Effective Design and Evaluation of Writing Assignments

A Sample Assignment:

Pretend you are a self-described Asian nationalist in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Write your autobiography, explaining how your experiences in colonial society have shaped your views and actions. What books or events have shaped your thinking? How do you define your nation? What are your personal aims for your nation, and what challenges do you face in realizing them? You are free to refine your identity as you see plausible. But you must remain true to the specific historical contexts and facts affecting your situation. You may choose to be a nationalist from any Asian country.

This assignment:

- Requires students to think/read/write like historians.
- Sets clear criteria for evaluation.
- Identifies what sources to use and how to use them.
- Provides students with places to start writing.
- Encourages critical thinking.
- Promises to be fun to read as well as write.
- Resists plagiarism.

Stage 1: How can we get students to form good ideas?

Inexperienced writers need to form ideas and develop focus. The following types of written activities can help:

1. a topic proposal
2. freewriting
3. a thesis statement
4. answering open-ended questions

Here are some examples, based on the history assignment:

A topic proposal. Take 5 minutes to think about what Asian country you might choose. What do you know about that country from class lectures & reading assignments? Why are you interested in that country? When you finish writing, volunteers will read aloud. I'll collect your piece & mark it strong (S), okay (ok), weak (w), or no credit (NC).

A freewrite. Write a page on what you've learned about the Asian nations we've studied. Jump around if you must, but don't stop writing for 5 minutes. I'll underline interesting parts.

A thesis. Before the end of class, take 5 minutes to write. Describe the character of your autobiography. Explain his/her idea of nationalism. Tell how this idea will affect his/her historical account. I'll provide brief comments.

An open-ended question. Look at the assignment, choose 1 of the questions, & answer it. Read it to small group of classmates. They'll suggest what rank they think I'll give & why. Turn it in.

Stage 2: How can we help students deal with sources?

Activities to help deal with sources include:

1. annotated bibliography.
2. mini literature review.
3. interviews (professors/advanced students).
4. internet source critique.

A précis of mixed sources can lead to the most interesting writing. For example:

Mixed sources. By [due date], turn in a 1-page review of 4 sources on the country & historical period you're investigating. Use a book, an article in a scholarly journal, an interview, & an internet source. Summarize briefly, explain why these sources seem reliable, & tell what you found useful in them. Check the Wisconsin Writer's Handbook @ <http://www.wisc.edu/writing/Handbook/main.html> Summaries/explanations=4 pts. Correct MLA documentation=4 pts. Less than 6 pts: revision required!

GIVE IT A TRY: Please write a short prompt for an exercise in dealing with sources that you might use with your own assignment.
Stage 3: How can we help students learn a specific format?

Written formats differ from discipline to discipline. Students need instructions & practice. Writing activities that can facilitate include:

1. progress report on the most difficult part of a paper
2. two-minute oral report & outline on a specific section (done in small groups; students turn in outlines)
3. multiple introductions (3)
4. multiple conclusions (3)
5. mini-papers (1-2 pages) on a section

Here are some sample activities that would help students learn the format required in the “historical autobiography” assignment:

**Literacy narrative.** Consider what kind of education your historical character would have had at the turn of the 19th-20th century. Write a 1-page report about what books or other printed materials that person read (or had read to her). Explain whether this reading material was introduced to her by colonials, by fellow nationals, or by some other type of person. Show how these reading materials influenced the character’s thinking, leading her to become a nationalist. Two classmates will comment on how plausible your report is in terms of: A. reading materials, B. influential people, C. the character’s development. I’ll rank these 3 categories, too (S, OK, W, NC).

**Alternative conclusions.** Since your character is fictional, that person may have died in many ways—e.g. political violence, a disease for which no cure was known at the time, an accident relevant to the mishaps & dangers of the period. Write 3 possible conclusions from the perspective of your character (1st-person narrative). Justify which one might be most effective in the historical context. 1 page; I’ll give brief comments.

GIVE IT A TRY: Please write a prompt that would help students develop a specific part of your own assignment.

Stage 4: How can we teach students to synthesize?

Students need to see how to put a large project together. You can ask them to turn in:

1. an outline of the total project
2. a 1-page abstract
3. a draft & 1-page explanation of meeting assignment’s instructions.
4. a report on tutoring (WAC consultant or writing center) & consequent revisions

Even chronological formats require certain important features & expectations, as the following activity for the historical autobiography suggests:

**A time-line.** Draw a time-line of key personal and political events occurring your character’s life. Show relationships—e.g. if your character dies in the Boxer Rebellion, when does that person get involved with the Boxers? When do significant, relevant events happen? What geographical moves have an impact, and when? Briefly describe the cause/effect relationships of the life events you plot. Provide at least 10 events for a total of 30 points.

GIVE IT A TRY: Please write a prompt that would get students to provide information so you can suggest revisions.

Stage 5: How can we motivate students to edit?

Different disciplines require different stylistic conventions & applications of grammar. You can help students edit their work by providing them with a style & grammar sheet of the things you think are most important. Limit your list to 20 items if you can. Supply students with copies. They can use this tool throughout the semester to do:

1. peer editing (in-class or out)
2. self-editing (in-class or out)
3. a report on using an OWL or handbook to correct errors
4. error analysis & a “contract” to make corrections

**A peer edit:** A polished draft of your project is due [give date]. A classmate will have 10 minutes to read, using our style & grammar sheet. If your classmate identifies more than 3 problems in the first two pages, you must proofread and correct much more closely. Your classmate will circle the problems and write the corresponding numbers of the errors from our sheet. If you have not proofread your final essay closely, I will return it.

GIVE IT A TRY: Please write your own editing exercise.