Variables in designing an assignment:

- **Pedagogical justification**—What’s the student going to get out of the assignment? How does the assignment connect with concepts in the course? What specific content material will the student have to know and apply?

- **Purpose**—What function will the assignment serve? E.g. is it meant to convey information, argue a point, describe a procedure, diagnose a problem, make a recommendation, or some combination of functions?

- **Audience**—Who is the “ideal” reader for the audience? Someone with some level of expertise or authority? As someone being examined? As a peer? As a fictional but likely reader?

- **Writer’s Role**—How is the student supposed to present herself? As someone being examined? As a character in a potential, real-life writing situation? As a peer? As someone with some level of expertise or authority?

- **Format**—What are the expectations as to word count, genre (e.g. executive summary, article review), grammar, documentation, medium (e.g. web page, accompanying media, supplements to text such as graphs, text only)?

- **Criteria for Success**—What specific criteria will the student need to meet, based on the above variables?

Dialoge: Kit O’Toole and Tom Van Vleet on Assignments

**The end of semester is a good time to reflect on writing assignments. What worked well? What do we want to revise for next term? WAC Consultants Kit O’Toole and Tom Van Vleet provide perspectives on how students fare with our writing assignments.**

Mr. Van Vleet: In psychology, students typically have to do two types of papers: topic-specific research review and lab experiments. Both require the use of APA style. It’s challenging to students unfamiliar with this way of writing.

Ms. O’Toole: One of the most common assignments in sociology, political science, or History is the book or article critique. Students have three kinds of problems: not understanding the reading, summarizing too much, or hesitating to express their opinions.

Mr. Van Vleet: Yes, students must learn to formulate compelling arguments. They sometimes have problems backing arguments with data from their experiments or previous studies. They have to practice making tentative conclusions based on experiments, examining possible flaws in research, and conceiving alternative explanations.

Ms. O’Toole: Many students have told me they don’t know enough about a topic to say anything insightful. Professors can encourage students to choose a viewpoint, write it down, and share it in class. For example: “This article/book does/do not contribute to the field in this way….” Then they can compare what others say to what they say. Having students write one-paragraph summaries of materials covered in class or in their reading also helps them prepare for longer assignments.

Mr. Van Vleet: This process provides a unique opportunity for students to think about the implications of research and to exercise their critical thinking skills, too. Another way professors can help students is by stating their expectations: write a concise argument, cite references appropriately, communicate results and implications of experiments, and double-check APA format.

Ms. O’Toole: Giving the structure of the assignment is good, as well. For example, a critique is 1/3 summary and the rest is analysis of how the article/book contributes to what the reader knows, what controversies the work involves, how it relates to subjects discussed in class, etc. Setting aside 10 minutes to discuss assignments in class often clears up confusion and leads to improved writing.

**A well-written assignment is a work of art.**

WAC Advisory Board: Professors Representing Professors

A lot of excellent teaching is happening at NIU, and much of that teaching involves writing. Yet many of the goals for supporting professors who integrate writing in their courses have yet to be realized.

For this reason, a WAC Advisory Board has recently been convened to represent the faculty’s writing concerns throughout all the colleges in the university. Upcoming issues that the WAC Advisory Board will address are “local” workshops for faculty in colleges and departments, expanded services in the Writing Center, and writing courses for students.

The members of the Board are Ruth Gold (Assessment), Kathleen Coles (Law), Jeanna Hunter (Law), Jerry Meyer (Art), Kit O’Toole (WAC Consultant), Brad Peters (WAC Coordinator), Julie Robertson (School of Nursing), Jule Scarborough (Technology), Robert Self (Director of Freshman Composition), Donna Wiseman (Education), and Daniel Wunsch (Management).

Contact these people with your concerns!
Kempton’s Semester-long Writing Project Educates Students and TAs Alike

Daniel Kempton, Chair of Political Science, believes that long-term writing projects get the best results. In POLS 285: Problems of International Relations, his students study and discuss case histories of how past political leaders have dealt with troublesome situations. For homework, Kempton asks students to read two stories per week in the *Christian Science Monitor*. Students keep journals on the international problems that these stories portray. In each journal entry, they sum up the stories they read, and they assess how current political leaders are responding to the problems.

Three times a semester, Kempton also assigns the students to post an entry to the class webboard. Similar to the journal entries, the webboard entries focus on contemporary political problems and how world leaders make decisions. Many of the students post more than three entries to this class forum, because they like the written interaction with classmates.

Kempton usually grades the journal entries three times a semester. However, this semester he has a graduate teaching assistant in training who helps him grade the journals. Students have the option of revising journals if they are unsatisfied with their grades. The final essay that emerges from this process gives them plenty of opportunity to develop their critical thinking and writing skills. The future TA gets excellent practice in writing responses to the students, too.

Near the latter part of the semester, Kempton assigns a formal essay, based on a serial story that each student has found compelling. The essay is an analysis of the problem the story has documented—for example, the Serbo-Croatian crisis. Students must draw and expand upon what they have written in journals and webboard entries, so plagiarism is not a problem. Classroom discussions on international case histories give students the model for how to write the essay. Kempton modified this idea from one he got from Dwight King. He advocates the wisdom of professors borrowing from one another.

Writing Project Connects Students to Businesses

One effective method of preparing business students for potential jobs is to offer hands-on business experience in the classroom. The major written project in MKTG 443: Principles of Marketing Research is an actual project for outside clients.

The research process is broken into 7 steps. The written portions are completed and turned in for grades at each step. At each step, I give comments and suggestions about the content and the writing. Students meet with clients and define a research problem, identify an appropriate research design, research the industry and background of the company, collect data, select a sample, analyze the data, and report the results. At the end of the semester, the students give the client a professional written report and also make an oral presentation of the report to the client.

"Most of our students can write decently. They just don't allow themselves enough time for proper revision."
—Carol DeMoranville

Prior to that presentation, they do a practice presentation for me, where they get feedback about how to present quantitative data and convince a client of the validity of the research.

One benefit of breaking the report into 7 steps is that I can catch any fatal mistakes early and redirect the students. Another benefit is that the repeated feedback helps students learn how to write, using a professional business report style. One disadvantage is the additional time I take to provide the feedback. However, students say it’s the most fun they ever had in college, and they willingly do the extra work to produce a high-quality project about real business problems with real clients.

Spring Workshops and Grant Deadlines

The WAC Program is teaming up with the Office of Faculty Development and Instructional Design to offer two workshops for faculty in Spring ’00.

The first workshop will focus on the continuing interest all professors have in time-saving ways to assess writing effectively. Participants will be asked to bring a sample writing assignment to the workshop.

The second workshop will center upon uses of technology in teaching writing. This workshop will invite professors to use a number of interactive forms of technology—including a technological “writing environment” and a “smart board.” Watch for notices to come!

The WAC Program deadline for grant proposals is March 12, 2000. Faculty may get grants up to $1000. Consult the WAC Webpage for details:

<http://www.niu.edu/english/wac/ciuewac.html>