

TEC Workshop: Major writing assignments: Improving the final product

There is no royal path to good writing; and such paths as do exist do not lead through neat critical gardens, various as they are, but through the jungles of self, the world, and of craft. ~Jessamyn West

The time to begin writing an article is when you have finished it to your satisfaction. By that time you begin to clearly and logically perceive what it is you really want to say. ~Mark Twain

General Suggestions:

- Have a final product in mind: what would an ideal paper look like? What do you want your students to gain from this assignment? How does this paper fit into your overall course goals?
- Create awareness of your standards and expectations early. When students hear that you care about good writing—and what you consider to be the elements of good writing—they will take you seriously. Many students simply don't realize or understand that writing is a skill valued by professors other than English.
- Students who see one major assignment at the end of the syllabus are naturally tempted to procrastinate. They may have trouble breaking down the assignment into manageable steps. Mini-deadlines create a “safety net” for students. The process becomes integral to the product, and the final assignment becomes less daunting.
- Because students might see these assignments as busywork, however, it is important to explain that these are steps to the final product. In general, outlining the purpose of each step—how it fits into the big picture of the assignment *and* the course (even, if you're feeling ambitious, their lives)—will ward off exasperation and confusion.

Introducing the research component separately.

Approach 1:

Take a major project and break it down into development components. Think about what tasks a student should finish at what point in time in order to be likely to have a well-done final product. Most of these components should receive grades (although the point value for early steps may be low). For example, for an independent research project, here are some component steps that work well.

- Have students bring two topic ideas to class (ungraded; receive in-class feedback from peers and instructor).
- One week later students turn in an annotated bibliography on the topic (graded; returned next class period).
- One week later students turn in an outline of their project. It should include major points to be developed in the project and where each reference will be incorporated (graded; returned next class period).

- Ten days later students bring a full draft to class for peer review feedback (in-class; explicit instructions given) and instructor feedback (graded for general completeness; reviewed during class).
- One week later students turn in a final, complete project (graded by instructor; largest component of project grade). Use class time to prepare for Powerpoint presentations (students also expected to spend out-of-class time preparing presentation).
- One week later, students give an in-class Powerpoint presentation to the class (graded).

Approach 2:

For students new to research (or discipline-specific research), guide them through the process of finding appropriate sources.

- Show them the databases that you use when doing research. Refer them to their subject librarians.
- Identify appropriate and inappropriate types of sources. (There are tutorials and online quizzes on the library website.)
- Make them become experts on a topic before the major paper is due. Also, explain the importance of note-taking during the research process.
- Hold them responsible for summarizing their research findings to their peers. A few ways to do this: 1) annotated bibliographies; 2) individual or group presentations; 3) literature review.

Once the student has developed a sense of him/herself as a researcher, and has synthesized sources for an audience, then he or she can often make the transition to writing a coherent research paper. A solid base of knowledge can help them approach the writing with confidence.

Explore then Focus

Approach 1: Sometimes students have multiple interests or are not sure what topic they might like to explore for a major research paper. This approach allows them to explore more than one somewhat superficially, and then choose one of them for the in-depth paper. It also gives them a feel for the availability of related research prior to committing to a major research paper on that topic.

- Students write three short (~ 3-page length) papers in which they introduce the topic, state why it is of interest to them, state why it is of interest to others / society-at-large, and summarize three Internet sources of information on the topic. When summarizing the Internet sources, they should address the quality of the source. These papers are due approximately two weeks apart and are graded by the instructor.
- Students choose one of the three topics and write an in-depth, up-to-date research paper (guidelines given for the number of sources and types of sources, page length 12-15 pages).

Approach 2: Prompt students to think about the major paper (whether or not it requires research) well before they must decide on one topic:

- One-page reading responses: completed out of class, typed and coherent, but not necessarily formal. Frequency might be weekly, one topic from each unit, or a specified number of readings. (These can provide springboards for in-class discussion.)
- In-class exploratory writing: 5-minute freewriting on the topic. Guide students with prompts such as “What aspect of concept X or chapter Y is the most interesting to you? What questions would you ask theorist A if she were standing right here? What is a potential application of theory Z?”
- If you want to emphasize the process, require all “pre-writing” to be included with the final product. (This step can also help reduce plagiarism.)
- It isn’t necessary to grade each assignment. They can be skimmed or spot-checked by instructor, given points but no grade (perhaps just participation).
- To manage the paper load, some instructors have students write on index cards, in blue books, or via email. Setting up an online forum (WebCT) for discussion or reflection is another possibility.

Use of Rubrics

Sometimes students turn in what they consider to be a complete project, but they have left out minor and major components that instructors believe are fundamental. This incompleteness may be due to the fact that they didn't clearly understand which components needed to be included. In such cases, giving students the grading rubric ahead of time can help them clearly see what components will be expected, and how much weight each component will be given in the final grade.

Rubrics can also be used to clarify what distinguishes a good paper from a poor one, or great from good. “Good writing” is not a constant value; it changes from discipline to discipline. What they learned in composition classes may not apply to their current courses, and a rubric can show students what elements are emphasized.