ASSIGNMENTS AS INSTRUCTIONS

Creating good writing assignments

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http://www.humanities.ualberta.ca/WAC/
Like the protagonist in Dickens’ novel, we sometimes come to class with great expectations of our students, only to be disappointed by their actual performance on written assignments.
2. WRITING INSTRUCTIONS

- One way to forestall disappointment is to write clear instructions
- As the co-author of a technical writing textbook, I have some advice on this
ORIENTING YOUR READERS

- Define your terms
- Write a brief overview or rationale of the entire assignment
- Provide a list or concepts that the student needs to know to complete the assignment successfully
Purpose

This essay should demonstrate that you can identify the audience, ethos, and purpose of a written text (Chapter 1). You should also demonstrate the ability to apply the concepts from Chapter 2—visual and verbal explanations, organization, point of view, focus and frame, and interest in texts. Your essay should explain:

- the purpose of the news article,
- the ways in which the visual interacts with the verbal to accomplish this purpose,
- how the language of the article contributes to this purpose and communicates with the audience,
- how the context of this article (it appeared in a student newspaper at a university) affected the way it was written, the selection of the topic, and the framing of the topic.
Plastic bags harm marine animals, ecosystems
London Plastic Bag Project screens documentary film

By Desiree Gamotin
Gazette Staff

How could something as commonplace as using plastic bags for garbage be damaging to the environment?

The BBC documentary film *Message in the Waves* answers this question and reveals how our throw-away lifestyle threatens ecosystems. Shot in Hawaii, the documentary shows the detrimental effects of plastic pollution. The film contrasts beautiful shots of the island and waves with scenes of distressed marine species on the shore.

Millions of seabirds, turtles, seals and dolphins have suffered from the entanglement or ingestion of plastic bags and materials disposed by humans. Filmmaker Rebecca Hosking, moved by her experience filming this movie, has inspired entire towns in the UK from using plastic bags.

As part of Waste Reduction Week, a national environmental initiative, *Message in the Waves* will be screened at Hyde Park United Church here in London this Saturday followed by a discussion on the environmental issues raised in the film.

The screening is held by members of The London Plastic Bag Project, a volunteer-based movement that promotes sustainable reduction in plastic bag use in London, Ontario.

“Plastic bags are conceived by consumers as free so people use them then throw them out,” Annamarie Bosco, London Plastic Bag Project member, comments. “Canadians use 55 million bags a week, but they have a lot of environmental costs that are hidden.”

Although the film is shot in Hawaii, Bosco says plastic pollution is a global problem. She argues we must realize the things we do here affect the environment thousands of miles away. Having lived in Australia where reducing plastic bags is a priority, Bosco noticed plastic bag reduction is a relatively new concept in London.

“There’s a huge contrast between here and Sydney. Here the issue hasn’t come to the floor yet,” she says.

Part of the reason is people are unaware of the problems posed by plastic bags. Since they are not biodegradable, they decompose into bits of plastic that can contaminate the ground and clog waterways.

Bosco pointed to the wave of awareness that has increased since the Ontario provincial government stepped up efforts to reduce the use of plastic bags by 50 per cent. Grocery stores like Dominion and Loblaw’s now sell 99-cent reusable shopping bags.

For those who use plastic bags in trash cans, Bosco suggests giving something value when reusing it. For example, try to use up all the packaging that you can, using milk bags for garbage to reduce additional bags.

“Once I started doing that, I changed all my shopping habits,” Bosco adds. “Just be mindful when you’re buying stuff.”

Even simple habits like taking tote bags to the store and carrying reusable water bottles and mugs can help reduce more waste than you think.

“I myself feel that this is an issue we could do something about and make changes in our lifestyles,” Bosco says.

*Message in the Waves* is playing for free at Hyde Park United Church, 1360 Hyde Park Rd., this Saturday at 6:15 p.m. RSVP at wastefree.world@gmail.com. For more info on The London Plastic Bag Project, visit wastefree.world.
BREAK INSTRUCTIONS INTO STEPS

- Use numbered lists for steps that must occur in chronological order
- Use bulleted list for items that do not have to appear in sequence
- Limit each sub-procedure to 7-10 steps
- Each step should describe one action
- Packing more than one action into a step invites errors
Invention/Drafting/Research strategies

1. Identify a scientific topic that you are already familiar with or that you want to learn more about.

2. In the research class on Oct. 31 in UC 2, find 5-10 sources that you might be able to use in the research essay (Assignment 4)

3. Email pdfs or full-text copies of these to yourself.

4. Write short (50-100 word) summaries of these articles describing what they add to your knowledge of the topic.

5. Write the introduction to your proposal in which you make the argument that researching this topic benefits you in some way or improves your scientific knowledge and background—why do you want to study this topic?
USE IMPERATIVE SENTENCES

- Use the imperative (command) sentence order: “Verb + Object” [This sentence is itself an example of this principle]
- If conditions apply to the action, include them in a dependent phrase or clause before the imperative. [This sentence is itself an example of this principle]
STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTIONS – A SUMMARY

- Overview
- Group into chunks
- Step-by-step
- Clarify key points
- Include alternatives or substitutions
- Tips, warnings, cautions
- Troubleshooting
- Adapt to reader’s level
- Use imperative
- Define terms
- Use logical order
- Maintain uniform tone
3. GUIDELINES FOR WRITING INSTRUCTIONS

- Topic/description
- Purpose
- Audience
- Invention/drafting/research strategies
- Length
- Drafts/workshopping deadlines
- Revision policy
- Drafting
- Criteria/rubric/grading

Glenn, Cheryl, Melissa Goldthwaite, and Robert Connors. The St. Martin’s Guide to Teaching Writing
Did you need all these categories?
Do your students need other kinds of information?
Conflicts?
Observations?
Questions we ask—“why” and “how”—need to be elaborated to make obvious the implied argument we want to read.

Directives ("discuss," "consider") need to be elaborated to identify the argument from sources you want to read.

Open-ended assignments: turn them into questions.

O'Brien, Emily, Jane Rosenweig, and Nancy Sommers, “Making the most of College Writing.”
MORE ADVICE TO STUDENTS

- **Analyze**: find connections
- **Compare and contrast**
- **Define**: make a claim about how something should be defined
- **Describe**: observe and select details
- **Evaluate**: argue according to criteria that something is good, bad, best
- **Propose**: identify a problem and argue for a solution
INSTRUCTORS AS AUDIENCES

Aims:
- To please
- To entertain
- To engage

O’Brien, Emily, Jane Rosenweig, and Nancy Sommers, “Making the most of College Writing.”
Non-academic Audience

For the article review, your initial audience for this assignment is your instructor; readers of Occupational Therapy Now form the primary audience.
Assessment tools, like NSSE (National Survey of Student Engagement) and other “benchmarking” or outcomes statements, increasingly rely on explicit statements describing levels of student achievement.

- Rubrics are useful ways to control this process because they allow you to self-define the learning outcomes for your course.
REFERENCES