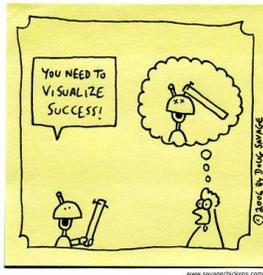


Northern Essex Community College

Get the Results You Want: Crafting Effective Writing Assignments



VISUALIZE

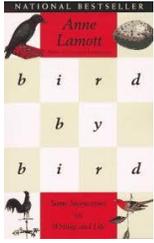
- ❖ For your own sake, as well as the students', force yourself to develop a clear mental picture of your expectations for each assignment. What does your imaginary ideal look like?
 - Length
 - Format (centered title? name and date in left or right corner? spacing? font? pagination?)
 - Number of paragraphs
 - Specific paragraph content
 - Citation style

All too often, we believe that students share these mental images. They don't! In the tutoring center, students say, for example, "Oooh. You mean that she wants double spaces between the LINES?"



CREATE AN ASSIGNMENT SHEET

- ❖ This is essential.
 - Limit the assignment sheet to one page
 - Use an organizational structure that is obvious to the students, e.g., bullets, checkboxes, or numbering
 - Break down the assignment into significant parts (beginning, middle, end)
 - Keep the structure clean; you want your students to read it



DESCRIBE THE TASK

❖ HOW?

- Step by step (or bird by bird...)
- “Your paper must...”
- “Choose two poems/one article/a bacterial illness...”
- Use the exact word for the writing you want to see in the assignment: define, explain, describe, compare, contrast, analyze



QUANTIFY

- ❖ Wherever possible, give your students numerical guidelines:
 - 5-7 pages
 - 500 words
 - A one-sentence thesis statement
 - 2 paragraphs



DEFINE TERMINOLOGY

- ❖ Be specific:
 - Briefly define any terms specific to your content area
 - Briefly define any writing terms connected to the assignment
 - Warning: This is especially important when you think terminology is universally understood (e.g., thesis statement)

Students are easily intimidated by jargon. (Some examples: “Avoid second person,” “narrative format,” “expository essay”)



GET STUDENTS STARTED

- ❖ Begin writing assignments in class:
 - Pair up students to trade possible topic ideas
 - Consider requiring that students have topics approved
 - Have them work on introductions in a group of 3 or 4 students
 - Or have each student present a possible thesis statement

You don't have to use large amounts of class time. Introduce your assignment, then plan for 10 minutes at the end of class that same day, or on a day in the following week. Get students talking to each other; this reveals sources of universal confusion.

This exercise from Barbara Walvoord will maximize the effectiveness of your writing assignment:

Checking Your Assignment

1. Analyze the parts of the assignment. Will it be clear to students what they are being given: a required sequence of parts? a suggested sequence of parts that they may change if they wish? a complete list of the material to be covered in the paper, with the sequence left to the student? a partial list of questions or ideas, merely to get students started? hints for planning, researching, and developing the paper? You may want to add some of these guides to your assignment.
2. Underline words that tell the topic of the final paper. Circle the one word that is most central to the paper's subject. Will students be able to tell what they should focus on?
3. Circle verbs that tell the student what to do. Predict the pattern of organization implied by the verb(s). Are you saying "describe" when "analyze" would be more precise? Will your students know from your verb choices what to do?
4. What thesis or topic and what pattern of organization for the final paper are implied by the wording of your assignment? Will students correctly infer what you want?

When you analyze the tasks and potential difficulties within an assignment, you can specifically warn and guide your students... (Walvoord 37)

Walvoord, Barbara E. Fassler. *Helping Students Write Well: A Guide for Teachers in All Disciplines*. New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1986. Print.

Sample Assignment for Blocking Activity

Writing About Your Strengths!

Topic:

For this essay assignment review your top five strengths you discovered using the StrengthsQuest program. Reread the description given for each of your top five strengths, and then, from your top five, choose **three** strengths that you feel have influenced you most. These three strengths will be the focus of your essay assignment.

