see in the paper. Yet the assignment may say little about how the writing task supports

(a) the goals of the course

From *What Is "College-Level" Writing? Volume 2: Assignments, Readings, and Student Writing Samples*, edited by Patrick Sullivan, Howard Tinberg, and Sheridan Blau. Copyright 2010 by the National Council of Teachers of English. Used with permission.

From *What Is "College-*

when they knew exactly what was happening, when we rush to other country's aid for lesser problems?? Why do you think that these things STILL continue throughout the world?

Your report is to be SINGLE SPACED, with no bigger than 10 pt. type!!!

If that instructor wanted a well-defined topic, would a writer focus on the visual aspects of the exhibit? the global situation in relation to what is pictured there? the American response to that

us episodes of the show, as a means of demonstrating knowledge, a phenomenon that is particularly characteristic of responses to assignments concerned with literature or film. In contrast, more knowledgeable students would be able to read through the poorly defined assignment or at least be able to ask pertinent questions about its goals. These students would realize that it is really the first question that the essay must respond to, and that the subsequent questions were designed to prompt the development of content.

specificity are goals to keep in mind when composing that most difficult of writing tasks writing a good assignment.

Assuming Student Knowledge

cultural knowledge, and other differences among our students. But sometimes that awareness recedes when an assignment is written, and problems can arise when the instructor forgets to consider whether the class shares common knowledge. This is particularly evident when some of the students in the class come from immigrant backgrounds, are non-native speakers of English, or are international students. Sometimes, the age gap between the instructor and the students is much about. Sometimes, the whole class has different cultural assumptions or are from different ethnic or economic or geographical settings. Consider the topics for following three assignments (the whole assignments are not included here, just the topics):

From *What Is "College-Level" Writing? Volume 2: Assignments, Readings, and Student Writing Samples*, edited by Patrick Sullivan, Howard Tinberg, and Sheridan Blau. Copyright 2010 by the National Council of Teachers of English. Used with permission.

From

or two-sentence assignments are prompted by good intentions, mistaken perceptions about

At the opposite end of the spectrum is this assignment, recommended to me for this essay by Pamela Childers, that would require the writers in the secondary school class in which it was assigned to be masters of incredibly concise prose in order to respond to the topic within the required two pages:

Causes of World War I Essay

If you could narrow down all of the many causes of World War I, which event, incident, development or person would be most responsible? In a well-argued, well-written essay of at least 2 full pages in length, define based on what you have learned in class and from your textbook, what one factor contributed most to armed conflict. Explain why your choice was more decisive than all of the others and choose at least three less decisive factors and explain why your choice played a more pivotal role in creating war. This exercise will take the place of a traditional class exam and is based on pages 272-327 in our textbook. Each student will present their opinions to the class during our second meeting next week (the day the papers are due) and will submit their papers at the end of class. The successful 2-3 minute presentation of your ideas will account for 20% of your grade on this project. Please see the accompanying rubric for the presentation component of this project.

To further compound the question of length of assignment are those that run on for a page or two or sometimes three, usually single-spaced. (For an example of such an assignment that is far too long see Appendix A.) While there may be students in these classes who will wade

From *What Is "College-Level" Writing? Volume 2: Assignments, Readings, and Student Writing Samples*, edited by Patrick Sullivan, Howard Tinberg, and Sheridan Blau. Copyright 2010 by the National Council of Teachers of English. Used with permission.

diligently through the dense prose, some will falter after the first few paragraphs and fail to notice some important part of the assignment buried in a long paragraph on another page.

While some instructors note that reading an assignment closely should be a skill students must learn, others offer different perspectives. In a listserv discussion for writing program administrators, WPA-L, Ryan Skinnell offers the following:

I think many students, myself included, believe assignments should function like directions. They should tell me the basic process and what to expect as a final product. Too much information can be as daunting as too little. I work under the assumption that the test is supposed to be the writing, the thinking, and the revision not reading the prompt. Therefore, in my opinion, assignment sheets should have as little information as possible while still encouraging the type of writing I hope to get.

Trixie Smith noted that in a previous institution she worked at, some students who came to their writing center never had written assignment sheets because one faculty member always gave his assignments orally. Some students only had confused recollections of what the assignments entailed.

Kathryn Nielsen-Dube offered a different problem the topic that causes students personal discomfort. The example she offered was as follows:

About two years ago a female student arrived in the writing center with an assignment from her FYC course. The instructor was a young, male adjunct. The assignment was to write a personal descriptive essay about a body part (of their own) that they did not like. Students were to state what the body part was and describe it effectively with plenty of descriptive details; then, the assignment went on to ask students to explain why they did not like the body part using examples of how it affected them physically and mentally. I

From *What Is "College-Level" Writing? Volume 2: Assignments, Readings, and Student Writing Samples*, edited by Patrick Sullivan, Howard Tinberg, and Sheridan Blau. Copyright 2010 by the National Council of Teachers of English. Used with permission.

From

writing center on their campus or even with the class; others create the assignment together with the class. There are numerous methods that are limited only by the creativity of the teach

between these authors, especially the as-
inform your discourse with some understanding of the persona and stylistic turns used by the
writers you have read.

For your 5- to 7-page formal paper, you will write an extended analytical definition of the world/space of the Internet, drawing on the short stories and essays read in class, plus class lectures and discussion, but focus most on the readings. Select at least two of the readings to use in your analysis and close reading. Choose readings that are in conversation. From the texts, generate your own original claim, your own argument about how the writers imagine, deploy, use, and define this space. Think about the following questions when you sit down to make your claim as they may help you come to a conclusion that you can then argue:

Do the writers imagine and define the Internet similarly? How? Why is that important?

Do the writers conceive of this space radically differently? How? Why is that important?

How does the virtual world play in life, in culture, in the text? How and what does the virtual world tell us about the world?

Explore the recurring motifs, and draw on arguments that move through logos, pathos, and ethos for appeals.

What are the creations that the Internet has made spaces for? What are the consequences or dangers of virtual worlds on the Internet?

How are these virtual worlds described? Materialized? Used? Why is that important?

Consider the imagery employed. Are there paradoxes in the imagery that further

From *What Is "College-Level" Writing? Volume 2: Assignments, Readings, and Student Writing Samples*, edited by Patrick Sullivan, Howard Tinberg, and Sheridan Blau. Copyright 2010 by the National Council of Teachers of English. Used with permission.

need to consider of what information each type of reader will need to make sense of your essay. Another good way to think about your audience is to imagine the publication in which your essay could appear such as the Reading Contexts anthology or a website or scholarly journal.

Format: This assignment is a formal, academic paper and should follow the manuscript guidelines outlined in the course policies:

formal title page, appropriate title for your paper

1 paragraph audience analysis

5-7 pages, typed, double-spaced, with MLA citations, stapled

bibliography, correct and current MLA format

