

Writing Matters



Sequencing Assignments

When we assign research projects, we do so in hopes of creating an opportunity for students to explore a subject in depth. However, many students view research (and many other formal writing projects) as complete mysteries. They are confused by the process and unsure of how to proceed from one step to the next. One way to support students as they move through their research is to sequence assignments that build up to the final, formal paper. Informal writing—freewriting, journaling, brainstorming—that takes place in class can begin the student's conversation with the topic. Subsequent assignments build from that, asking the student to perform brief research or summarize an article that pertains to the topic explored in the informal writing. By building a foundation of writing (and critical thinking), students can move forward into research with a clearer purpose and with confidence in the process. This allows them to truly take hold of the topic, exploring it with depth and critical thought.

An Example of a Sequenced Assignment

The following example is taken from a psychology course that aims to analyze social dilemmas. The ultimate goal is to have students integrate ideas about social dilemmas with an approach to a current environmental topic.

Step One: Write an informal, in-class writing assignment to stimulate thinking about pollution. What is it? How has it affected you? What is its source and how could it be reduced?

Step Two: Find a newspaper or magazine article on pollution. Write a summary. What are the effects of pol-

lution? What are some possible effects that were not mentioned in the article?

Step Three: Short, formal writing assignment that integrates ideas about social dilemmas (getting populations to cooperate rather than blame; what are social norms?) and an environmental issue. How are the two areas related? How can principles related to social dilemmas be applied to analyzing and solving an environmental issue?

Step Four: From the above writings, develop a term paper topic that seeks to integrate social dilemmas

and environmental issues.

Step Five: Seek out sources that will help with your research paper. Write summaries of the sources in an annotated bibliography.

Step Six: Rough draft of paper due with proper citations and references page in APA Format.

Step Seven: Final draft of paper due.

When looking at this example of sequenced assignments, one can see that it takes planning and focus to

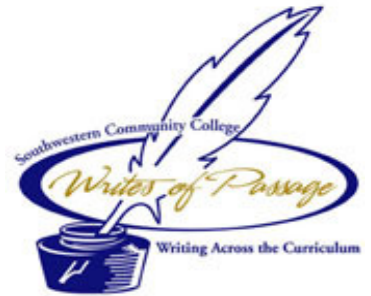
develop structure for the final goal: a research paper. Also, notice that the assignments begin as informal explorations. As the semester develops, the assignments become more formal, first with a short assignment, then moving towards a final draft of a research paper.

Students in this class have been prepared for the paper over the course of at least several weeks. Because of that, they are more likely to produce writing that is thoughtful and analytical. The instructor directed their thinking and helped develop a framework for thinking.

Quantity produces quality. If you only write a few things, you're doomed.

Ray Bradbury

Writing Matters



March 5—NC-NET Event

On Friday, March 5, Southwestern Community College will be hosting an NC-NET event with Dr. Chris Anson. Dr. Anson is currently a University Distinguished Professor of English at North Carolina State University. He is well known in the field of Writing Across the Curriculum, conducting workshops and conferences across the country and around the world. He is a respected teacher and researcher, and he brings years of experience to the discussion of using writing in the college classroom. His seminar is entitled “Writing Their Way to Deeper Learning: Using Brief, Engaging Assignments to Strengthen Student Achievement.” In this interactive session, participants will explore ways to integrate effective, learning-based writing assignments into all disciplines and weave them into their courses to enhance student engagement.

Remember to encourage your students to enter the 2010 WAC Awards. Any non-fiction essay written for a class this academic year is eligible to win cash prizes!

Complete rules and entry forms are available on the WAC website or outside the WAC office, Oaks 101 B.

The act of putting pen to paper encourages pause for thought; this in turn makes us think more deeply about life, which helps us regain our equilibrium.

~Norbet Platt