DESIGNING WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

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As instructors, designing engaging and relevant writing assignments is one of our more creative tasks. According to **John Bean**, author of *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking and Active Learning in the Classroom* (2nd ed.), effective writing assignments have three components:

1. a task that requires critical thinking and engages students actively in problem-solving and meaning-making

2. a clear explanation of the purpose and expectations for the assignment

3. interactive elements (brainstorming exercises, peer feedback, opportunity to revise assignments for a new grade) that situate writing as a process of inquiry and discovery

CONSIDERATIONS

Each writing assignment requires you to determine:

- a **clearly defined learning goal:** what do you want students to gain from doing this?

- a **purpose** that connects to your course and/or program learning objectives: why should students care about doing this?

- how much **autonomy** students will have: will students be able to choose their topic, the form their writing will take, the sources they must use?

- who **the audience** is for this assignment: is the writing for you alone? Or their classmates? Or a hypothetical or imagined audience?

- how much time you have for **feedback**: is this writing you will need to grade quickly with minimal feedback?

You might also consider:

1. The **types of writing** students have done before: will they be familiar with the form and task you are assigning?

2. How writing assignments are **sequenced**: how might you build skills and expectations from one assignment to the next?

3. Whether large research papers could be broken into **smaller**, **progressive assignments** such as an outline and research plan, a rough draft for peer review, an annotated bibliography, etc.

THE ASSIGNMENT SHEET

The assignment sheet is an important genre of writing in itself. The best assignment sheets are clear, concise, and leave students in no doubt about the expectations for the assignment.

Ideally, your assignment sheet will fit neatly onto a **single page**, though sometimes it's helpful to provide additional information (library resources, models, rubrics) in an appendix.

At a minimum, an assignment sheet should:

1. Outline **the problem** to be addressed by the assignment. This may be a single problem, a choice among options, or an invitation to identify their own problem.

2. Identify the intended **audience** for the writing.

3. Specify the **form** that the assignment should take, with any specific requirements (length, citation format, etc.) clearly spelled out.

4. Include, clearly and visibly, the **deadline** for the assignment, and where and how students should hand it in.

5. Explain how students will be **evaluated** and what you will be looking for (some instructors use a rubric for this—see separate handout)

   Some common evaluation criteria:
   - Quality and originality of ideas or argument
   - Organization and development of ideas
   - "Interestingness" of the writing or the topic
   - Use of sources and evidence of research
   - Technical proficiency (spelling, grammar, punctuation)

Some instructors use a checklist to make sure they've included all necessary information. You can find many sample checklists online.

The Writing Centre also offers appointments to review your assignment sheet before you share them with students. Visit **blogs.eciad.ca/wc** to book appointments.