

*From the Springfield College Writing Center
January, 2004*

Creating Effective Writing Assignments

While many advanced students need less formal instruction when it comes to formal writing assignments, most college students need explicit instruction that helps them understand how to proceed with a writing assignment and what the instructor's expectations are. The following suggestions apply to any writing assignment:

- Describe your format and content expectations as clearly as possible in written form. Make this handout/file available to students and Writing Center tutors early on in the semester. It should describe what you want the writer to do, who the audience for the paper should be, what the format requirements are, your expectations about the process writers should follow, and what the criteria for evaluation will be.
- Take time during class to discuss the assignment and suggest how you think students should most effectively proceed.
- Suggest or require that students submit preliminary drafts or outlines to you or some other reader (such as someone in the Writing Center). Use these drafts to learn more about not only how your students write a paper, but also what they know about course content.

The following are three “thesis-support” type assignment models discussed by John Bean in *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*. This book is available at Babson Library. Each of these assignments can support course content and teach thesis-governed argumentation within a discipline.

Present a Thesis That Students Defend or Refute:

In this assignment, you ask students to defend or refute a controversial proposition or defend one of two opposing propositions. This assignment can be the basis for research-based assignments in the content area, allowing students to think differently about a subject than they did before doing the research.

Give Students a Problem or Question That Demands A Thesis Answer:

In this assignment, you may provide some background information of a problem that leads to a single question. Students' theses should also be one sentence, followed by detailed explanation.

Ask Students to Follow an Organizational Structure That Requires a Problem-Thesis Pattern:

With this structure, you can give students the opportunity to pick their own topic, but require them to focus on a problem, thereby including consideration of audience and purpose, and leading to a thesis. This form is useful for initiating on-going discussions with students about how they would defend their argument.

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Critique Your Own Assignment

Ask yourself the following questions (from John Beans' *Engaging Ideas*, p. 86) about your assignments in order to refine and improve them:

1. Is the assignment clear? Might a student misread the assignment and produce something not anticipated? Is its purpose clear? Will a student see how it fits into course goals?
2. Does the assignment seem interesting and challenging? From a student's perspective, how difficult is this assignment? How much time will it require?
3. What kinds of students would this assignment particularly appeal to? What kinds of students might not like this assignment?
4. Does the assignment specify or imply a suitable audience? Are the grading criteria clear?
5. Are the mechanics of the assignment clear? (due dates, expected length, manuscript form, other particulars)?
6. Is the process I want students to follow as explicit as possible? Should I build checkpoints into the assignment (submission of a prospectus, abstract, peer review dates, and so forth)?
7. How easy or difficult will this assignment be to coach and grade?

