### Karlson Shares Stages of Term Paper Assignment

Good assignments tell students our expectations. However, we rarely have the chance to see our colleagues’ examples of such assignments. Stephen Karlson in Economics has permitted the Newsletter to show how he uses his term paper assignment to provide writing instruction for students in ECON 420: Antitrust Economics. He wisely breaks his assignment into stages: (1) topic selection, (2) outlining, (3) drafting, (4) receiving feedback, and (5) revising. His rubric for grading shows students what criteria they must satisfy.

Below are the full text of Karlson’s assignment and the rubric he uses:

**Stage 1, Outlining:** The purpose of an outline is to give yourself a working plan that will make the actual writing and rewriting of the research paper easier.

In a previous assignment, you identified a research topic that you wanted to pursue further. My observations at that time were intended to help you develop and limit your topic. A topic that is properly developed is one that appeals to you, because you are going to be devoting resources to researching it, and that appeals to me, because I have responsibility for your intellectual progress. A topic that is properly limited is one that you are able to complete in the time allowed.

For this stage of the assignment, your responsibility is to prepare an outline of the research project you are doing. This outline may be arranged as a topic outline or as a sentence outline. For instance, a topic outline of your assignment might look like the following:

**The Problem: Developing an Outline.**

I. Preparations
   A. Identify ideas that bear on the topic
   B. Arrange ideas into logical order

II. The Outline
   A. Make sure the outline covers the subject
   B. Make sure that the parts of the outline are arranged logically
   1. Group related ideas
   2. Arrange parts in a logical order
   3. Do not allow topic headings to overlap
   4. Get advice on the mechanics.
   C. Check your work for notation, indentation, parallel structure

The division of main topics and subtopics that you adopt may be different from the division that I presented above. Note that I have followed the convention that a topic divided into subtopics has more than one subtopic. If your outline includes topics with only one subtopic, check your logic: perhaps the subtopic refines the main topic.

The Writing Center is available as a resource for developing outlines. The people there will not write your outline for you, but they can offer additional advice on developing outlines and check your work. Use their office wisely as there is a one-week deadline on this part of the project. Outlines submitted with evidence that you worked with the Writing Center will receive one point of extra credit (thus potentially 31 points on a 30 point assignment).

**Stage 2, Drafting:** A “first draft” of a paper is different from attempting to write the first four or five pages of your paper. It is probably a bad idea to attempt to start by composing a perfect first sentence and continuing from there. Snoopy on his doghouse typing “It was a dark and stormy night” is a cartoon! It is probably an urban legend that J.R.R. Tolkien wrote down “In the valley there lived a Hobbit” and the rest followed from there.

Consider the following approach instead.

1. You have received back an outline with my comments on it.
2. You have done some library research and located some other people's writings on your problem.
3. You have some ideas of your own about how those writings support your own prior beliefs about the problem you're working on.
4. If you're really lucky, you have identified writings that compel you to rethink those prior beliefs.

Congratulations! You're on the way to developing a first draft. Using your thesis statement from Problem Set I and from your outline, organize the ideas that your library research has turned up into "supports my belief" and "makes me think." What principal arguments stand out? Can you arrange them into greater and lesser importance? (Here's where the outline helps.) Get your ideas on paper. You have just roughed out what the professors call a "literature review." (I know, it's an ugly term, academic writing isn't exactly literary.)
Portfolio Assessment Makes Great Progress in Nursing

The School of Nursing has revised its current system of assessing student writing on a large scale. A portfolio committee has coordinated with faculty in developing a new rubric whose criteria reflect the goals of the Nursing Program. Last semester, faculty tested the rubric on three model portfolios, each containing common types of writing that all students in nursing must do: a case study, a research paper, and a concept map.

The faculty found a strong consistency in ranking the portfolios. Discussion of professors’ reasons for ranking the portfolios led to valuable insights about what good writing means in the field. The ranking of the portfolios occurred on a scale of 3 to 1 (3 = exceeds expectations; 2 = meets expectations; 1 = doesn’t meet expectations). Here are the criteria for the rubric:

1. The student’s portfolio demonstrates an ability to gather appropriate data, analyze a situation, and formulate an appropriate diagnosis/conclusion. 3—2—1

2. The student’s portfolio demonstrates an ability to develop logical arguments or cases. 3—2—1

3. The student’s portfolio demonstrates an ability to transfer information or apply principles from one context to another in establishing therapeutic nursing interventions or in developing implications for professional nursing. 3—2—1

4. The student’s portfolio demonstrates an ability to evaluate the effectiveness of therapeutic nursing interventions, conclusions drawn from professional resources, or other kinds of decision making. 3—2—1

5. The student’s portfolio demonstrates an awareness of readers in the nursing field in terms of APA documentation, grammar and spelling, format, and professional vocabulary. 3—2—1

6. The student’s portfolio demonstrates an ability to reflect upon what the student has learned and still needs to learn. 3—2—1

On a scale of 1 to 10 (1 = very difficult; 10 = very easy), faculty rated use of the rubric at a 7.5 and ease of the ranking process at a 6.5. In April, Nursing faculty will run a pilot test, ranking a collection of actual student portfolios. Enthusiasm for implementing the system runs high.