



Designing Writing Assignments to Promote Critical Thinking in All Disciplines

(and oh, by the way, College and Career Readiness)

Dr. L. Lennie Irvin, San Antonio College and the San Antonio Writing Project lirvin@alamo.edu

Writing is a powerful tool for active learning and teaching because it is both a process and a product of critical thought.

The Three Features of Effective Writing Assignments

Interactive Components

Interactive components situate writing as a process of inquiry and discovery, promote productive talk about the writer's emerging ideas, and encourage multiple drafts and global revision.

A Meaning-Construction Task

A "meaning-construction" task asks students to bring their own thinking to bear on that matter to both the writer and the intended audience. [It] typically presents students with a disciplinary problem.

Clear Explanation of Writing Expectations

Effective assignments clearly present the instructor's expectations for a successful performance. Ideally the assignment prompt also explains the purpose of the assignment in terms of the course's learning goals and presents the instructor's grading criteria, often in the form of a rubric.

Resources for Designing Writing Assignments and Critical Thinking

Bean, John C. *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*. 2nd ed. San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, 2011.

Gardner, Traci. *Designing Writing Assignments*. Urbana, Ill: National Council of Teachers of English, 2008. Available at <http://wac.colostate.edu/books/gardner/>

Writing Next: Effective Strategies to Improve Writing of Adolescents in Middle and High Schools. Washington, D.C.: Alliance for Excellent Education, 2006. Available at http://www.all4ed.org/publication_material/reports/writing_next

RAFT Sites

Daretodifferentiate: <http://daretodifferentiate.wikispaces.com/Home>

ReadWriteThink NCTE: <http://www.readwritethink.org/professional-development/strategy-guides/using-raft-writing-strategy-30625.html>

Northern Nevada Writing Project WritingFix: <http://www.writingfix.com/wac/RAFT.htm>

Designing R.A.F.T.S. Writing Assignments

Effective writing assignments enable students to write fluently and purposefully for an audience.

R.A.F.T.S. can help teachers identify and incorporate the elements of an effective writing assignment.

This strategy encourages creative thinking and motivates students to demonstrate understanding in a nontraditional yet informational or persuasive written format.

Role of the writer – helps the writer decide on point of view and voice.

--the writer is either more informed or a greater authority or equal to the audience

Audience for the piece of writing – reminds the writer that he must communicate ideas to someone else; helps writer determine content and style.

Format of the material – helps the writer organize ideas and employ the conventions of format, such as letters, interviews, and story problems.

Topic or subject of the piece of writing – helps the writer focus on main ideas.

Strong verb – directs the writer to the writing purpose, e.g., persuade, analyze, create, predict, compare, defend, evaluate.

EXAMPLE: You are Ulysses on your journey home from Troy after being gone for over ten years. Write a letter to your wife Penelope explaining why you won't make it home for dinner, AGAIN.

(role) (format) (audience) (strong verb) (topic)

Task as Asking students to address problems or questions that have no easy answer acts as doorways leading students to think critically.

Intriguing Intriguing problems or questions have a natural interest for students and push them toward greater understanding of the subject matter and deeper learning.

Problem “Students cannot learn to think critically until they can, at least momentarily, set aside their own visions of truth and reflect on alternatives.” (G. Myers, 1986)

EXAMPLE: Many people believe, mistakenly, that summer is hotter than winter because the summer sun is closer to the earth. You are a physics teacher (role) and you received this same question from your 12 year old nephew who holds this mistaken belief. Send your nephew (audience) an e-mail (format) that explains (strong verb) why this belief (topic) seems logical but is in fact wrong. Then offer a better explanation. (for Physics)

How to Use RAFTS Assignments:

1. Think of the important ideas or information you want students to learn. Consider how writing might enhance student' understanding of a topic (e.g., stages of the digestive system). This focus established the writing topic. The topic can be a creative title or stated in general terms, as long as it is clear to the student the goal of the assignment.
2. Think particularly about key questions, problems, or areas of disagreement or ambiguity surround this subject. What are the most intriguing problems or questions?
3. Brainstorm possible roles students could assume in their writing. For example, a student in auto class could imagine he was a spark plug and describe what occurs when an engine starts.
4. Next, decide the audience for this communication. Using that audience, determine the writing format. For example, the spark plug could be writing in the format of a diary to be read by new spark plugs just placed in cars.
5. Explain RAFT to the students and list the role, audience, format, and topic for writing. You may want to choose different roles from which they can choose based on the same knowledge, reading, or concept.

This strategy works with all disciplines and across disciplines as an exciting strategy for student writing.

