

Essay Assignments

Students should have copies of all writing assignments. These can be duplicated and handed out to students, or they can be displayed on overheads so that students can copy them down. Writing assignments should also contain all of the necessary information that will help students succeed in the assignment, including audience, length, critical strategy, due dates, etc. One way to prompt ourselves to think through the complexities of designing writing assignments is to follow Erika Lindemann's advice in *A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers* as listed in figure 2. She has titled this list "A Heuristic for Designing Writing Assignments."

Four other ways of helping students succeed are (1) to provide them with models of successful responses, (2) to examine student drafts in conference, (3) to recommend that they go to the Academic Skills Writing Lab for help in planning, drafting, revising, and editing, and (4) to respond to their writing in such a way that supports the writing process. Finally, students who succeed most are those who are able to make a personal connection to the writing assignment. Successful writing assignments provide ways for students to make that connection by offering them audiences and purposes to choose from.

A Heuristic for Designing Writing Assignments

- 1. What do I want students to do?** Is it worth doing? Why? What will the assignment tell me about what they've learned? How does it fit my objectives at this point in the course? Does the assignment assess what students can do or what they know? Am I relating their work to the real world (including academic settings) or only to my class or the text? Does the assignment require specialized knowledge? Does it appeal to the interests and experiences of my students?
- 2. How do I want them to do the assignment?** Are students working alone or together? In what ways will they practice prewriting, writing, and rewriting? Are writing, reading, speaking, and listening reinforcing each other? Have I given students enough information to make effective choices about the subject, purpose, form, and mode?
- 3. For whom are students writing?** Who is the audience? Do students have enough information to assume a role with respect to the audience?
- 4. 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, and rewriting? How much time in and outside of class will students need for each stage? To what extent will I guide the students' work? What deadlines do I want to set for collecting the students' papers (or various stages of the project)?
- 5. 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? What problems did I encounter when I wrote my paper on this assignment? How can the assignment be improved? (208-9)