

Heuristic for the Writer of Writing Assignments¹

Edward M. White (1999) has suggested a set of questions to guide the designing of effective writing assignments. As you draft the writing assignments for your course, ask yourself the following questions.

A. Task Definition, Meaning, and Sequencing. What do I want students to do?

Why? Is it interesting and appropriate? What will it teach the students specifically? How does it fit my objectives at this point in the course? What can students do before they undertake the assignment and where do I expect them to be after completing it? What will the assignment tell me? What is being assessed? Does the task have meaning inside as well as outside the class setting? Have I given enough class time to discussion of these goals?

B. Writing Processes. How do I want students to do the assignment? Are the students working alone or together?

In what way will they practice prewriting, writing, and revising? Have I given enough information about what I want so that students can make effective choices about subject, purpose, form, mode, and tone? Have I given enough information about required length and the use of sources? Have I prepared and distributed a written assignment with clear directions? Are good examples appropriate? Have I given enough time to discussion of these procedures?

C. Audience. For whom are the students writing? Who is the audience?

If the audience is the teacher, do the students really know who the teacher is and what can be assumed? Are there ways and reasons to expand the audience beyond the teacher? Have I given enough class time to discussion of audience?

D. Schedule. When will students do the assignment? How does the assignment relate to what comes before and after it in the course?

Is the assignment sequenced to give enough time for prewriting, writing, revision, and editing? How much time in and outside of class will students need? To what extent will I guide and grade the students' work? What deadlines (and penalties) do I want to set for collecting papers or for various stages of the project? Have I given enough class time to discussion of the writing process?

E. Assessment. What will I do with the assignment? How will I evaluate the work?

What constitutes a successful response to the assignment? Will other students or the writer have a say in evaluating the paper? Does the grading system encourage revision? Have I attempted to write the paper myself? What problems did I encounter? How can the assignment be clarified or otherwise improved? Have I discussed evaluation criteria with the students before they began work, and will I discuss what I expect again as the due date approaches?

¹ Adapted from White, Edward M. *Assigning, Responding, Evaluating: A Writing Teacher's Guide*. 3rd ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1999.