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Faculty Support

PORTFOLIO CONFERENCE AT NIU
What are campuses nationwide doing about large-scale writing assessment? Go to the NIU Portfolio Conference, sponsored by Faculty Design and Instructional Development, March 4! [http://www.niu.edu/facdev/conference/portfolio.htm](http://www.niu.edu/facdev/conference/portfolio.htm)

MAY WORKSHOP
Professors, supportive professional staff, and instructors can participate in the May 23-24 workshop to design a writing-enhanced course in general education or the major. Receive a copy of John Bean’s Engaging Ideas and a $300 stipend at the workshop’s completion. Contact Brad Peters, 753-6718.

WAC at NIU provides the following faculty support:
- Free tutoring in the University Writing Center
- Consultation in departmental evaluation of writing
- Faculty and TA workshops
- Tips in assignment design, rubrics, writing instruction

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Best Practices: Short’s Tasks Hint at Workplace Politics

Stacey Short’s MGMT 346 students learn that writing memos, business letters, and reports are complicated tasks. She wants them to be alert to company policies, business-client relations, and professional demeanor.

In one assignment this semester, she supplies many details of a typical business scenario. Students must imagine that they work for a consulting firm that provides workshops on dealing with international clients. Students must write a bad-news letter, advising a Vice President of sales that he cannot co-present at a workshop series his company has contracted. Despite his personal experience with Europeans, the students must inform the Vice President that their firm’s contractual stipulations only allow their own trained and qualified presenters to do the job.

Short says that in real-life situations such as this, students don’t always realize how business writing requires a difficult combination of exercising tact and adhering to protocols. Writing is not just about selling a product, she points out. Writing has to take conflicting egos and emotions into account.

Short also connects her assignments directly to course material. In her letter assignment, she tells students to study what their textbook tells them about relaying bad news to clients. She holds them responsible for a written format that she always discusses in class. She advises her students to include only necessary information from the scenario and exclude anything that’s irrelevant. They must anticipate the client’s perspective, even while they must accurately represent their own firm. She does not accept mechanical or grammatical problems in the letter’s final, one-page draft.

Because the assignment involves such rhetorical complexity, Short advises students to use the University Writing Center. She provides the UWC a copy of her assignment. She tells her students the UWC tutors are not simply copy editors. She wants students to seek consultation, as they would in the workplace.

The result? Short’s students become attuned not only to the conventions, but also to the interpersonal politics of writing tasks.

Students Wonder What Professors Want; Let’s Tell Them!

To help students write successfully, guidelines for assignments ought to include:

- **Purpose:** What should students accomplish? Give them ample contextual details and explain how the assignment connects to course objectives and texts.
- **Audience:** What kind of reader should students address? Let them know how knowledgeable the reader is supposed to be, what kinds of bias the reader may have, what special terms the reader will (or won’t) understand.
- **Writer’s Role:** How should students represent themselves? Tell them if they should adopt the role of an examinee, a writer on the job, an expert in the discipline, a consultant, a go-between, etc.

- **Process:** How should students work through the assignment? Provide them with guidance on whether to submit a paper in stages or to submit a whole draft and revise it after getting feedback. They also need to know the specific criteria on which they’ll be graded, and if the criteria for a revised draft will be different.
- **Format:** How should students organize their assignment? Help them realize that different academic disciplines use different formats. They also need to know the approximate word count, citation style, heading style, and expectations on grammatical correctness and mechanics.

For more suggestions, go to: [http://web.mit.edu/writing/Faculty/](http://web.mit.edu/writing/Faculty/)
When good assignments go flat, it’s time to figure out why. Writing Center tutors say that one of the biggest problems students have is understanding what to do. Here’s a check-list:

1. Did the students get written instructions? Mystified students often say their professor only gave them oral instructions. Posting written instructions on a course website or including them in the syllabus is wise, as well.

2. Did students hear instructions read aloud and ask questions? Students may tuck instructions into their notebooks and discover too late that they are puzzled. Reading an assignment’s instructions aloud invites important questions and provides the chance to explain confusing parts.

3. Did the students get ideas for starting? Students benefit from suggestions about where to begin research, how to set up an introduction, or what kinds of research questions to ask. They also learn from hearing how we would begin the assignment. Or we can ask them to email us to confirm what first steps they have taken.

4. Did students know how the finished assignment should look? Models of a finished assignment give good guidance. Students can use models to figure out format requirements, possible options, citation styles, etc. Showing students models of A, B, and even C-level work also has a big impact.

5. Did the students have to provide follow-up? When students must demonstrate periodically that they are on task, the final written product improves. At different intervals, they can bring in: a thesis statement or research question, an annotated bibliography, an introductory paragraph, an outline, a progress report, or an abstract of their project. We don’t need to grade these—just provide a check, plus, or minus, so students see the quality of their work, and we have a record.

Writing Tutors Ask: Do Students Understand the Assignment?

When we define the keywords of what an assignment requires students to do, we help them a lot. Keywords include:

Define: Tell what a thing is and is not, categorize it, and distinguish it from other members in that category.

Analyze: Break the whole into parts to show how the parts relate to the whole, e.g., stages of a process, causes of an event, components of a theory.

Evaluate/Assess/Critique: Decide the value of something, using clearly defined criteria.

Classify: Identify something by singling out traits that categorize it as belonging to a similar group of objects.

Compare/Contrast: Discuss two things, either to emphasize their similarities or differences.

Describe: Indicate the characteristics of a thing, event, person, principle, procedure, or action, so others recognize it.

Interpret: Suggest what an object or text is about, based on what its creator seems to intend.

Discuss/Examine: Analyze and/or evaluate something, deciding what questions or points are most important to emphasize. Go beyond summary.

Illustrate: Give a specific example that shows the basic traits of a concept, issue, or problem.

List/Enumerate: Arrange essential points logically.

Explain: Provide reasons, identify causes, clarify basic principles, and/or relate something unfamiliar to something familiar.

Prove/Argue: Establish the truth or likelihood of something by providing relevant evidence, facts, or reasons.

Outline: Arrange a project’s description according to main and subordinate points, stressing a development or classifying elements of a problem.

Summarize: Review only the main points of an issue, a text, a concept, or an event.

See: http://wac.gmu.edu/teaching/cca.html