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Effective Writing Assignments: Writing Tutor Feedback to Faculty

Based on their experience as student writers and as peer reviewers for other students, writing tutors offer the following suggestions for effective writing assignments, especially for lower-level classes.

The best assignments communicate clear expectations for the assignment (topic, format, ...) but allow students the flexibility to explore ideas and discover insights.

SUGGESTIONS

- Model clear writing by composing clear assignments. Give particular attention to how you compose the assignment for the first paper.
- Clearly identify your goals for the assignment. For example, make clear if you expect students to **argue** a claim—to take a position on a topic—or to **explain** aspects of the topic.
- **Allow for discussion** of the assignment—in class, office hours, or email. The best assignments arise out of larger conversation between you and your students.
- Specify the assignment **audience**; a paper written to other students in the class differs from a paper written for readers not in the class.
- Share good or poor responses to the assignment (save examples when grading).
- Communicate grading criteria and basic expectations for the assignment: length, documentation method, appropriate sources,

CAUTIONS

- A **string of questions** that appear to be of equal importance can be confusing. Students aren't always able to separate key questions from sub-questions; some students may use a list of questions as an excuse to avoid formulating a thesis statement. Related to this point: Students need to know how to handle **sub-questions**. Is their purpose to stimulate thinking but students do not need to address them? Or will students lose points if they fail to address them?
- If you give 'design your own topic' assignments, have students focus their topics before writing—preferably by clearing topics with you.
- Avoid asking students to write for a specific publication or audience that may be unfamiliar to them (e.g., write an article for *Esquire*). Or—provide a model of what you are looking for.
- Avoid **dictating a specific structure**. Students will learn more about the topic and their composing process, and will think more independently, if you let them discover a structure.
- Rather than specifying a **precise word count**, suggest a lower/upper word or page limit. Precise counts may distract from the goals of the assignment and shut off the thinking at an important point. A writer's best insights often occur late in the first draft.