

Designing Writing Assignments



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4 Defining New Tasks for Standard Writing Activities

The FAQs, writers' blogs, and endorsement letters in the previous chapter go beyond standard writing activities. They explore the same kinds of writing that more traditional assignments cover, but they focus on unusual or new alternatives for the standard kinds of writing that students are asked to complete. For many teachers, the challenge in designing writing assignments comes in identifying or inventing alternatives that depart from traditional assignments but still focus on traditional writing instruction and strategies.

In her chapter "Getting Ideas for Units and Making the Unit Blossom" in *Both Art and Craft: Teaching Ideas That Spark Learning*, Diana Mitchell outlines six different questions that she uses to frame assignments for her students:

- Can I change a point of view?
- Can I bring someone else in [to speak to the class]?
- Can I encourage students to think about characters in new ways?
- Can I encourage students to extend what is in the story?
- Can I identify new formats in which students can respond?
- Can I identify issues in stories that connect to the students' lives?
(28–29)

Using these questions, Mitchell designs assignments that ask students to create missing narrative passages in novels, compose answering machine messages for characters in recent readings, and speculate on a fictional character's choice for a hero.

As I design writing assignments, I too try to define alternative writing tasks. Sometimes a twist on a traditional assignment comes to me quickly and easily, but often it takes a bit of thinking to arrive at an engaging and challenging new assignment that will still meet the goals for the class. To help with the invention process, I've created my own series of questions that encourages me to rethink and reframe traditional assignments. I rarely respond to all of the questions as I design an assignment, because changing every possible parameter could easily result in an awkward writing situation. Instead, I consider the various

options, combining them as needed until I arrive at an assignment that fits the needs of the students I am teaching.

For each of my five questions, I'll explain how you can use the question to define a writing task for students. Each question is accompanied by example starting points that can be expanded into complete

writing assignments. While I'm focusing on defining the writing task in this chapter, naturally I'll touch on the other goals for designing a writing assignment, which I discussed in Chapter 3, as they are appropriate. As you read through the examples, realize that a fully developed assignment would include more information than the simple prompts included here as starting points do.

- Who will read the text? Can I choose an alternative audience?
- What stance will students take as writers? Can the assignment ask for an unusual tone?
- When does the topic take place? Can the assignment focus on an alternative time frame?
- Where will the background information and detail come from? Can the assignment call for alternative research sources?
- Can students write something other than a traditional essay? Can the assignment call for alternative genres or publication media?

Who will read the text? Can I choose an alternative audience?

In practice, it's possible that an assignment will be read only by those in the classroom, but the intended audience can be any one of a huge range of readers, as long as it is authentic and clearly explained for students. Figure 4.1 outlines many possible audiences for writing assignments—too many, in fact, for students to navigate on their own. The first task in using the list is to sort through the ideas to find the best options. You can choose specific readers in the various categories, or you can share several options and ask students to choose one audience or more for their work. Keep in mind that when you choose an authentic audience (assuming it's not a fictional audience for a literary project), you should help students send the final documents to the target audience as part of the activity. For example, if students write texts for local businesses, mail or hand-deliver the texts to those businesses.

When I search for alternative audiences for a writing activity, I try to narrow the choices for students and zero in on their expertise. If I begin with the audience "zoo visitors," for instance, I'd next think about whether that audience is identified specifically enough for students. Perhaps I should name a particular zoo or even individual animals in the zoo (e.g., everyone visiting the giant pandas at the National Zoo). I

Alternative Audiences for Writing Assignments

School-Related

- students in other classes
- teachers
- department chair or members
- librarians
- advisors/guidance counselors
- administrators
- support staff
- family members of students
- school graduates
- athletic team members, coaches, and sponsors
- school clubs and organizations
- club and organization sponsors
- students at other local schools (at the same or another academic level)
- students at schools in geographically different locations or that serve a different population of students
- accreditation organizations
- funding organizations (e.g., those providing grants funds)

K–12 Schools

- local school board
- district administrators
- state or federal department of education

Colleges/Universities

- deans
- department chair
- provost or president
- board of visitors or board of trustees

Employment-Related

- co-workers
- managers
- business owners
- franchise or corporation administrators
- customers
- vendors or suppliers

Recreation-Related

- zoo and museum staff, visitors, volunteers, donors, and supporters
- staff and volunteers at state and national parks and historical sites
- recreation program managers, organiz-

ers, participants, and supporters (e.g., Little League, YWCA)