Assignment:

In a 2-3 page essay, analyze how three of your strengths influence you. Begin your essay with an introduction that draws the reader into your topic. End your introduction with a thesis sentence establishing how your strengths influence you. Use the body of your essay to thoughtfully analyze how each one of your strengths influences you. Each of the strengths should have its own body paragraph that contains a clear topic sentence and a well-developed supporting anecdote. (Anecdotes are short stories used to illustrate a point.) Conclude your essay with a closing paragraph that reminds us of how these strengths have influenced you.

Steps to complete this assignment:

1. Choose the three strengths.
2. Do your prewriting assignment.
3. Block or outline your draft.
4. Type first draft for next class.
5. Have a peer review your essay in class.
6. Revise your draft.
7. Edit your final draft.
8. Prepare your final draft.

Your final draft should be...

- Typed and double-spaced
- Written in 12-point Times New Roman font
- 2-3 pages in length
- Staped and/or paper clipped to all work you've done for this assignment

NOTE: If you are having any concerns or trouble with your essay assignment, please see your instructor for assistance. Do not hesitate to ask for help!

Sample Student Essay for Example Activity

Karelyn Garcia

Strengths Essay

October 4, 2010

Includer, Harmony, and Responsibility!

Finding my strengths in StrengthsQuest was the best thing I did. StrengthsQuest is a website that our teachers, Trish and Clare, got us to go to. This website gives you a survey with different questions that you answer. Based on what you answered is how they find your strengths. I was very surprised that my strengths were responsibility, harmony, consistency and includer because my life revolves around them. My top three are includer, harmony, and responsibility. These strengths are what make me who I am today.

One of my top three strengths is Includer. An includer is basically someone who always wants to make a person feel welcome or part of a group. Also, an includer doesn't judge a book by its cover and doesn't care what race or sex others are. I remember it was a snowy day in December. My stepsister, Pamela, had just come to America from the Dominican Republic for the first time. She had finally got the privilege to come to the United States. I felt bad for her because our world is all new to her. It's a different language, friends and weather. When my cousins would all be at one of my aunts' houses none of them would talk to her. They mostly talked English and it's hard for their Spanish to come out right. Therefore, they would never include her in anything they were doing or talking about. Pamela would always be with my stepmother, Rosa, because she would always feel left out. Finally, one day, I couldn't

take it anymore and I had to tell my cousins something about it. “I’m tired o you guys not trying to find a way to talk to her. She is a very nice girl when you do start talking to her,” I said.

My cousin, Danny, said, “It’s that my Spanish doesn’t come out right. I’m so used to talking only in English.”

“Me too,” said my other cousin, Samantha.

“You just have to have patience and think of the word or what you’re trying to say to her in your mind before you try to talk out loud. You can even talk to her in English. She understands a little bit. She used to take English classes in Dominican Republic,” I said to them.

“Oh, okay!” said Samantha and Danny.

After that, Pamela, both my cousins and I became really close with each other. We all helped her speak better English as well, and she taught us how to speak better Spanish. I love making people feel welcome. It makes me happy and a better person inside.

My second strength is Harmony. A person with Harmony is someone who looks for peace. It’s someone that tries to find a common thing among different people. We’re also people who look for places of agreement. For example, one day my sister, Mayelin, and her boyfriend, Gabriel, were arguing about two different movies they wanted to see. Mayelin wanted to watch *The Hangover*, which is a comedy, but Gabriel wanted to watch a horror movie, *Friday the 13th*. My solution for this disagreement was to provide them with a horror/comedy movie. The first step I took to go about my plan was calling my boyfriend to come over because he owns the movie I had in mind. So when he got to my house I took the movie from him and said to my sister and Gabriel, “*Zombie Land!*”

“Perfect! Horror and comedy in one movie, now we can both enjoy ourselves and stop this never ending, time wasting arguing, You see, that’s why I love my sister. Thank you, Karelyn,” said Mayelin. My harmony comes in handy in situations like this one.

