

# Creating Relevant Assignments

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# Overview

- Why real-world assignments matter
- Some examples
- Designing an assignment
- How to write an effective assignment sheet

# Meaningful writing projects

- The most meaningful writing projects for most undergraduates are those that ask them to do something they've never tried before.
- Also meaningful: connected to the work they would do as professionals

<http://meaningfulwritingproject.net/>

# Meaningful assignments

- Good assignments are situational and “authentic”
- Audience and purpose or genre are key
- What have students NOT tried to write before?

# Begin with Backwards Design

- What specific learning objectives will the assignment meet?
- What do you want the students to know or be able to do?
- Determine what writing products will meet these goals.
- Note specific skills that will contribute to the final product.
- Sequence activities (reading, researching, writing) to build toward the final product.

# Authentic Options

- Apply for this grant or scholarship or position
  - Write up observation session at the zoo
  - Review this book for this newsletter or blog
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- Provide CONTEXT, reasons, motives.

# Spheres of writing

- Academic writing
- Personal writing
- Public or civic writing
- Professional or workplace writing
- Popular culture writing

# Possible Genres

- **Academic** = summary or abstract, review article, lab report, poster, scholarly article
- **Personal** = letter, diary entry, blog, essay, reflection
- **Public** = op-ed piece, policy brief, documentary film
- **Professional** = memo, brochure, press release
- **Pop culture** = lyrics, bumper sticker, comic book



# A good example

You are hired as lab manager and two days later the textile plant burns down. The company president has requested a full report from you about what equipment and resources you will need to make the lab fully functional again.

# One more

The entry in “Wikipedia” on clinical depression is out of date and full of misinformation. In a new entry, define carefully the symptoms, treatments, and possible medications. Include an FAQ as part of your entry.

# Last one

You are working as a tour guide at the Inca site of Machu Picchu (Peru). Most of your clients visit Machu Picchu because it is a “must-see” tourist destination, but they typically know very little about the Inca civilization. Your goal is to share your admiration for the amazing achievements of the Incas. Your task is to develop 5 talking points for your tour.

# Pause here and draft...

Sketch out a situation that might be relevant in your discipline. Draft an assignment that includes a real-world target audience and purpose.

# The Assignment Sheet

- Communicating effectively is OUR challenge, just as it is theirs.
- Consider the rhetorical situation, including audience, purpose, and voice.
- Get feedback! Share your assignment sheet with colleagues or with Writing Center tutors. Be willing to make changes.
- Could some of the information be delivered via links?
- Could the assignment be presented in stages?
- Could students be asked to present parts of the assignment to the class?

# In writing your assignment sheet

1. Choose Keywords Carefully
2. Consider Document Design
3. Give Guidance for How to Succeed

# Keywords

Define

Discuss

Illustrate

Demonstrate

Explain

Compare

Analyze

Argue

Apply

Identify

Predict

# Document design

- What is the most essential information?
- Use spacing, margins, fonts, color, or boxes appropriately.
- Organize the information into “chunks” and guide the reader’s eye.
- Use informative headings and lists.



# Guidance for how to succeed

- Rubrics for major assignments
- "Successful responses will include . . . ."
- "A convincing solution will be characterized by . . . ."
- "Your answer must address . . . ."

# Show models vs lots of explanation

- “What does the instructor want?” can be addressed by models of previous student work rather than by more exposition.
- Showing is more effective than telling?
- If they know **a student** wrote it . . .

# An example of assignment sheet revision

- “Global Perspective Paper” becomes “Tour Guide Script”
- Notice that the following revised assignment creates an INVITATION to write
- Students are given a role and a reason to write
- The instructions are clear about the task, the genre of writing, and how to succeed
- Key dates are provided
- Language is engaging and not punitive

**Global Perspective Paper**  
Due: Friday December 1<sup>st</sup>  
5 Points

**Objective:** One element of being a globally responsible citizen is to understand and appreciate the historical development of different cultures around the globe. This assignment is designed to deepen your understanding of another culture through “perspective taking” (describing how the perspectives and circumstances of others differ from your own).

**Introduction:** As Feder points out in his Epilogue to our textbook, “Many of us in the West view history as an endless upward spiral of material progress, an inevitable pathway of ‘improvement’ of the human condition leading necessarily to us, to Western civilization (494).” Feder goes on to question this view, and emphasizes the value in the “diversity of evolutionary pathways” found around the world. The Inca (and their predecessors) provide an example of a way of doing things, which is quite different from many of the other civilizations we will soon be discussing (the Mesopotamians and Egyptians, for example).

**Instructions:**

1. Read pages **436-7, 445-455** and **458-460** in the Feder textbook, which discuss the Inca Empire.
2. While reading, take notes on the traits of complexity discussed in the chapter.
3. Answer the question below, following the formatting guidelines provided on the back.

**Question:**

You are working as a tour guide at the famous Inca site of Machu Picchu (Peru). Because you speak English, you primarily lead tours for American visitors. Most of your clients visit Machu Picchu because it is a “must-see” tourist destination, but they typically know very little about the Inca civilization. Your goal is to share your admiration for the amazing achievements of the Incas (beyond simply the creation of Machu Picchu). Your task is to develop 5 talking points about the Inca for your tours.