Local

- community organizations—clubs, churches, and so forth
- businesses and corporations
- recreational groups and sports clubs or teams
- library staff
- city officials (including elected officials)
- election candidates and politicians
- senior center residents or visitors
- chapters of nonprofit organizations (e.g., American Heart Association or Girl Scouts of the United States of America)
- food bank donors, employees, volunteers, and managers
- convention and visitors' bureau
- chamber of commerce
- chapter of the Better Business Bureau

State and National

- government officials (including elected officials)
- election candidates and politicians
- corporations and other businesses—employees, managers, officers, stock holders, boards of directors
- nonprofit and philanthropic organizations

Personal

- students themselves—in the past or future
- family members (including extended family members)
- family friends
- friends

Literary-Related

- characters in the text or in another reading
- the author of the text
- historical figures from the time period
- others who have read the text
- critics who have reviewed the text

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Figure 4.1. Teachers should help students navigate this list of audiences.

also need to think about students' experiences—have they all visited a zoo? If students don't have the expertise to write for the specific audience, I need to choose something different or widen the audience. Switching from the audience of "zoo visitors" to "people who visit the zoo or the zoo website" expands the options so that every student should have adequate expertise, especially if I add time in the schedule for the class to explore the zoo's website.

Choice is important in defining the writing task. When possible, I look for more than one group of readers so that I can give students several options to choose among. For instance, I might offer students the option of writing to a city official, a local political candidate, a law enforcement officer, or a community organization president. Students would then choose one of these general audiences and finally narrow the audience even further to the specific person or people who will actually read the text (e.g., Blacksburg, Virginia, Chief of Police Kimberley S. Crannis).

The following starting points show how one topic—explaining a new rule or program at the school—can be positioned for a range of alternative audiences. Regardless of the audiences I choose, I need to be sure to position students as experts, so I would structure time in the schedule for students to talk about the rule or program in class. We would explore the details as much as necessary to ensure that every student understands the rule or program well enough to explain it clearly and can discuss how it affects students, school staff, family members, and visitors to the school. For each starting point below, I add details on the ways that the choice of audience influences other aspects of the complete writing assignment.

- *Explain a new rule or program to the families of students who attend your school and try to convince them to support it.* As I develop an assignment from this starting point, I'd spend time in class asking students to think about the questions that families will have and how the rule or program will affect them. To move students beyond simple restatement in their writing, I'd encourage them to reframe the information so that it fits this family perspective, rather than the student-oriented point of view included in the original statement of the rule or program. As a class, we'd gather a list of characteristics important to the message, and, for models, we'd look at other messages sent home to families. To make the activity more authentic, I'd ask students to share their messages with their own families. Alternately, we might compare the different versions written by students and create one class version to send home.

■ *Write to local businesses to explain a new program or rule at your school and ask them to support it.* To prepare students to write for this audience, we'd spend time in class brainstorming local businesses and ways that they might support the new program or rule. The activity gives students a number of options because of the support different businesses will be able to offer. To reframe the activity so that it moves beyond restating the description of the rule or program, I'd ask students to consider how the businesses will be affected by the rule and ask them to compose an explanation that fits with the businesses' points of view. After the messages have been written and students have received feedback from peer reading groups, students will deliver the messages to the businesses.

■ *Imagine that a character from a piece of literature you have read is transported to your school. Describe the new program or rule to the character so that he or she understands and can follow it.* This starting point requires some creative thought from students, so I'd add time for brainstorming, freewriting, and small-group discussion of the fictional characters and the ways those characters would react to the new program or rule. Depending upon the character, students may need to completely rethink the new rule or program as they explain it—imagine, for instance, how one of Chaucer's pilgrims would react to a rule regarding the use of MP3 players at the school. I'd schedule time to talk about language and historical considerations and ensure that students have the supporting information and resources that they need. I'd add a reflective component to the assignment that asks students to explain how they chose their characters and why they explained the program or rule in the ways that they did. I'd also have students share their pieces with others in the class who have read the same texts.

What stance will students take as writers? Can the assignment ask for an unusual tone?

Students need to be positioned as experts in their writing, but you can customize the tone they use as they share their expertise. Begin with one of the possible positions outlined in Figure 4.2. As I design an assignment with an alternative tone, I scan through the list and choose positions that ask students to move beyond basic informal or formal tones. Depending upon the activity, I'd either choose specific positions for students to take or decide to share the entire list with the class. Either way, I'd spend time unpacking the different stances on the list with the class. While the differences among the positions are probably clear to me, they may not be evident to students.