My third strength is my most common and useful. I use Responsibility everyday. Responsibility is being on time, being neat and organized, and trying my hardest to fulfill tasks given to me by another person or myself. I could talk about many situations that I was responsible, but I’ll just reminisce upon the time I helped my cousin. One Monday before I went to work, I received a phone call from my cousin, Athena. She was on her way to her job. “My daughter just got to school and caught a virus. I didn’t know until the school called me and told me she was vomiting on the bus,” she informed me.

I told her, “Don’t worry about it. I’ll pick up little Naomi from school and bring her to her grandma’s house.”

“Thank you so much. I hope this doesn’t make you late to work,” said Athena.

“Don’t worry. I’ll make it on time,” I replied.

I then went to Naomi’s school, picked her up, took her to her grandma’s house and rushed to work. Surprisingly, I made it on time. In the end, I was responsible for fulfilling my duties to my family and my job.

I’m hoping that with my strengths I can build success throughout my lifetime. I know that in my college career, I will use responsibility all the time because it is my most important strength. I will always seek harmony as long as the situation calls for it. In the future, my includer strength will surely be with me because I will never be prejudice and I will always give someone a chance. I’m also going to need my strengths more as I get older to help other people become includers and responsible and live in harmony.

Student Name:					
Strengths Essay Grading	Excellent	Good	Average	Fair	Poor
Response to Assignment: Has the writer completed all steps for the assignment? Has the writer met all the requirements of the assignment?					
Thesis sentence: Does the introduction end with a clearly written thesis sentence establishing 3 strengths that influence the writer?					
Development: Does the writer develop the body of the essay using detailed anecdotes and/or examples? Do all paragraphs support the thesis sentence?					
Organization: Is the essay well organized with a strong introduction, body and conclusion? Has the writer used clear topic sentences in each paragraph, and transitional devices as needed?					
Process & Revision: Has the writer used revision strategies to strengthen the essay? Does the writer show an understanding of revision?					
Editing: Has the writer edited the paragraphs for: misspellings, missing or wrong words, fragments, run-ons, verb usage errors, unclear sentences/wording					
Teacher's Comment:					

Suggested informal writing assignments*

- In class
 - ❖ Lecture response 1: Announce the topic for the day, then have students free-write for 5 minutes on that topic or list 3 questions about it.
 - ❖ Lecture response 2: At the end of class, have students write down a summary of the day's topic or discussion OR write the most useful or surprising aspect.
 - ❖ Lecture response 3: When students seem to be fading, ask them to write in response to a prompt connected to the day's lecture.
 - ❖ Reading response: At the beginning of class, ask students to write down 2 questions about the reading.
 - ❖ Teaching response: If you try a new teaching strategy, have students write a description of their responses to it.
 - ❖ Counterargument: Ask students to write down as many counterarguments as they can think of after an argument is presented in class.
 - ❖ Explanation: Ask students to describe a new process or technique, in writing, for someone who missed the class.
 - ❖ Microthemes: Pass out a 5x8 card to each student. Ask them to write a response that fits on the card. A microtheme can be, for example, a summary (of reading or classroom discussion), defense of a position, explanation of data (a graph or statistics), or explanation of a problem/solution. (For a brief discussion of microtheme use, see "Sequenced Microthemes: A Great Deal of Thinking for Your Students, and Relatively Little Grading for You" by Ray Smith, <http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/cwp/assgn/microseq.html>.)
- Outside of class
 - ❖ Letters: Assign a weekly letter to you, perhaps a half page to a page in length. You can give the students a prompt to respond to or leave the letter open ended, but most letters should have some connection to classwork or content. Return the letter promptly – at the next class – with a brief response.
 - ❖ Journals: Ask students to write regular amounts and at regular intervals in a dedicated journal. As with letters, the journal entries should connect to course content.

*Some suggestions adapted from: Walvoord, Barbara E. Fassler. *Helping Students Write Well: A Guide for Teachers in All Disciplines*. New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1986. Print.