

Writing Matters



Where Are We Going?

Arranging a family vacation is similar to designing a class or a good writing assignment—it begins with the end in mind. When heading off on vacation, you should (ideally!) know where you're headed, how to get there, and how long you'll be there. You have money set aside to fund the vacation, and you've planned fun activities to make the time away from home memorable for everyone involved. The design of any writing assignment should have the same elements in place: know where you're headed, how to get there, what you're going to do while you're there, and when to stop and come back home. When looking at the possibility of incorporating writing into your classes, the first component that needs to be considered is the ultimate goal of the assignment and how it relates to the goals of your classes (this is "where you're going" on vacation). Be sure to ask yourself how a particular writing assignment moves your students closer to the goals you have for the class in general. The answer to that question gives the writing (and the students) a true sense of purpose.

Purpose-Driven Writing Assignments

One of the key components to good writing is having a clear purpose. Not coincidentally, that component is also crucial to developing a good writing assignment.

Before assigning writing, take a step back and look at the bigger picture for a moment. What are your overall goals for the course? If you're not clear on what those goals are, think of framing them by using the following statement: "At the end of this course, the successful student will..." Whatever phrases you choose to complete that statement are your ultimate goals for the class.

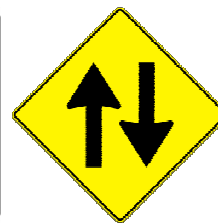


The writing assignments you choose to use in your classes should align closely with the goals for those classes. Once you have your course goals sufficiently outlined, take a look at them and ask yourself what they indicate for student learning and thinking. How do you want students thinking about your subject matter at the end of the semester? What precise skills will students need to learn by semester's end? What



critical thinking processes are you hoping your students develop? Answers to these questions will direct you towards designing writing assignments that will help move your students toward your goals.

Of course, no one writing assignment will fully address every component of every goal. However, by keeping the end in mind, you are better suited to begin building



various writing assignments that move students purposefully toward the goals you've stated.

Take, for example, a physics instructor who has identified key concepts—speed and velocity—within his course that students must understand. These two ideas are critical to a student's success in his class. After covering the material in class, he could ask students to write an explanation of these concepts to an imaginary fellow student who is struggling to understand.*

Aligning student writing with course goals gives each assignment a specific purpose and each student a sense of direction.

If you don't know where you are going, you will probably end up somewhere else.

*adapted from

Bean, John. *Engaging Ideas*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001.

—Lawrence J. Peter

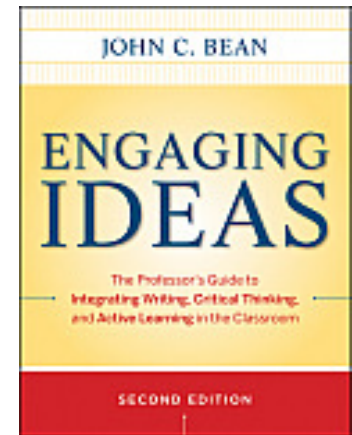
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Recommended Reading

John Bean's *Engaging Ideas* was first published by Jossey-Bass in 2001. SCC faculty members who have participated in the WAC workshops have copies of this book. This past August, the second edition of this practical guide for teachers was published with updated material. Bean addresses the why and the how in incorporating writing into classes in order to engage students and encourage critical thinking. In the second edition, Bean also addresses online learning environments, quantitative/scientific learning, and new learning theories.

I can't recommend this book highly enough. It is down-to-earth and easily understood. Bean moves quickly but thoroughly through the theories behind the importance of writing to the practical applications in nearly any classroom. With creative suggestions for writing assignments, any teacher can glean new ideas and new inspiration for writing from Bean's book.



What I Think About My Paper

An Assignment to Engage Your Students' Minds

On the day that a writing assignment is due, we often find ourselves roaming the aisles of our classrooms or checking our BlackBoard drop boxes to take up papers from our students. However, I would encourage you to take a moment and incorporate an additional step in the process that takes very little time but yields enormous results. Have students write a short reflection on the papers they are turning in. Ask them to answer questions such as, "Why did you choose this topic? Does your paper do what you wanted it to do? Does it prove your point? How confident are you about your grammar and spelling? Did you have someone help you proofread?" Students are not used to thinking critically about their own writing or the writing process. They're used to having a teacher read their papers, offering feedback that they may or may not understand. Our students then simply move on to the next assignment without thinking critically about the last assignment. This short reflection gives them that opportunity to think about their own writing and express what they are thinking. Finally, these reflections can offer you rich feedback on how your students are working through your assignments and on the thought processes they are using (or not using) to complete their papers.

Give me a stock clerk with a goal, and I'll give you a man who will make history. Give me a man with no goals, and I'll give you a stock clerk.

—J.C. Penney