Possible Positions for Writers to Take		
■ aggressive	■ furious	■ nervous
■ angry	■ helpful	■ nosy
■ annoyed	■ humorous	■ offended
■ anxious	■ indecisive	■ opinionated
■ bitter	■ indifferent	■ oppressed
■ bold	■ injured	■ playful
■ cheerful	■ inquisitive	■ positive
■ concerned	■ insincere	■ resentful
■ condescending	■ inspirational	■ sad
■ curious	■ interested	■ sarcastic
■ depressed	■ intimate	■ serious
■ determined	■ ironic	■ shocked
■ discouraged	■ irritated	■ sincere
■ disinterested	■ light-hearted	■ spirited
■ enthusiastic	■ lively	■ upset
■ frightened	■ meditative	■ witty
■ frustrated	■ negative	■ worried

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Figure 4.2. These positions will push students to be more adventurous.

In addition to making sure that students can define the relevant stances, I'd spend time asking them to compare the positions and to think about how the stance would affect the messages they are to complete. Take, for instance, the words *angry*, *annoyed*, *furious*, *irritated*, and *upset*. With such a group of related words, I'd ask students to arrange them on a continuum and play out the ways that each position would change someone's reaction in an example situation (e.g., learning that a store will not refund money for a computer game). I'd have students work through an example scenario or two in small groups, perhaps presenting skits that demonstrate the situation for the full class. After working through the samples as a class, students will have a concrete model of the kind of thinking they need to do as they compose.

Freewriting and other informal writing are also important when students write from alternative positions, so I'd include time for students to gather ideas on those perspectives in their journals before they begin their drafts. Writing from a specific position gives students the chance to try on the voice for their messages. Just as important as having students try on the position that they will use for their work is having them write informally from an opposing position. For instance, after freewriting from the position of someone confident about applying for a job, I'd ask students to write in the voice of someone nervous about

applying for a job. Comparing notes from the two stances gives students details that can strengthen their final drafts—the language of the nervous writer shouldn’t appear in the text of the confident writer!

The following scenarios provide starting points for writing assignments that ask for different tones. When possible, it’s best to include more than one tone for students to choose from, so that students can adopt a position that feels comfortable. For each starting point, I’d include details on the full assignment that I’d develop.

- *The local city council has announced a new ordinance concerning bicycle helmets. Write a persuasive letter that asks the council to change its decision. Choose a tone—concerned, frustrated, anxious, or serious—that communicates your feelings about the new rule.* To move from this starting idea to a full assignment, I’d begin with lots of information on the new ordinance itself. Students cannot do a good job of communicating their feelings about the ordinance if they don’t understand it, so we’d spend time unpacking what the ordinance means both literally and personally to the students. After working through the ordinance, I’d ask students to either freewrite or brainstorm about ways that the ordinance could affect them. This process will provide students with concrete details to support their tone. With all this supporting background information in hand, students will begin composing their messages. As appropriate, in minilessons I’d talk about how they can include supporting details in their messages. When the messages are finished, I’d gather them all and deliver them to the city administration building.

- *Write a letter from one character in a reading to another from that same reading that communicates the person’s feelings about a significant plot event. Use the tone that is appropriate for the character’s perspective.* Before students can begin communicating a character’s feelings they need to choose the plot event to focus on. To get started, I’d have students get into their literature circles to brainstorm significant events from the reading. Once each group has a list of events, I’d have group members review the lists and decide if they are all significant events. I’d encourage discussion of what makes an event significant to the plot. Because this list of events will be crucial to the writing process, I’d make sure that every group member copies the list. Once students have a list of events to choose from, I’d ask them to freewrite some journal entries from the perspective of the character they choose for their letter. To structure the entries a bit, I’d ask students to write an entry that shows the character’s feelings before the plot event, during the plot event, and after the plot event. Students can share these journals with their litera-

ture circles, and as a class we'd use these first notes to begin a class rubric that accounts for how the letters will communicate the character's feelings. I'd also spend time talking about audience and purpose for the messages, so that students think about how they can communicate the character's feelings to another character in an appropriate way. Once the letters are finished, I'd provide summative comments, guided by the rubric the class has developed.

When does the topic take place? Can the assignment focus on an alternative time frame?