Ten Strategies for Designing Critical Thinking Tasks

(that can be designed at RAFTS assignments—either formal or informal)

1. Tasks Linking Course Concepts to Student's Personal Experience or Previously Existing Knowledge.	6. Template Assignments --an organizational frame that students must follow and flesh out
2. Explanation of Course Concepts to New Learners	7. Assignments Requiring Role-Playing of Unfamiliar Perspectives or Imagined "What If" Situations
3. Thesis-Support Assignments --give students a controversial thesis to support or defend	8. Summaries or Abstracts of Articles or Course Lectures
4. Problem-Posing Assignments --instead of giving students the thesis, give them the question which they have to try and answer	9. Dialogues or Argumentative Scripts
5. Data-Provided Assignments --teacher gives student the data; student must what thesis or hypothesis it supports	10. Cases and Simulations

Discovering RAFT Writing Assignments

1. List some important things you want students to learn in your course. What should they learn about? What should they learn to do? After you list some learning goals, pick one to work with here. (Topic)
2. Now think about key questions, problems, or areas of disagreement or ambiguity surround this subject. What is the most intriguing problem or question? (TIP)
3. Brainstorm on some possible roles students could play in addressing this subject? Do you want the writer to be more knowledgeable as the audience or on equal footing with them? (Role)
4. Who might be likely audiences, real or imaginary? Pick one. (Audience)
5. What do you want the writer to do with this writing? What will their purpose be? Express this purpose with a strong verb (Strong Verb)
6. Decide what would be the best format for the writer to write in toward this audience? (Format)

Write your RAFTS writing assignment (label each part of the RAFTS in parenthesis)

Forms of Writing For Assignments

(An incomplete listing)

Advertisements Affidavits	Historical accounts	Package copy Paraphrases
Analytical paragraphs/papers	Imaginative Literature: Fairy	Parodies Personalized license
Anecdotes/stories	tales, myths, novels, plays	plates Persuasive: to public
Announcements Applications	Indexes Instructions Internet	officials, to the editor,
	Interviews (real/imaginary)	recommendations Placards
Bibliography annotations	Introduction Itineraries	Poems:
Biographical sketches Blurbs:		Villanelle
yearbook pictures Blurbs: TV	Job specifications	Haiku
lists/book covers Board game	Journal entries	Sonnets
instructions Brochures	Lab reports Las wills and	Prayers Précis Prophecies and
Bumper stickers	testaments Legal briefs	predictions Proposals
	Legislation Lessons plans	Psychiatrists' notes Public
Captions Case studies	Letters:	notices Public Statements
Children's books	Advice Application/	Reaction papers Requests
Commentaries Comparison	Resignation	Responses and rebuttals
paragraphs/papers Computer	Complaint	Resumes Reviews:
Programs Constitution articles	Congratulation From	Books Movies Outside
Consumer guide or report	imaginary places	reading Radio/TV
Contest entries (25 words)	Inquiry	programs
Contrast paragraphs/papers		
	Lists	Science fiction
Debate outlines/notes	Math notes/observations	Short stories
Declarations Definitions	Math problem solutions	Screen plays and skits
Dialogues Dictionary entries	Math record books Math	Sermon
Directions: Guide to places,	story problems Memos	Slogans
how-to, survival manuals	Menus Messages to/from	Songs
	the past/future Minutes of	Specifications for reports
Editorials E-mail	meetings Monologue	Speech
Encyclopedia entries	Mottoes	Story boards for animation
Environmental impact reports	News stories –	Summaries
Epitaphs Eulogies Expense	paper/radio/TV	Table of Contents
accounts and defense	Orations	Telegram
Explications Fact Sheets Five		Test questions
paragraph themes		Thumbnail sketches
Graffiti Greeting card or text		

Strong Verbs for R.A.F.T.S. Assignments

align	understand	winnow
annotate	warn	analyze
apply	amaze	annoy
brainstorm	announce	assimilate
cancel	assess	cajole
carve	browse	capture
charge	capitulate	characterize
coalesce	cancel	clarify
communicate	charm	combine
connect	collapse	contemplate
consider	compare	count
construct	connive	critique
contest	consolidate	define
create	consume	design
decipher	decorate	distinguish
delineate	describe	elucidate
diagnose	digest	encourage
divulge	edit	exemplify
embellish	empathize	fold
engrave	eradicate	illuminate
explain	express yourself	improvise
harmonize	identify	melt
imagine	immortalize	modify orchestrate
inform	inspect	peruse
investigate	link	ponder
memorize mold	metamorphasize	reconcile
participate	navigate	record
photograph	persuade	reject
quote	plagiarize	remark
reconstruct	recapitulate	review scrutinize
reflect	regurgitate	shrivel
relate	remunerate	trigger
remind	script	visualize
rhyme	separate	
search	shrink	
shave	summarize	
specify	tell	
suppress	urge	