For each talking point:

- State your **main argument** (what you want the tourists to learn) and provide **additional information** from the textbook to support this point.
- Tie your argument to the **traits of complexity** we have been discussing in class, (e.g. government, standardized record keeping, monumental works, etc.), rather than simply describing the site of Machu Picchu.
- **Describe** what aspects of Inca society would be familiar to your audience (21<sup>st</sup> century Americans) and which would be unfamiliar. Try to explain unfamiliar practices in the context of the Inca’s own culture (rather than as something that seems bizarre or strange to you from an American perspective). Anthropologists call this “cultural relativism.”
- While your goal is to share your respect for the achievements of the Inca, this does not mean that you should only discuss positive aspects of their society (only their best achievements). Feel free to discuss things like inequality, child sacrifice, taxation, conquest, etc.

See back for more instructions.

**Formatting Requirements:**

Please do the following:

- Simply provide a numbered list of the 5 talking points; you do not need to have an introduction or conclusion. However, each talking point should be written in paragraph form (not just a bulleted list of details/evidence).
- **Do not** use direct quotes from the book; put the information in your own words.
- You do not need to cite the Feder text or provide page #s for this assignment. Remember that your audience is your tour group, so they will not have taken APG 202; don’t refer to the Feder textbook or our class directly (e.g., don’t say “The second trait of complexity we discussed is...”).
- Type, double-space, and staple your paper (no cover page is necessary).
- Limit your response to **4 pages** in length. You can write less than 4 pages, if you feel you have adequately discussed each of your talking points; however, it is unlikely you could write a thorough response in less than 3 pages.
- Proofread your paper for typos and grammar/punctuation errors.
- Turn in a hard copy of your paper at the **beginning** of class on Friday, November 30<sup>th</sup>.

**Email submissions will not be accepted.**

**\*\*Important Note about Plagiarism & Use of Internet Sources\*\***

Copying other’s work in the class, or from a publication or website without proper citation, will be considered plagiarism. This is not a research paper. **Do not do any online research or use outside sources.** Use only the information from the Feder textbook. If you do not own a copy of the textbook, plan ahead and use the copy on Reserves in the library. I have read the textbook discussion many times, so I will know if you provide information or examples from another source (e.g. Wikipedia). **If your paper includes information that is not in the textbook, you will receive a zero for the assignment.**

**Evaluation:**

Each paper is worth 5 points. Papers will be evaluated in terms of the following criteria:

- **Content:** Are the talking points related to the traits of complexity discussed in class? Are the explanations clear? How thorough and accurate is the information (arguments/evidence)?
- **Context:** Does the tone reflect “admiration for the achievements of the Inca”? Is the language appropriate for the audience? Does the student relate Incan society to the 21<sup>st</sup> century American audience?
- **Mechanics/Structure:** format, length, grammar, spelling, punctuation **Have Questions?**

Please see me during office hours (Mon 11-12, Wed 2-3, Thurs 1-3), or email me if you have questions about the paper. I am happy to help.

### Machu Picchu Tour Guide Script

Due: Monday November 25<sup>th</sup> (5 Points)

You are working as a tour guide at the famous Incan site of Machu Picchu (Peru). Because you speak English, you primarily lead tours for American visitors. Most of your clients visit Machu Picchu because it is a “must-see” tourist destination, but they typically know very little about the Inca. Your task is to develop 5 talking points about the Inca for your tours. Your goal is to relate Incan culture to your American tour group, and explain unfamiliar practices in the context of the Inca’s own culture, rather than as something that seems bizarre or strange (anthropologists call this “cultural relativism”).



#### Preparation:

1. Read pages 460-461, 469-479 and 482-484 in the Feder textbook, which discuss the Inca Empire. The textbook should be your **only source of information** (not the internet or other sources).\*
2. While reading, take notes on the following traits of complexity: social stratification, centralized economy, formal government, monumental works, and standardized record keeping.

#### Writing a Successful Script:

Each of your talking points should:

- 1) relate to one of the five traits of complexity listed above,
- 2) highlight the remarkable achievements of the Inca,
- 3) relate Inca culture to your 21<sup>st</sup> century audience (discuss similarities),
- 4) explain unfamiliar practices in the context of the Inca’s own culture, and
- 5) provide details from the reading.

#### Formatting Requirements:

- You do not need an introduction or conclusion, just a numbered list of talking points. The text of each talking point should be in paragraph form, however.
- Create a title or label for each talking point. Example: #1: Social Inequality in the Incan Empire: The Original 1%?
- You do not need to cite the Feder text or provide page #s, given that your audience is your tour group. For that reason, do not use direct quotes; put the information in your own words and use language that is appropriate for your audience.
- Limit your response to **4 pages** (typed, double-spaced). No cover page is necessary.
- Turn in a hard copy of your script during class on November 25<sup>th</sup> (or arrange to hand it in early, if you cannot be in class). **Email submissions will not be accepted.**

#### Evaluation:

Scripts will be evaluated in terms of **content** (thoroughness and accuracy), **context** (tone, consideration of audience), and **mechanics** (format, length, grammar, spelling punctuation).

**\*If your script includes information from outside sources, you will receive a zero for the assignment. Note: I have read the textbook many times and know what information it does and does not contain!**

# Resources for faculty developing relevant assignments

- Office of Advancement for Teaching and Learning (Anna Santucci)
- Writing Center, URI (trained undergraduates and graduates)
- Writing Across URI (peer review, supporting faculty and student writing across disciplines)
- Colleagues