Some assignments can be customized simply by adding or changing the relevant time. Instead of merely asking students to describe a place that is significant to them, frame the time period to sharpen their focus: describe a significant childhood place or describe a place that has been important to you during this school year. Figure 4.3 suggests some alternative time frames that can inspire creative assignments.

For each of the time periods, I'd have students research or gather the background information that will position them as experts. In some cases, students can simply gather their own memories in journal entries. Other times, however, they may need to talk to family, community members, or friends who were present during the time. Library research might be important if students are writing about an era that doesn't have personal relevance. If students are writing about the time period in a text they have read (such as when a novel is set), students can collect details about that period. For all this research, I'd try to provide graphic organizers and other scaffolding to help students gather everything that they will need to produce an effective piece of writing.

The format that students use may deserve special attention when they write about different time periods as well—after all, it wouldn't make sense for a student to compose a series of email messages when writing from the perspective of Renaissance England (unless, of course, such an anachronistic situation is part of the assignment). I would talk with students about the different genres that would be appropriate for the relevant time period and provide additional support for any genres that are unfamiliar. This exploration of genres can fold neatly into the background research that students complete for the assignment, so that it becomes a natural discussion for the class.

For each of the example starting points below, I suggest how I would provide ways for students to gather background information as I worked from the issues raised during class discussions to develop the full assignment:

Alternative Time Frames for Assignments

General

- a number of years in the past or the future
- an hour earlier or later
- a day earlier or later
- a week earlier or later
- over the course of a day, week, month, or year
- during a decade

Personal

- childhood—a particular age or generally
- a particular year of school
- time spent at a particular school
- days, weeks, months, or years in the future or past
- before, during, or after a holiday or significant event

Historical

- before, during, or after a significant event
- before, during, or after a figure's life or a significant event in that figure's life

Literary

- just before or after a plot event
- just before the events in the text begin
- just after the events in the text end
- a different literary time period
- a character's life five years earlier or later
- the first person to ever read the text
- the last person to ever read the text

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Figure 4.3. Selecting an atypical time frame will inspire creativity.

■ *What was important about the time you spent in kindergarten? Describe a significant event and demonstrate why the event mattered to you.* Students will probably remember specific details about their early education, so I would begin with some prewriting questions that tap those memories. When I introduce the activity to students, I'd be careful to talk about alternative time periods so that students who did not attend kindergarten still feel confident about working on the assignment. If the students in the class had extremely varied backgrounds, I might even adjust the assignment to focus on "the first day/week/month of school." After students gather their memories from their early school days, I'd ask them to identify two or three events to focus on and brainstorm reasons that the events were significant to them. If possible, I'd have students talk to family members about the event also, with the idea of determining if others remembered the events the same way that they do.

■ *If you could look in your crystal ball and determine the most significant thing that happened to you this week, what would it be? Write a cause-and-effect paper that explains what the event is and predicts how it will affect you.* It's easy for students to remember things that happen during the current week, but it's harder to determine why or if those events are significant. For this task, I'd begin designing the assignment by unpacking the writing prompt. Although students probably know what the word *significance* means literally, it's useful to talk about what makes an event significant and how we decide whether something is significant to us. After that discussion, I would model the process of brainstorming a list of events and evaluating the list items to find the most significant events. Choosing a specific event from another point in time works well, so I might make a list of events from summer vacation and then narrow the list down to significant ones. I'd also spend time defining and exploring what a cause-and-effect paper is and conjecture the possible effects of the events that the students choose. I'd encourage students to choose a specific time in the future because a concrete future time, such as the first day of a new job, will help students identify the particular effects of the events. During a minilesson, I'd spend time covering transitions that students can use in their writing. Early in the process, I'd share a rubric that touched on both defining significant events and exploring the effects of an event, and I'd return to the rubric periodically as students work on their papers, so that the connections between their writing and its assessment are clear.

■ *If the novel that you have read were set during the American Civil War, how would the protagonist's life be different? Write a paper that explains the general differences to the protagonist and provides concrete examples of ways that specific plot events would change.* This assignment actually begins when students choose the books for independent reading. My goal is to connect to the content area information students have been studying in their history class to their reading content, but I want them to complete an activity that moves beyond simply stating facts from a historical fiction text set during the Civil War. I'd begin by providing a list of novels with contemporary settings, and then I'd discuss the requirement for such a setting and pass out an assignment sheet or explain the writing task before students choose their books, so that they understand the purpose of the setting requirement. Because the book choice is so important, I'd ask students to turn in a brief note with the author and title of the book as well as a few sentences that tell me the time period the book covers. By reviewing these notes, I can intervene if a student chooses a book that will not work well for the assignment. I'd provide

a graphic organizer to encourage students to take notes on details in the novel that might be different if the novel were set during the American Civil War. Because knowledge of the Civil War is vital to this activity, I'd have the class work in small groups to create cheat sheets on the time period, using their notes and texts from the history class. Each group would focus on a different topic (e.g., the role of women, life for African Americans, military battles) and then share the finished cheat sheets with the rest of the class.

