

9/21/12 - Matt Dowell - O'Connell Writing Pedagogy Talk #1  
**Composing Effective Writing Assignment Handouts**

Effective **writing assignments** satisfy at least five primary goals. A successful **writing assignment**:

- Extends from the course content and engages course goals
- Asks students to write to an audience, engage particular purposes, and compose in an appropriate genre
- Is appropriate for the class and course-level
- Generates sustained student engagements
- Positions clear and appropriate assessment criteria.

Effective writing assignment *handouts* are clearly written, sharply designed, and directed toward your student audience. They provide students with a guide to refer to throughout the writing process. Strong writing assignment *handouts* often (but not always) include four sections:

- Description of the writing task
- Explanation of expectations
- Articulation of grading criteria
- Inclusion of supplemental information (library/content resources, tips, reminders, pet peeves, etc.).

Common assigning practices are often not sound practices. Teachers commonly:

- Do not provide the assignment in writing
- Assume students know what is meant by “term paper” or “research paper”
- Ask students to follow rote steps, not critically engage as a writer
- Define a writing assignment *handout* as consisting only of expectations and/or grading criteria.

Remember the writing assignment *handout* does not stand on its own. After you distribute the *handout*, you should:

- Provide students time to read and digest the assignment task, expectations, and grading criteria
- Offer students the opportunity to respond to the assignment *handout* and ask questions
- Return in class to the assignment *handout* regularly throughout the writing process
- Accept that comprehension gaps are both inevitable and valuable.

Questions? Feedback? - contact Matt Dowell; dowellml@lemoyne.edu; x4395

## Guiding Questions for Evaluating Writing Assignment Handouts

Evaluating **writing assignments** and writing assignment *handouts* are related but not equivalent activities. To effectively evaluate a **writing assignment** you need knowledge that extends beyond that contained in the assignment *handout*. You would need to be knowledgeable of the discipline in which students are writing as well as the course goals.

Possessing this knowledge, you could ask the following questions to evaluate a **writing assignment**:

- Is the assignment appropriate for both course level and point in the semester?
- What purposes will students engage when completing the assignment?
- How does the assignment forward course and programmatic/disciplinary goals?
- What do students need to know to complete the assignment?
- How does the assignment situate students for upcoming content and writing?

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To evaluate a writing assignment *handout*, imagine yourself as the student receiving it. By approaching the assignment *handout* from the student's perspective, you are most likely to uncover issues in the *handout* before you distribute it to students.

To critique your assignment *handout*, you should ask yourself the following questions:

- What is the writing task, based only on the material communicated in the handout?
- Does the handout articulate connections between the assignment and course goals?
- Is the task clearly communicated?
- Does the assignment handout provide students a sense of their purpose or purposes, the audience or audiences to whom they are writing, and the genre in which they should write?
- Is the handout material presented in a logical order?
- Are the expectations appropriate, clear, and complete?
- Are students familiar with the terms used? If not, do you define/explain such terms?
- Are students provided a clear sense of assessment criteria?
- Is the handout well designed? Does the handout make effective use of white space, fonts, headings, etc.?
- Is any important information missing?
- How might students read (and misread) the assignment? What questions might they have? What questions does the handout seem to invite?

Soc 211: Race and Ethnic Relations  
First Writing Assignment: Family History<sup>1</sup>

This assignment is due in class on Monday, June 13<sup>th</sup>

This paper is worth 20 points.

2 points for proper academic writing style with introduction, conclusion, and citations

4 points for explanations of theoretical concepts

4 points for application of theoretical concepts to the narrative

4 points for use of readings in exploring theoretical concepts and narrative events

6 points for complete narrative according to assignment description

If you feel uncomfortable disclosing the following information about yourself, you are welcome to interview a friend or family member to write the paper. Just clearly indicate at the top of your paper that you have chosen to use an interview.

This paper asks you to take the theoretical concepts of ethnicity, race, and migration and the notions about the history of race and ethnicity that we will develop through the first week of the course and apply them to your own family story. You should provide a narration of how you came to be in New York that stretches back at least four generations. While I do not need specific genealogical information, you should provide a general sense of where your family comes from and how you got to where you are today. In this narration, relying on lecture notes and course readings, you should discuss changing conceptions of race and ethnicity that have effected your family. These changes may be changes that your family faced when migrating across national or state boundaries, or they may be general cultural shifts. You should conclude by explaining how the history of your family and the cultural ideas around race, ethnicity, and/or migration have affected how you view yourself in the 21st century.

Your paper should be 4-6 pages long, written in a 12-point standard font double-spaced with one-inch margins. You are expected to provide proper citations according to a recognized citation style. Late papers will be penalized 1 point per day.

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<sup>1</sup> This assignment was taken from <http://www.ric.edu/faculty/marthur/classes/gs/race05/famhist.html>. I chose it because it served multiple purposes for our workshop. I have reworked the assignment sheet's formatting to facilitate our discussion.