Assignment Design for Writing as a Skill: Tips and Tricks from the Pros
Spalding QEP Learning Community, September 25th, 2018

The three behavioral pillars for apprenticing students to writing as a skill:
- Iterated scaffolding of concepts & skills
- Encouraging meta-cognition (awareness of process)
- Instructor & peer collaboration/feedback

Section 1: Tips for Structuring Student Writing in Your Course

1. Think of assignment writing as your writing for the course: draft, revise, peer review, revise
   - Unique difficulties of assignment writing: compression of form, clarity and exactness, variability in student creativity, the necessity to grade
   - See Section 2 of this handout for specific assignment writing tips

2. Use writing to learn activities during class time to help students generate and feel confident about ideas (see: http://library.spalding.edu/qep/student_engagement; http://library.spalding.edu/qep/writing_to_learn)
   - Use writing to learn activities iteratively with the discussion of ideas during class to give students the chance to claim ownership over their thoughts and to solidify their interest in the topic
   - Using small group peer presentation can be a good idea (e.g., think, pair, write, share)
   - Consider not letting students use the computer for pre-writing, because Word processing software encourages editing

3. Make last minute writing impossible
   - The most effective writing assignment sets up a continuum of drafting and revising that begins with assignment distribution

4. Scaffolding: Divide/sequence the complex task into a series of smaller jobs
   - Sequenced assignments could be organized according to a progression of skills, for example incorporating quotations, conducting library research, summarizing and evaluating sources
   - Sequencing writing can also be supported by carefully sequenced reading assignments
   - With sequenced assignments, students are more likely to incorporate revision—this is one way to get students to incorporate instructor comments

5. Readings can serve as models and stimulation for your writing assignment
   - Anonymous previous student work can also serve as a good model

6. Distinguish the cognitive work of revision from the editorial work of correcting errors
   - Both are important, but revision ≠ editing!

Section 2: Writing Your Assignment

Good assignments are embedded integrally within a sequenced course structure/progression—a sequenced series of ideas that build on one another

Questions to consider when you sit down to write your assignment:
- What do I want students to learn?
- Does the task have meaning outside as well as inside the class setting?
• How is this relevant to group classroom discussion?
• How do I want students to go about doing the assignment?
• How much information do I need to give so that students understand the kind of a product that I want?
• What is the audience of this paper?
• In what form do I want the students to produce the assignment?
• How should I schedule the scaffolding pieces of this assignment?
• How does the assignment relate to other parts of the course?
• Do students understand how I will evaluate this assignment?
• What are the boundaries within which students are free to write? (Students are about evenly split on their preference for open or tightly-controlled parameters.)

Using clear terminology in your assignment:
• Avoid potentially vague or confusing language: for example, “show,” “discuss,” “describe,” “explain,” “illustrate,” or “analyze.” Or, at least make sure students know what you mean by the terms. For example, “describe” usually requires specific detail, “explain” calls for definition and analysis, and “analyze” suggests taking something apart to see what it is made of.
• Avoid “clarifications” that suggest a “hidden agenda”; this makes students think there is a “right answer” and can stifle creativity (“You might consider...”; “Consider the following questions...”; “For example...”)

Commonly-used verbs in writing assignments, and a suggested definition:
**List**: name one by one, explaining or commenting where appropriate
**Enumerate**: list in a meaningful sequence
**Outline**: give an overall plan for proceeding in some kind of order
**Design**: present a more elaborate overall plan outline, using descriptions, sketches, drawing, etc.
**Summarize**: state the main points in a concise way without commentary
**Review**: give a quick survey of several positions, using summaries with commentary
**Interpret**: explain in detail what something means to you and how you came to that understanding
**Define**: present in detail the essential traits or characteristics of something and how it differs from similar things
**Prove**: provide evidence to establish that something is true
**Demonstrate**: add to your proof examples of what you have shown to be true

Sequencing your writing assignments. Move from:
• Simple → complex tasks
• Short → long assignments
• No/single sourced → multiple source assignments
• Summarizing → applying
• Explaining → developing a stance
• Start by working with basic disciplinary terms/ideas
• Concrete → theoretical
• Use repetition to gauge progress – same assignment at different points in the course

References