Where will background information and detail come from?

Regardless of whether students are writing research papers, you can tweak the sources that they use and thereby create alternatives to traditional writing assignments. The list of alternative resources in Figure 4.4 demonstrates the overwhelming range of options. To create your own twists on generic assignments, just go through the list of alternatives and think about how they might be used as a resource for details. When I choose prospective sources, I always begin with availability. If students do not have easy access to the different texts, they will struggle with the writing activity. If the resources are readily available in the school library, I can move forward without worry. In other cases, I may provide examples myself. For instance, if students need access to children's picture books, I can check out copies from the public library and make them available in the classroom and on reserve in the school library. If there is ever a question about access, I will include an option for more than one resource so that students can choose a text that they can easily acquire.

My concern is not solely physical accessibility when I look for options for students' work. Students must have the literacy skills necessary to read and critique the texts. If the text calls for more sophisticated strategies than students are likely to develop quickly or already have, the text is not a good choice. If students have had no experiences with almanacs, for instance, they aren't a good option for this kind of alternative assignment.

Once the question of which sources to use has been addressed, I'd move on to exploring the texts themselves. Students may be familiar with many of these research sources, but they often have not taken the time to think critically about the characteristics of the texts. Using a sample text, I would walk students through the text structures, asking questions that compare the text to other sources students are familiar with. I might compare a coffee-table book to a history textbook or

Alternative Research Sources for Assignments

- almanacs
- anthologies
- artworks
- atlases
- audio recordings
- bibliographies
- biographies and autobiographies
- blogs
- board games
- book or movie reviews
- buildings
- catalogs
- census data
- children's picture books
- chronologies, chronicles, and timelines
- coffee-table books
- computer operating systems
- concerts
- concordances
- databases
- dictionaries
- discussion forums
- drawings and illustrations
- email messages
- experiments
- eyewitness accounts
- folk stories
- grave markers
- historical documents
- hypertexts
- instant messages/chat rooms
- Internet archives
- interviews
- introductions or guides
- journal articles
- letters
- library catalogs
- lyrics
- magazine articles
- memos
- monuments
- movies
- musical scores
- newsgroups
- newspapers
- nonfiction books
- novels
- obituaries
- observations
- online encyclopedias
- oral presentations
- pamphlets and brochures
- performances (music, dance, etc.)
- personal communications
- personal journals, logs, or diaries
- personal memories
- photographs
- plays
- poems
- postcards
- PowerPoint or KeyNote presentations
- public records
- quotations
- reenactments
- religious texts
- reports
- search engines
- software documentation
- software programs
- statistics
- statues
- surveys
- telephone books
- television programs
- textbooks
- thesauruses
- travel guidebooks
- video games
- websites
- wikis
- yearbooks
- zines

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Figure 4.4. Teachers should determine which alternative research sources can be accessed by students and which ones will require additional text-reading skills.

compare almanacs and encyclopedias to Wikipedia. After looking at larger features, I'd ask students to focus on issues like the use of language, the formatting of the text, and how illustrations are used.

Finally, as I define the writing task for students, I'd ask them to use the resources in ways that go beyond restating information from the text. I'd ask students to use the text to generate questions about something else that they are reading. Students might use newspapers from the 1930s to gather questions about *The Grapes of Wrath*, or they could use soldiers' eyewitness accounts from World War I to shape their inquiry of *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Sometimes I ask students to use research sources to explain something mentioned elsewhere. I've asked students to choose an allusion from a poem they are reading and use a religious text or collection of folk stories to explain why the author used the allusion. Other times, the unusual research sources offer inspiration for students' own writing. A historical monument, roadside marker, or grave marker might inspire a creative narrative about the related person or event.

The sample starting points below demonstrate how I would move from the starting idea to define a writing task and develop a full writing assignment.

