

Designing Effective Written Assignments (Chet Meyers)

Liabilities of the Traditional Term Paper

- "Consumes inordinate amounts of time . . . and the time is not well spent."
- Students report the thinking of the "experts" rather than do their own thinking
- Professors write imprecise instructions that do not give enough guidance
- Students "focus their attention on form rather than . . . formulating a cogent argument."

Characteristics of Effective Written Assignments

1. They employ a step by step development of critical thinking skills

"Students do not learn to think critically merely by acquiring increasingly complex layers of discipline content; . . . rather, they need to practice actively the component skills of critical thinking." A series of shorter writing assignments, building from summaries and proceeding through short analytical papers will teach and demonstrate thinking better than one long paper at the end of the course.

2. They focus on real problems and issues

Present the task as a case study or problem to solve. For example, not "Discuss the relationship between Sartre's concepts of anguish and freedom," but rather "A friend's marriage has just broken up. Your friend is in deep despair over this loss and is fearful of facing the future alone. How would you explain your friend's feelings and condition in terms of Sartre's concepts of anguish and freedom?" [slightly edited]

3. They have clear instructions

"Whenever my students have uniformly bungled an assignment, the problem can always be traced to some legitimate misinterpretation of my instructions."

Five Types of Written Assignments for Critical Thinking

1. Summaries

Although summarizing might appear to be a simple exercise, it requires identifying central concepts and issues, prioritizing, and seeing connections between concepts. "Summarizing requires sorting through words and ideas, trying to separate the essential from the nonessential. . . . Instructors therefore should give priority to initial assignments that highlight essential concepts, issues, and principles and require students to translate these into their own words and experience. . . . Summaries function much like study questions."

2. Short analytical papers (micro themes)

A series of several short papers focusing on related concepts can build a sequence of connections among related themes in the course; they can also become parts of a longer paper.

3. Problem solving exercises using popular media

Asking to students to apply the knowledge in the course to respond to an editorial, political columnist, or recent news story is a good way to turn abstract concepts into concrete applications.

For example: (1) Summarize the attached editorial/column. focusing on the reasons and evidence

For example, (1) summarize the evidence carefully, focusing on the reasons and evidence given; (2) how does the writer's interpretation confirm or contradict the X principle/theory/model we have been studying?

4. Simulations and cases

Simulations and hypothetical or real cases provide a realistic context, a purpose, and an audience with which to apply the content of the course, to pull together the various themes and threads, to apply abstract principles to a concrete situation.

Source: Chet Meyers, *Teaching Students to Think Critically: A Guide to Faculty in All Disciplines*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1986.