- *Ask students to tell the story behind a coffee-table book.* From this beginning idea, I'd think about all the ways students might tell a story. They could tell an imagined tale of how the coffee-table book came into being, a narrative of how and why an imagined character acquired the book, or even a creative tale of what the coffee table thinks of the book. I'd either leave the options wide open or narrow the task further to fit the needs of a particular group of students. Once the general task is defined, I'd bring in some examples of coffee-table books and talk about the genre with the class. Together, we'd create a class definition of the genre and sketch out a list of common characteristics. If students are comfortable with the genre, we'd spend a day in the school library for students to self-select books from the collection. If students need a bit more support, I'd choose books with the librarian and set aside a pile of appropriate ones for students to choose from. If students choose books independently, I'd ask them to show their choices to me before they get too involved in the project, just to ensure that they all have chosen texts that fit the genre. With texts selected and the genre explored, students are ready to begin writing and revising.

- *Have students gather opinions on current events by searching blogs and forum postings and then write a paper that presents at least two different*

views of the issue and how the writer's perspective influences the facts included in the postings. Before fleshing out a writing task that taps online resources, I'd confirm that the activity fits with the school's acceptable use policy and create a list of online resources for students to use. If school policy allows, students can use search engines to find blogs and forum postings on their own, but I'd still have a backup list of appropriate blogs and forums. Since the activity focuses on current events, I'd begin by asking students to brainstorm some local, state, national, and international events from the news. I'd ask students to narrow the lists by eliminating items that are unlikely to evoke differing opinions. At the same time, I'd have students talk about the various opinions and positions that people discussing the remaining topics might express. Using sample blog entries, I'd explore the differences between subjective and objective information in the posts, and we'd also discuss the importance of evaluating the reliability of sources. With this information in place, I'd have students begin choosing resources for their papers. Once students have gathered some blog or forum posts, I'd demonstrate how to identify facts in some sample posts and then compare the facts from different texts. Depending upon the topics that students are pursuing, I might bring in resources to supplement their work. For instance, if a student is examining a current debate on free speech, I'd point the student to the Bill of Rights online as well as to ACLU resources on First Amendment rights. With the process modeled and their resources collected, students can begin the process of writing a comparison of the different sources. I'd discuss comparison and contrast writing strategies in minilessons as they work on their drafts and then I'd share details on the expectations for the activity.

Can students write something other than a traditional essay? Can the assignment call for alternative genres or publication media?

You can renovate an assignment completely by rethinking the final texts students create. The most basic assignment is the traditional essay printed out, by hand or computer, on sheets of paper. Change the genre, the publication medium, or both to create an unusual assignment. Figure 4.5 outlines dozens of genres and subgenres that can enliven a writing activity. The different genres and subgenres are not equal in their writing challenges or requirements. When I choose alternative publication genres, I begin with those that students are likely to be familiar with. If I choose a genre that students have little or no experience with, they probably will not do their best writing. I also have to think about the other writing activities that students will complete in the course,

Alternative Genres and Subgenres for Assignments

- acrostic
- advertising giveaway—buttons, pens, calendars, etc.
- almanac article
- anagram
- anthology or submission to a class anthology
- application (e.g., job, college, grant)
- bad news letter or memo
- banner ad
- billboard
- blank verse
- blog—personal, corporate, etc.
- book cover or dust jacket
- bulletin board (on the wall)
- business card
- campaign speech
- cartoon
- CD or DVD collection (e.g., the items in the collection)
- CD or DVD cover
- census report
- chart, diagram, or graph
- cinquain
- claims letter
- classified ad (e.g., personal, want ad)
- coffee-table book
- collage—word, visual, aural
- collections letter
- comic book or strip
- commercial (radio, television, or online)
- congratulatory letter
- contract
- cookbook or recipe collection
- cover story or front page news
- crossword puzzle
- declaration
- dialogue
- diamante
- diary entry
- dictionary or dictionary entry
- direct mail—letter, pamphlet, postcard, etc.
- directory (e.g., staff, telephone, member)
- dramatic monologue
- dramatic scene or skit
- eBay listing
- editorial column
- email message—personal, customer service, interoffice, etc.
- eulogy
- expository essay
- eyewitness account
- fake news—comedic or corporate/government-produced
- feature article
- flyer, pamphlet, or brochure
- found poem
- free verse
- friendly/personal letter
- fund-raising letter
- game instructions
- good news letter or memo
- government report
- grave marker/tombstone
- greeting card—birthday, holiday, condolence, thank you, etc.
- grocery list
- haiku
- homepage on a website
- hospital chart
- illustration
- IM or chat room transcript
- infomercial
- interview or interview transcript
- item description for a mail-order catalog
- item description for an online store
- letter of recommendation
- letter or memo of introduction
- letter poem
- limerick
- list, or catalogue, poem
- log entry
- lyrics and/or music—pop, country, western, ballad, heavy metal, rap, etc.
- magazine or journal ad
- map with legend
- math problem
- meeting transcript
- memo—departmental or interoffice
- memoir
- memo of understanding
- menu

continued on next page

Figure 4.5. Assignments can focus on genres of differing complexity and length.

Figure 4.5 continued

- monologue
- monument or statue
- MP3 player playlist
- newsgroup posting or thread
- newspaper ad (e.g., full to partial page ad for businesses, etc.)
- newspaper or magazine insert
- news teaser
- notebook
- obituary
- ode
- online bulletin board posting or thread
- online forum posting
- online profile (such as on Facebook or MySpace)
- PA announcement
- pantoum
- performance appraisal
- personal commentary
- personal interest article (as in newspapers, magazines, etc.)
- photo gallery/album
- photograph with caption, keywords/tags, and/or descriptions
- picture book
- play
- police report—CSI-style, coroner's, moving violation ticket, etc.
- political advertisement
- pop-up ad
- postcard
- poster
- press release
- product or service website
- product placement recommendation (e.g., placement in movie or TV show)
- proposal
- public service announcement
- quiz
- ransom note
- recipe
- recipe poem
- recommendation report
- reference book or entry/article in a reference book
- report card
- resignation letter or memo
- resume
- sales letter
- sandwich board
- scrapbook
- script—television, radio, podcast, etc.
- short story
- social worker's report
- sonnet
- special news report or update
- sports score and story
- survival kit
- tanka
- telegram
- telemarketer's script
- telephone book ad
- testimonial ad/endorsement
- text message
- thank you letter, memo, or note
- timeline
- trading card
- transcript of phone call, conversation, etc.
- transit ad (i.e., ad on bus, plane, or train)
- treaty
- trip report
- T-shirt message
- video or computer game vignette
- villanelle
- voice mail message
- wanted poster
- warning sign
- Web page—personal, corporate, organization, educational, etc.
- wiki or wiki entry
- will
- word seek puzzle
- yearbook—spread on student life, class section, feature on academics, special profile, sports section, ad, or special event
- zine

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since writing instruction must cover a wide range of genres and texts of differing complexity and length. I try to build activities from least to most sophisticated, so a more complicated genre like a telemarketer's script or a villanelle would be more appropriate later in the term.

The range of genres included in Figure 4.5 includes many that are fairly traditional, with their emphasis on words, sentences, and paragraphs. Writing letters or memos, dialogues, short poems, and newspaper articles are good places to start because they are most likely to match students' prior experiences as writers. More sophisticated tasks ask for genres that are less familiar to students—such as campaign speeches, declarations, or police reports. Perhaps the most sophisticated genre options ask for multimodal composition, which can involve still pictures, words, sounds, and moving images. Even an assignment as simple as designing a bumper sticker asks students to think about the use of color, layout, and the interplay of words and images. As I make choices of genres for students, I try to match the activity to the students and to build on the abilities that students have already demonstrated. Additionally, I add a genre study as part of the exploration of the expectations for the assignment to help ensure that students understand the task before them.

I also talk about the medium for students' composition. In some cases, the genre determines the medium. For instance, a banner ad or pop-up ad is designed for online presentation on a Web page. You just won't find pop-up ads in your print newspaper. Other genres lend themselves to several media—a testimonial ad could be an audio recording, a video recording, or a print design. As you scan through the list of genres and subgenres, consider how students might publish their work as an audio recording, a Web page, an animation, a video recording, a hypertext, a computer-based presentation (including a PowerPoint or KeyNote presentation), or a series of still visual images.

In many cases, the critical thinking that students do for more sophisticated genres may not be obvious in the final version of their work. Are all the decisions that go into designing a bumper sticker going to be evident simply by looking at the final product? Probably not. To ensure that the thinking behind students' work is clear, I typically add an artist's journal in which students explain the options that they considered and the reasons for their final decisions.

The following possible starting points demonstrate how I would think through the design and support for writing assignments that ask students to work in unusual genres.

■ *Imagine one of your most important belongings has been stolen. Create a police report that describes the item with enough detail for officers to identify the object if they recover it.* This writing task is basically a description of a tangible object. I hope to have students focus their attention on crucial details by working in the format of a police report. The genre actually determines the audience—the police officers who will look for the object—and purpose—to provide enough information to help the police find and identify the object—for their writing as well. I'd try to have the school's resource officer or a city police officer visit the class to talk about the process of reporting a stolen object, or I'd at least try to get a sample copy of the forms that the local police department uses. With this information, the class and I can craft both graphic organizers and a rubric or checklist for the activity. I'd spend some time talking about the objects that students choose for this assignment. I want to be sure that students choose an item that's appropriate for class discussion as well as one that is not overly personal. I'd suggest a number of options and then ask students to brainstorm additional items as a class or in small groups. In case students are uncomfortable talking about an item of their own, I'd also include some options for items in the school that might work for the activity, such as a library book or one of my own belongings in the classroom.

■ *Design an eBay listing for a significant object that the main character in a recent text you have read has decided to sell. Remember to include images, descriptions, shipping information, and pricing.* To develop a full writing assignment from this starting point, I'd begin with the books that students are reading. This activity can work as a book report alternative for individuals or as a group project for books read in literature circles. I'd wait until students have read a third to half of the book before introducing the activity. At that point, I'd explain the activity and have students brainstorm lists of three to four significant objects from the book that the character might be willing to sell. With potential objects identified, I'd provide a bookmark graphic organizer that students would use to track details on the object from the book. First, students would track back through the book, looking for pertinent details and noting them on their bookmarks. As they continue reading, they add the information that they find. Once students finish reading their books, I'd share several examples of eBay listings that show a range of effectiveness. I'd ask students to work in small groups to compare the eBay examples and determine characteristics of effective listings. After sharing the characteristics with the class, we'd work together to shape a

checklist and rubric that would be used to describe the objects. I'd add minilessons on specific aspects that fit the criteria. For instance, I'd likely talk about the differences between objective and subjective descriptions and about how the two different kinds of description are used in the listings.

- *Create a visual collage of belonging that is important to you, your family, or your community. Your collage should communicate your feelings about the belonging.* Because students may be less familiar with composing multimodal texts, I'd begin this activity with discussion of several example collages, asking questions about the feelings students associate with the images and having students conjecture on the artist's purpose for including the different images in the collage. Only after students have seen several models would I introduce the actual assignment. To help ensure that students think through the decisions for their collages, I'd add some specific structures to support their process. We'd first talk about appropriate objects for the activity and brainstorm twenty to thirty possibilities. I'd emphasize, of course, that students can choose items that are not on the list. I'd have students choose an item to focus on and then spend some time freewriting about why they chose the item as well as their feelings about that object. This freewriting will be the first entry in an artist's journal that each student will keep. After each class period and after working on the collage out of class, I'd ask students to note what they chose to include or change and to explain the decisions that they have made. To focus students' collages on communicating their feelings about their belongings, I'd limit the images of the actual object that each collage includes, because one to three photos or illustrations should be enough. I'd allow plenty of class time for students to search for additional text and images to include in their collages. I'd provide computer access so that students can look for items online, and I'd have old magazines and newspapers in the classroom for students to work from. When the collages are complete, I'd ask students to review their artist's journals and compose short artist's statements to accompany their collages. I'd allow class time for a showing of the collages with the posted artist's statements. If possible, I'd display the collages on a school bulletin board or in the classroom.

Designing Writing Assignments

Traci Gardner

Effective student writing begins with well-designed classroom assignments. In *Designing Writing Assignments*, veteran educator Traci Gardner offers practical ways for teachers to develop assignments that will allow students to express their creativity and grow as writers and thinkers while still addressing the many demands of resource-stretched classrooms.

She explores how to balance pedagogical and curricular goals with the needs of multiple learners while managing everyday challenges such as mandates, testing, and the paper load.

Gardner uses her classroom experience to provide ideas on how to effectively define a writing task, explore the expectations for

a composition activity, and assemble the supporting materials that students need to do their best work. This book includes dozens of starting points that teachers can customize and further develop for the students in their own classrooms.

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As the online content developer for ReadWriteThink at NCTE, **Traci Gardner** writes lesson plans, designs interactive student materials, and composes curriculum and professional development materials. She is also editor of the Ideas section of NCTE's *INBOX* newsletter and a contributor to the NCTE *INBOX* Blog.

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